

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: SOME OF US ARE STARING AT THE STARS: SPECULATIVE FICTION, FANDOM, AND TRANS IMAGINATION

Damien Hagen, Doctor of Philosophy, 2023

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*Some of us are staring at the stars: Speculative Fiction, Fandom, and Trans Imagination* takes up the multiple ways that trans and nonbinary people have used speculative fiction as a survival strategy and worldbuilding tool. Through engagement with trans and nonbinary fans and creators of imaginative works, Damien shows how speculative fiction has powerful material effects for trans lives. Primary attention is given to the possibilities contained in media that was not created to be explicitly “transgender,” but was experienced and read as such through a “trans imaginary.” Damien’s research methods are interdisciplinary, incorporating the use of autoethnography, focus groups, close readings, and thematic analysis. Chapters include an analysis of regeneration as trans possibility in the TV series *Doctor Who*, an inquiry into shared experiences among trans and nonbinary fans deriving from focus group interviews, an examination of the ways the genre of “body horror” in film and television has been used as a tool for processing and dealing with experiences of body dysphoria, and an analysis of the trans world

building possibilities in Blue Delli quanti's *Oh Human Star* and Gretchen Felker-Martin's *Manhunt*.

SOME OF US ARE STARING AT THE STARS: SPECULATIVE FICTION,  
FANDOM, AND TRANS IMAGINATION

By

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## Dedication

To my dad, for teaching me to love monsters, never let go of childhood whimsy, and  
for giving me my first Octavia E. Butler book.

## Acknowledgements

Coming as a complete lack of surprise to those who know me personally, this section was perhaps the part I was most excited to write. I am filled with an abundance of love and gratitude for so many who have supported and facilitated my ability to survive and dream.

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even if it made you late. Cáel M. Keegan, this project is incredibly indebted to your work. You have laid so much of the foundation of which I have tried to build and inspired me greatly. I am grateful for the time you have spent reading my work and offering guidance and support.

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## Introduction | How do we survive?

In 2015, while attending a fan convention in DC, I ran into four different friends throughout the day who, like myself, happened to be trans/nonbinary. When I ran into the fourth friend near the end of the day, they mentioned that they had seen yet another mutual friend of ours earlier in the day—who happened to also be trans. At this information I joked with them that I felt like I was seeing more of us at this fan convention than I often see at local pride events. While this was said in jest, it wasn't all that surprising. Speculative fiction has played an important role in the lives of many trans and nonbinary people and was absolutely part of my own trans becoming.

On the drive back to Baltimore from D.C., I found myself unable to stop thinking about how many trans and nonbinary friends I had run into, as well as how many other trans and nonbinary people I had seen at the convention. I thought about the trans and nonbinary people in my life, the people I knew who loved speculative fiction, and how much they overlapped. There was of course a certain amount of selection bias occurring here; most of my friends were trans or nonbinary and many of us shared similar interests. While this particular convention experience made me consciously think about this correlation, I realized how much I had already instinctively known or felt this to be true, but I hadn't yet considered the *why* of it. At first glance there is the somewhat obvious connection that many trans youths can struggle to fit in and feel out of place—speaking from experience—and it is reasonable to gravitate toward fictional worlds that can momentarily help us escape

from our real lives. What I was interested in however, was what role that escape might have had in our lives and what it might have offered and provided in our lives.

Imagination is essential for trans people as the process of trans becoming is an inherently speculative process. All trans people begin as speculative fiction until we become non-fiction. Trans becoming starts with the questioning of gendered possibilities, of restrictions we have been told about gender, of the ways we are expected to feel about our genders, our bodies, our lives, and imagining something different. micha cárdenas describes the process of trans becoming as beginning with “an affective claim to futurity that rejects the truth of the visible”<sup>1</sup> and what is speculative fiction if not imagining the world as it currently isn’t? cárdenas describes how “trans visibility” is always a paradox as trans is always malleable and indeterminate and therefore can never fully be “visible” as this would require an “essential trans identity to make visible” when there is no such thing.<sup>2</sup> Speculative fiction asks us to imagine what could be, beyond what currently is. This process of becoming is described by Kai Green as “tranifest”-ing—to make manifest the possibilities of trans existence and identity.<sup>3</sup> This process of becoming, and transness itself, is imaginative work. The trans imaginary, Cael M. Keegan argues,

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<sup>1</sup> micha cárdenas, ‘Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media’, in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (New York: New Museum, 2017), pp. 161–81 (p. 170).

<sup>2</sup> cárdenas, ‘Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media’, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Kai M. Green, “‘What the Eyes Did Not Wish to Behold’: Lessons from Ann Allen Shockley’s *Say Jesus and Come to Me*”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112.2 (2013), 285–302 <<https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1215/00382876-2020208>>; Kai M. Green and Treva C. Ellison, ‘Tranifest’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.1–2 (2014), 222–25 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399542>>.

“summons its own literalization.”<sup>4</sup> Speculative fiction is an inherently trans genre as it moves us from the present to the possible or even not quite possible.

Trans?

In the introduction to the inaugural issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Paisley Currah and Susan Stryker highlight their decision to not provide a definition of trans, preferring to leave it open for interpretation.<sup>5</sup> They explain the purposeful exclusion of the word “trans” from their keywords by stating “although we retain *transgender* in the full, formal title of this journal, we invite you to imagine the T in TSQ as standing in for whatever version of *trans*- best suits you.”<sup>6</sup> This purposeful refusal to limit the definition and category of “trans” reflects an overarching theme amongst trans studies scholars, theories, and creative works. The obfuscation of *trans* is a refusal to create walls or barriers around what and who is included and who is not.

In the past decade, the shortened term “trans,” and its variations *trans\** and *trans-*, have become more commonly used colloquially as well as academically compared to the term *transgender*. *Trans* is perhaps the most common term used today to refer to trans(gender) people. In the last couple of decades, the term *transgender* has shifted somewhat away from its use as an umbrella category as some have found the term is mostly used to refer to more binary gender categories, while

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<sup>4</sup> Cael M. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, Contemporary Film Directors (University of Illinois Press, 2018), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, ‘Introduction’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.1–2 (2014), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Stryker and Currah.

the shortened term *trans* is considered by some to be a more open category that can also include gender non-conforming people.<sup>7</sup> Throughout this dissertation I primarily use the language of ‘trans people’ rather than explicitly saying ‘trans and nonbinary people’ to make clear how I am theorizing and engaging the term trans. If we can understand the foundation of the term trans to refer to some form of movement, specifically in regard to gender, then those who identify as nonbinary inherently fall into the category of trans within a society that vehemently insists on a binary sex/gender system.

The variations *trans\** and *trans-* both reflect the possibilities that the shortened form of transgender calls to. *Trans\** uses the Boolean search tool of placing an asterisk after a prefix when searching to bring up anything that might use “trans” as a prefix. Avery Tompkins explains that the use of the asterisk after trans can open up “a greater range of meanings.”<sup>8</sup> Kai M. Green also enacts *trans\** as an analytic to address “a decolonial demand; a question of how, when, and where one sees and knows; a reading practice that might help readers gain a reorientation to orientation.”<sup>9</sup> *Trans-* serves a very similar function. Placing the hyphen after *trans*, allows for who and what is included in its usage to remain “open-ended and resis[t] premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Avery Tompkins, ‘Asterisk’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.1–2 (2014), 26–27 (p. 27) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399542>>.

<sup>8</sup> Tompkins, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Kai M. Green, ‘Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans\* Analytic’, in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, ed. by E. Patrick Johnson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 65–82.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, ‘Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?’, *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 36.3 & 4 (2008), 11–22.

These variations of the term also work to expand what constitutes as “trans” outside of individual identities. The removing of “gender” from the term does not work to erase or make invisible how gender interacts with *trans*, but to expand *trans* to include ideas, images, and frameworks that focus on movement and emphasize liminal or blurred distinctions. *Trans-* implies movement, change, going across or beyond. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore describe *trans-* as perpetually in relation to something else.<sup>11</sup> Mel Chen expands this use to argue that *trans-* does not refer to movement or relation between two binary and distinct concepts, but rather the movement being showcased and referred to with the term can illuminate the fallacy of dichotomous thinking or of rigid categorization.<sup>12</sup>

The term *trans*, and its variations, is often now used to refer to a “process rather than fixed identity.”<sup>13</sup> For example, Susan Stryker refers to “transgender phenomena” as “anything that calls our attention to the contingency and unnaturalness of gender normativity... at those fleeting and variable points at which particular bodies exceed or elude capture within the gender apparatus.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein argue that “*trans\** is not a thing or being, it is rather the process through which *thingness* and *beingness* are constituted.”<sup>15</sup> With this linguistic and discursive shift, *trans* becomes both adjective and verb. To refer to

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<sup>11</sup> Stryker, Currah, and Moore, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Perverse Modernities (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 136–37.

<sup>13</sup> Laura Horak, ‘Trans Studies’, *Feminist Media Histories*, 4.2 (2018), 201–6 (p. 201).

<sup>14</sup> Stryker and Currah, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> Eva Hayward and Jami Weinstein, ‘Introduction: Tranimalities in the Age of *Trans\** Life’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2.2 (2015), 195–208 (p. 197).

the trans-ing, or transing, of an object or idea, refers to the “practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces;” it is the process that allows us to see the way disparate poles are actually mutually constitutive; it is an “escape vector, line of flight, or pathway to liberation.”<sup>16</sup> Engaging a trans\* analytic, according to Kai Green, focuses on the relationship between things and illuminates differences rather than sameness between multiple identities, ideas, or objects.<sup>17</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I engage the utilization of the term trans to refer to various thematics, narratives, aesthetics, and affects beyond explicitly ‘trans’ identification. I argue that speculative fiction is an inherently trans genre. It moves us from the present to the possible and in the words of cárdenas, “rejects the truth of the visible.” This argument is additionally shaped by José Esteban Muñoz’s conceptualization of queer as a “rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”<sup>18</sup>

This move to trans as analytic, however, has been critiqued by Andrea Long Chu as simply another way to continue to use “queer” as an analytic.<sup>19</sup> Chu argues that the use of “trans” as an analytic is in no way different from the way “queer” has been theorized and that each way that trans is enacted in a thematic way could equally be described as queer.<sup>20</sup> Chu and Harsin Drager additionally argue that the shift

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<sup>16</sup> Stryker, Currah, and Moore, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Green, ‘Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans\* Analytic’, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Sexual Cultures, 10th Anniversary Edition (New York: New York University Press, 2019), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, ‘After Trans Studies’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 6.1 (2019), 103–16  
<<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7253524>>.

<sup>20</sup> Chu and Harsin Drager, p. 105.

within the field of trans studies toward trans as an analytic has also been coupled with the framing of trans as radical or subversive, and that this perpetuates the same error of assuming trans people do not want to be “normal” or are intentionally subverting gender norms that early trans scholars, like Stone and Stryker, explicitly critiqued in the early years of field formation.<sup>21</sup> Chu argues that Trans Studies is a dead field that does not exist today. Rather, she says it is a regurgitation of queer theory into a new package and does not have unique or distinct qualities to make it its own field.<sup>22 23</sup>

### Speculative Transness

By speculative fiction, I am referring to an umbrella category for a multitude of genres that portray or imagine the world as it currently isn't or never was. Science fiction, fantasy, horror, superheroes, magical realism, and surrealist fiction all fall into the larger category of speculative fiction. In speculative fiction there are infinite possibilities for identification, gender, bodies, sexuality, relationality, etc. Speculative fiction provides a space to imagine possibilities, other worlds, different ways of existing and being in relation to others. Fantasy and imagination help us in

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<sup>21</sup> Chu and Harsin Drager.

<sup>22</sup> Chu and Harsin Drager.

<sup>23</sup> Chu's critique directly contradicts a claim made by other trans scholars about the uniqueness of trans studies. Stryker that trans studies offers analytic frameworks and connections that queer studies has often failed to do, particularly in its intersections with disability studies (Stryker 2004, 214). Similarly, Keegan argues that Trans Studies offers more productive use of “affect and vitality” in theoretical framings than Queer Studies has provided so far. See: Cael M. Keegan, ‘Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans\*’, in *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO QUEER STUDIES* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 66–78 (p. 72).

challenging the limits of what seems to be possible and what could be possible <sup>24</sup>.

The possibilities opened through speculative fiction have particularly drawn trans and non-binary people to the genre <sup>25</sup> and provided a tool in which to imagine and enact alternative ways of surviving. Lavelle Ridley describes the importance of fantasy as “underscore[ing] the complex maneuvers that imagining otherly offers.”<sup>26</sup> Through asking us to imagine what could be, beyond what currently is, speculative fiction helps make trans existence possible.

With this project, I explore what possibilities and strategies speculative fiction has provided trans and nonbinary people. I explore what imaginaries trans people have crafted as a means of survival. How have trans people taken creative work that was not for or by us and used it to undermine rigid gender and sex categories and binaries and manifest new and different ways of being in our own bodies and in relation to each other? How does this manifestation bring forth new creative possibilities through trans worldmaking? Guided by these questions, I examine the imaginations of trans people and trans readings of cultural texts in order to elucidate what might constitute a trans imaginary and what work it might do in the lives of trans, and non-trans, people. In exploring trans world building and imagination, I explore the liberatory potentials of a trans imaginary that refuses or evades a cis gaze.

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<sup>24</sup> Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York University Press, 2014), p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>26</sup> LaVelle Ridley, ‘Imagining Otherly: Performing Possible Black Trans Futures in Tangerine’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 6.4 (2019), 481–90 (p. 485) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7771653>>.

I approach trans imagination not as a thing that individual trans people possess necessarily, but rather as something trans people do and do together. I am guided by a framing of imagination that understands it as a cognitive capacity in which we conceptualize that which we have yet to, or perhaps never will, experience directly. This exploratory thinking provides a lens through which we can understand and illustrate our own experiences.<sup>27</sup> I additionally frame the imagination as a collaborative process. Even the imaginative possibilities we may create in our own minds are perpetually shaped and influenced by our external experiences and act to influence how we exist within the material world.

My framings around imagination are significantly shaped by the works of adrienne marie brown and Walidah Imarisha, whose theorizing and organizing have emphasized the interconnected role of social justice and imaginative practice: “Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in an exercise of speculative fiction.”<sup>28</sup> Imarisha’s conceptualization offers imagination as essential to figuring out how to survive. At the very heart of this dissertation is the question of how do trans people survive in a world that is increasingly bent on erasing and eliminating transness?

Visionary fiction is described by Imarisha as a subcategory of speculative fiction that involves imaginative works that challenge existing power dynamics by pushing us to and helping us in imagining new, freer, and more just worlds that we

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<sup>27</sup> Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (Halifax ; Winnipeg : London: Fernwood Publishing ; Zed Books, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Walidah Imarisha, ‘Introduction’, in *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (AK Press, 2015), pp. 3–5 (p. 3).

may begin to build in the present.<sup>29</sup> While all speculative fiction inherently proposes and imagines alternatives to the way things currently are, Imarisha describes how much of mainstream speculative fiction reproduces, reinforces, and perpetuates existing power inequalities and does not advance toward justice or liberation.<sup>30</sup> Certainly not all cultural objects that help to spark a trans becoming, identity, or connection could be considered visionary fiction on their own, including many media objects this project will discuss, but the phenomenological and affectual work they do for trans people could be considered liberatory. Imarisha argues that the “worlds we imagine, the dreams we have, impact the futures we build.”<sup>31</sup> For trans people this can include a more euphoric affectual relationship with gender and our bodies.

For trans people to imagine gender euphoria and affirmation for ourselves, to imagine the possibility of creating and shaping our gendered selves and bodies against restrictive cisnormative gendered expectations and restrictions, and to imagine surviving, is itself a radical imaginatory act in a world in which the threat to our lives is ever present.<sup>32</sup> Describing the radical imaginative work of Ursula K. Le Guin’s iconic work *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Tuesday Smillie identifies Le Guin’s writing as a “radical, exploratory tool” used to challenge existing constructions of gender and

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<sup>29</sup> Exangel, ‘What Is “Visionary Fiction”? An Interview with Walidah Imarisha.’, *EAP: The Magazine*, 31 March 2016 <<https://exterminatingangel.com/what-is-visionary-fiction-an-interview-with-walidah-imarisha/>>.

<sup>30</sup> Imarisha, p. 4; Exangel.

<sup>31</sup> Exangel.

<sup>32</sup> Here I am drawing from Imarisha’s description of visionary fiction as “decolonization of the imagination” which she argues is “the most dangerous and subversive form there is.” Imarisha, p. 4. This decolonization she argues, provides space for us to “imagine our own futures rather than accepting the ones presented to us.” Exangel.

race to imagine alternatives for humans and other possible futures.<sup>33</sup> Smillie's description of her affectual response to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, provides an explicit example of how visionary fiction might impact the lives of trans people:

“As a white transgender woman invested in racial and social justice, reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* felt like a gift...[that] offers a respite from the rigidly defined and violently enforced systems of racism and binary gender currently found in the United States and in many cultures on Earth.”<sup>34</sup>

Furthering the use of speculative fiction for radical imaginative practices, Ramzi Fawaz argues that American comics, as well as many fan spaces, engage in a process of world building that can imagine and potentially bring about more just futures or alternative ways of life for marginalized groups.<sup>35</sup> Alexander Doty's work on queer interpretations of cultural objects, argues that queer people have read and inserted ourselves into narratives and cultural objects that were not created or intended to be queer.<sup>36</sup> Doty explained that queer audiences can identify with straight subjects when there is a hint of something that could possibly be read as queer, homoerotic, or strange.<sup>37</sup> José Esteban Muñoz theorized the creative and imaginative strategies of queer and trans people of color that expands and more clearly describes the interpretation strategies of queer people Doty identifies.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Tuesday Smillie, 'Radical Imagination And The Left Hand of Darkness', *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Techonology*, No. 12 (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.13016/M2W37KX2H>>.

<sup>34</sup> Smillie.

<sup>35</sup> Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheros and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York University Press, 2016), p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> Doty.

<sup>38</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Muñoz's offered the process of disidentification—a survival strategy used to identify with and against normalizing ideologies or institutions—as an essential reading, interpretive, or viewing practice for queer and trans people of color.<sup>39</sup> He argued that rather than identifying simply with or against (counteridentification) gendered categories, queer and trans people of color might find survival and identification through “retain[ing]the problematic object and tap[ping] into the energies that are produced by contradictions and ambivalences.”<sup>40</sup> He describes the world building potential of disidentifactory practices as “hav[ing] the ability to establish alternative views of the world” that challenge “oppressive regimes of ‘truth.’”<sup>41</sup> Muñoz's framing of this interpretation strategy as “tap[ping] into the energies that are produced by contradictions” invokes a trans imaginary.<sup>42</sup>

While most of Muñoz's work centers around queerness and sexuality rather than gender identity, his analysis of the creative work and “Terrorist Drag” of Vaginal Davis, shows how the same practices of disidentification may also be worked into a trans aesthetic. The process of disidentification can allow the subject to reshape their identity into one that allows, or even encourages, their survival.<sup>43</sup> Muñoz described an “identity-affirming ‘melancholia,’ that individual subjects and different communities in crisis can use to map the ambivalences of identification and the conditions of (im)possibility that shape [minority] identities.”<sup>44</sup> This melancholia,

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<sup>39</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

<sup>40</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, p. 195.

<sup>42</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, p. 71.

<sup>43</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, p. 74.

Muñoz argued, exists in a liminal space and relationship between “necessary militancy and indispensable mourning” that engages both emotions in, what I argue, is a trans analytic or praxis.<sup>45</sup>

One example of this disidentifactory practice is portrayed in the Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix.”<sup>46</sup> In her field defining essay, Stryker articulates an identification with Frankenstein’s monster that is develops in connection to the historical media portrayal of trans people as villainous, murderers, tricksters, and essentially monstrous. Stryker’s letter to Frankenstein draws from the concept or image of the monstrous transsexual, to find an identification that stands with and in defiance of the stereotype. Explaining her affectual and identificatory response, Stryker states, “by speaking as a monster in my personal voice... Like that creature [Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein], I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face and redefine a life worth living.”<sup>47</sup>

### Feeling Not Seeing

I focus my attention in this project on the possibilities contained in speculative fiction that was not created to be explicitly “transgender” as we understand that category today but was experienced and read as such through a transgender imaginary. How have trans people taken work that was not for or by us and used it to

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<sup>45</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> Susan Stryker, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1.3 (1994), 237–54 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237>>.

<sup>47</sup> Stryker, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix’, p. 250.

undermine rigid gender and sex categories and binaries and manifest new and different ways of being? Rather than focusing on and analyzing the trans body that is overly fetishized without larger western society, I focus this project on the trans interior, affect, and imagination. I purposely de-center explicitly trans and nonbinary characters and narratives for the majority of this dissertation in order to move away from scholarship on trans representation and visibility.

Today, trans visibility and representation is at an all-time high, creating what has been referred to as a “tipping point.”<sup>48</sup> In terms of previous representation, this is not much of a statement considering the cinematic and literary scraps of representation that has historically existed for trans people. While supposedly more “positive” or “sympathetic” representations of trans people have increased in recent years, these characters are still largely created by and for a cisgender audience and continue to rely on stereotypes, tokenism, sexualization, and violence against primarily trans Black, indigenous, trans people of color. It is increasingly common to see trans characters represented in tragic and violent scenarios with the intention of soliciting sympathy or artificial empathy from the cisgender audience.

While representation of explicitly, canonically, transgender characters is important, much of the trans media representation that has been offered so far has often been created through a cisgender imaginary of trans people and does not always speak to the actual experiences or identities of transgender people. As trans

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<sup>48</sup> Kathy Steinmetz, ‘The Transgender Tipping Point’, *Time*, 28 May 2014.

representation has increased, so has the amount of anti-trans violence.<sup>49</sup> Trans scholars have raised this concern, arguing that visibility and representation are limited in their usefulness for trans people or trans liberation<sup>50</sup> (something I discuss further in chapter one) and instead create a false narrative that progress is being made when it is not.<sup>51</sup>

Trans visibility often happens for some while relegating others to the “shadows.”<sup>52</sup> This argument is additionally made by Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable, who describe visibility as surveillance.<sup>53</sup> The increased visibility of trans

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<sup>49</sup> Viviane Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago: University of Chicago PRESS, 2000); Treva Ellison and others, ‘We Got Issues: Toward a Black Trans\*/Studies’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 4.2 (2017), 162–69; Cael M. Keegan, ‘Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans\*’, in *The Cambridge Companion To Queer Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 66–78.

<sup>50</sup> Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, ‘Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door’, in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. xv–xvi; Eric A. Stanley, ‘Anti-Trans Optics: Recognition, Opacity, and the Image of Force’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 116.3 (2017), 618; Ellison and others; Elías Cosenza Krell, ‘Is Transmisogyny Killing Trans Women of Color?: Black Trans Feminisms and the Exigencies of White Femininity’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 4.2 (2017), 226–42; Green, “‘What the Eyes Did Not Wish to Behold’: Lessons from Ann Allen Shockley’s Say Jesus and Come to Me’; Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable, ‘Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility’, in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (New York: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 39–56; Che Gossett, ‘Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility’, in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (New York: New Museum, 2017), pp. 183–90.

<sup>51</sup> Morgan M. Page, ‘One from the Vaults: Gossip, Access, and Trans History-Telling’, in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (New York: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 135–46 (p. 142).

<sup>52</sup> Green, “‘What the Eyes Did Not Wish to Behold’: Lessons from Ann Allen Shockley’s Say Jesus and Come to Me’, p. 300.

<sup>53</sup> Gossett and Huxtable, p. 42.

people in the media is often reduced to specific trans people who are most likely to fall within “acceptable” or “respectable” ideas of gendered expression.<sup>54</sup> Trans people that have gained increased visibility usually do so because of how well they are able to “pass” or be read as cisgender, and therefore more likely to be viewed as attractive or beautiful, while gender non-conforming and trans people who do not fit cisnormative beauty ideals are still continually sidelined or ignored.<sup>55</sup> Elías Krell has addressed both Julia Serano’s concept of transmisogyny and Viviane Namaste’s argument for the influence of media on trans lives.<sup>56</sup> Krell evidences that Serano’s concept of transmisogyny fails to address racial implications and intersections in the lives of Black and white trans women of color. Using examples from Caitlyn Jenner’s tv series *I Am Cait*, Krell shows how whiteness functions in media representations of trans women to reinforce racist and anti-black ideologies of Black women as aggressive and sexually promiscuous.<sup>57</sup>

Rather than continuing an emphasis on visibility and representation, Jasbir Puar<sup>58</sup> has suggested a shift to investigating the role of affect in producing and shaping political and social ideologies—a suggestion I am pursuing through the focus on the affectual experiences of media and literary objects on trans and gender non-conforming people. micha cárdenas takes Puar up on this suggestion as well in her work on affect, trans visibility, and digital media. cárdenas proposes a shift away

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<sup>54</sup> Gossett and Huxtable, p. 42; cárdenas, ‘Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media’, pp. 170–73.

<sup>55</sup> Gossett and Huxtable, p. 42.

<sup>56</sup> Krell.

<sup>57</sup> Krell.

<sup>58</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: HOmonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2012), p. 35.

from visibility, or toward “new modes of visibility” that do not recreate violence and harm on trans people.<sup>59</sup> Other scholars of trans studies have challenged the emphasis on the materiality of trans-ness as mostly physical or corporeal.<sup>60</sup> In her book *Assuming a Body*, Gayle Salamon pushes back against the framing of trans-ness and trans theory around the physical body exclusively and moves the conversation toward more phenomenological or affectual understandings of trans-ness and their role in creating the physical body. Salamon contends that the materiality of the body can be better understood through focusing on how a subject experiences their body and how their body is oriented toward or away from other bodies. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, Salamon emphasizes a “felt sense” of the body.<sup>61</sup> She argues that a complex relationship and tension between cultural norms around sex and gender and the felt sense of gender and sex embodiment is necessary to understand the materiality of trans people.<sup>62</sup>

#### A Methodology of “Doing Love”

To address the questions proposed by this project, I utilize a mixed methodological approach. I bring together autoethnography, focus group interviews, textual analysis, and speculation. By engaging these disparate fields and methodologies, I invoke a ‘by any means necessary’ interdisciplinary practice that

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<sup>59</sup> cárdenas, ‘Dark Shimmers: The Rhythm of Necropolitical Affect in Digital Media’, pp. 173–79.

<sup>60</sup> Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body : Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (Columbia University Press, 2010); LaMonda Horton-Stallings, *Funk the Erotic : Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 205–6.

<sup>61</sup> Salamon, p. 14.

<sup>62</sup> Salamon.

like many of the trans imaginatory practices I discuss, refuses disciplinary boundaries. The interdisciplinary framework I engage here primarily utilizes the lenses of trans studies, affect studies, and fan studies. The field of Trans Studies is itself a speculative project. Susan Stryker has described the field as a “practice for collectively thinking our way” into the future and imagining “unimaginable transformations” to come.<sup>63</sup> Over the last couple of decades, Trans Studies has formed as a field that addresses “strategies of resistance and self-fashioning by which trans people have existed both within and against the systems that have classified us.”

<sup>64</sup> Cael M. Keegan describes Trans Studies today as a field that values and centers “recovery, self-revelation, ecstasies, transitivity, paradox, mutual constitution, reconstruction, materiality, situatedness, interiority, integration, and concatenation/paratactics.”<sup>65</sup> Trans Studies as a field has worked to shift academic discussion of trans lives away from viewing trans people as objects for non-transgender people’s theoretical imagining and toward a focus on materiality and embodiment for trans people.<sup>66</sup> This shift has largely used and emphasized

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<sup>63</sup> Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges”, in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 12–13 (p. 8).

<sup>64</sup> Cael M. Keegan, ‘Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans\*’, in *The Cambridge Companion To Queer Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 66–78 (p. 66).

<sup>65</sup> Keegan, ‘Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans\*’, p. 71.

<sup>66</sup> Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges”; Horak, ‘Trans Studies’; Keegan, ‘Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans\*’; Susan Stryker, ‘Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10.2 (2004), 212–15; Julie L. Nagoshi and Stephen/ie Bruzuzy, ‘Transgender Theory: Embodying Research and Practice’, *Affilia*, 25.4 (2010), 431–43.

autobiographical or autoethnographic works by trans people<sup>67</sup>—a methodology I take up in this dissertation.

While not all trans people who have used speculative fiction as a survival strategy or to find joy would identify as fans necessarily, I utilize Fan Studies and theories on fandom in my formulation of the impact of speculative fiction on trans lives more broadly. Fan Studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines media fandom and fan cultures.<sup>68</sup> What is often cited as a distinguishing or unique aspect of fan cultures is the creation of “transformative” works or activities in which fans expand upon, alter, redesign, and/or utilize the original cultural object in the creation of new cultural objects.<sup>69</sup> Work on fandom has repeatedly addressed the

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<sup>67</sup> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Alexander Eastwood, ‘How, Then, Might the Transsexual Read? Notes toward a Trans Literary History’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.4 (2014), 590–604; Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (Vintage Books, 1994); Max Wolf Valerio, *The Testosterone Files: My Hormonal and Social Transformation from Female to Male* (Seal Press, 2006); Sandy Stone, ‘The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto’, *Camera Obscura*, 29.2 (1992), 151–76; Stryker, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix’; S. Bear Bergman, *Butch Is a Noun* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2006); *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*, ed. by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore (Seal Press, 2006).

<sup>68</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Henry Jenkins, ‘Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture’, in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. by Paul Booth (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 13–26; Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (Routledge, 2002); Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>69</sup> Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (University of Iowa Press, 2018); Alexis Lothian, Kristina Busse, and Robin Anne Reid, “‘Yearning Void and Infinite Potential’”: Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space’, *English Language Notes*, 45.2 (2008), 103–11; Rosalind Hanmer, ‘Internet Fandom, Queer Discourse, and Identities’, in *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, ed. by Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper (Routledge, 2010), pp. 147–58.

“overwhelming emotional conviction” fans possess toward a cultural object as often, although not always, providing social and emotional benefits.<sup>70</sup>

Over 400 anti-trans pieces of legislation have been proposed across state legislatures so far in 2023. The terrifying investment in legislating the death and disappearance of trans people that is shaping our present moment, highlights a sense of urgency for my project. Queer and Feminist Studies has historically abstracted transness as a metaphor or tool for theoretical framings of gender deconstruction, performance, and transgression. While I do engage throughout this project, a trans analytic that does often lean toward the speculative, I do so with the intention of grounding my theorization through an investment in the material lives of trans people. I am personally, professionally, and politically invested in supporting the survival and flourishing of trans and nonbinary people and view this project as an attempt to answer the question of ‘how do trans people survive’?

As I swim within the world of the speculative, I utilize the speculative to both envision possibilities of alternative ways of being in relation, of understanding ourselves and each other, of caring for our communities both in the future and in the present. My investment is in the survival and thriving of trans people, and do not view trans people as “subjects” of this research necessarily, but rather the community that this research is beholden to. In developing this project, it was particularly important for me to provide space for trans voices other than myself and my own theorizing. In my second chapter, I feature the words of the trans and nonbinary

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<sup>70</sup> Duffett, pp. 1–2.

people I spoke with heavily. This is a purposeful decision to center trans voices outside of academia.

It is with this investment in mind that I at times center trans joy in my analysis. I draw here on Ian Khara Ellasante’s call for Trans Studies to “do love” and healing work that continues to center the embodied knowledge of trans people <sup>71</sup>. In his 2020 book *Trans Care*, Hil Malatino describes his desire to see trans people “maintain the kind of wide-eyed silliness and unabashed enthusiasm that we associate with childhood but that, in fact, only the most privileged and unharassed kids get to experience.” <sup>72</sup> I share this sentiment with Malatino, and with this work I provide my offering and celebration of the abundant possibilities of trans imagination.

## Chapter Breakdown

### Chapter One

Combining autoethnography and fan-produced content, my first chapter argues that many trans fans of the BBC series *Doctor Who* have utilized the series as a tool for developing an understanding of themselves, for imagining that gender affirmation and euphoria are possible, to challenge chronological trans narratives, and for providing a way to envision their transness as lifesaving and affirming despite the world of violence trans people can face. Trans studies has at its foundation emphasized the importance and legitimacy of experiential knowledge. <sup>73</sup> In this vein, I use myself as a subject of analysis through autoethnography. My own lived

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<sup>71</sup> Ian Khara Ellasante, ‘Dear Trans Studies, Can You Do Love?’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 7.3 (2020), 421–26 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-8553076>>.

<sup>72</sup> Hil Malatino, *Trans Care* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), p. 18.

<sup>73</sup> Stryker, ‘“(De)Subjugated Knowledges’.

experience is woven into conversation with the experiences of other trans fans to examine the ways some trans fans have utilized Doctor Who in their own lives to survive, heal, and find happiness. I place myself within this chapter for both the evidence my own experience may provide, and additionally as framing of how I have come to this topic.

In this chapter, I engage Keegan’s concept of the trans media object. A trans media object, Keegan explains, is one that while not being explicitly “transgender,” still offers “an aesthetic space in which the subject might feel a way forward through the closed phenomenological horizon of binary gender.”<sup>74</sup> Recent series of the show have provided overt references to the gender transforming possibilities of regeneration, but the character of the Doctor has never been explicitly or canonically a “transgender” character. Regardless, many trans fans of *Doctor Who* have long interpreted the Doctor’s regenerations through a trans narrative. The attention on *Doctor Who* for this first chapter additionally helps frame my focus in the first three chapters, on creative works that were not created to be intentionally or are not canonically “trans” or “transgender” characters, visuals, or narratives.

Inspired by José Muñoz's<sup>75</sup> framing of ephemera as evidence, I am interested in what the series has provided or done for trans fans rather than what the series explicitly says or shows. It is the process of meaning making by trans and nonbinary

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<sup>74</sup> Cael M. Keegan, ‘Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image’, *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 32.61 (2016), 26–41 (p. 27) <<https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v32i61.22414>>.

<sup>75</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, ‘Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts’, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 8.2 (1996), 5–16 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228>>.

fans that I offer as evidence of the series' trans capacity and potential to impact trans lives. How have trans fans of the series interpreted and utilized the series to understand their transness? What affectual work has the series done for trans fans? Guided by these questions, I explain how the use of and engagement with the series Doctor Who can act as a powerful survival strategy for many transgender fans.

## Chapter Two

In my second chapter, I examine the experiences of trans and nonbinary people who identify as or with a speculative fiction fandom. Drawing on focus group conversations I conducted with other trans fans of speculative fiction, I discuss the role that fandom practices of fanfic, cosplay, and other transformative works have in supporting their daily lives. I focus on the ways trans and nonbinary fans of speculative fiction have utilized fandom in personal, collective, and material ways to help support them in surviving a deeply trans antagonistic world. With this work, I bring Fan Studies and Trans Studies into conversation to analyze the role of fan practices and transformative works in the lives of trans fans specifically.

From these experiences of trans fans, I theorize the ways fandom practices can mirror trans community building and care. I draw parallels between the creation of fan works that trans the original canonical material as a way of providing for other trans fans. Additionally, I theorize the similarities between the pathologization of trans people and fandom more broadly.

## Chapter Three

Chapter Three, “Long Live the New Flesh,” continues my argument for the inherent transness of speculative fiction by way of analysis of the genre of body horror. Body horror is a subcategory of horror that focus on an internalized threat that exceeds the interior. Body horror fuels its horror by portraying the body as something beyond or different than what we expect through representations of bodily disfiguration, dismemberment, transformation, mutilation, and mutation. The fear of losing control over one’s own body and of the body becoming something unrecognizable, “monstrous,” or inhuman provides the genre’s foundation. I discuss the ways the genre engages themes around the transcending or transgressing of bodily boundaries and blurring the border of the internal and external. I explore the way the body horror genre can and has been utilized by trans people as a way to describe and work through experiences of bodily and social dysphoria. With this, I explore the ways affirmation and comfort can be found in unpleasurable spaces; how negation and abjection itself can become a generative space for trans people. To further this analysis, I provide a trans reading of Cronenberg’s 2022 film, *Crimes of the Future*.

#### Chapter Four

The fourth and final chapter, “Trans Worlding and t4t Imagination,” I ask: what worldbuilding and imaginative practices can a trans imaginary offer? The focus of this chapter moves away from works interpreted and felt through a trans lens, to discuss two different works of speculative fiction created by trans and nonbinary identified people. Since the 1990s there has been an increase in the amount of literature and media made by trans people, however, scholarship on trans media has largely focused on works that included trans and gender non-conforming characters

created by cisgender individuals.<sup>76</sup> This observation is additionally made by Eliza Steinbock who has argued that there is a need for increased scholarship on trans made film and trans made media generally.<sup>77</sup>

I examine Blue Delliquanti's three-part graphic novel *O Human Star* (published between 2015-2020) and Gretchen Felker-Martin's 2022 novel *Manhunt*. I engage the trans care practices and critiques offered in I choose these two specific texts partially because of the extreme ends of imaginative possibility they possess. *O Human Star* takes an optimistic or utopian approach to trans imagination, while *Manhunt* is a bleak and viscous dystopian imagining.

Despite their opposite affects, these disparate texts illuminate the possibilities offered through the practice of trans worldbuilding. Within each text is an emphasis on the importance of trans for trans (t4t) care, love, and the role such praxis has in sustaining trans life. I work to elucidate what a trans world might entail and what thematics exist within a trans imagination. I end this project with a reflection on the concept of "hope," not for an imagined potential future, but in how we can work to create a more just world in our present moment.

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<sup>76</sup> Horak, 'Trans Studies', p. 202; Laura Horak, 'Tracing the History of Trans and Gender Variant Filmmakers', ed. by Roxanne Samer, *Spectator*, 37.2 (2017), 9–20.

<sup>77</sup> Eliza Steinbock, 'Toward Trans Cinema', in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender*, ed. by Kristin Lene Hole (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 395–406 (p. 395).

## Chapter 1 | A Big Ball of Wibbly Wobbly Gendery Wendery Stuff

*People assume time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually, from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint, it's more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly timey wimey stuff.*  
— The Doctor, *Doctor Who*<sup>78</sup>

In the episode “Blink” of the long-running BBC series *Doctor Who*, the iconic character of The Doctor makes the above statement while attempting to describe the nonlinear-ness of time. The Doctor explains that time is complicated, relational, messy, and defined by change. Time, according to the Doctor, isn’t straight. While the Doctor doesn’t say it himself,<sup>79</sup> their description of time is trans. Many trans media scholars have provided insight into the way themes and aesthetics of movement, malleability, change, and liminality can invoke a trans reading of non-explicitly trans objects.<sup>80</sup> The themes utilized in reading trans-ly mirror the reading

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<sup>78</sup> ‘Blink’, dir. by Hettie MacDonald, *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2007).

<sup>79</sup> A note about pronouns: My use of pronouns for the Doctor in this paper fluctuates as the Doctor does. When referring to a specific iteration of the Doctor, I use the pronouns that match the gender of that iteration. When referring to all of the Doctor’s iterations as a whole, I use “they/them.”

<sup>80</sup> Helen Hok-Sze Leung, *Farewell My Concubine: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010); Helen Hok-Sze Leung, ‘Trans on Screen’, in *Transgender China*, ed. by Howard Chiang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 183–98; Wibke Straube, ‘Trans Cinema and Its Exit Scapes: A Transfeminist Reading of Utopian Sensibility and Gender Dissidence in Contemporary Film’ (Linköping University, 2014); micha cárdenas, ‘Shifting Futures: Digital Trans of Color Praxis’, *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 6 (2015) <<https://doi.org/doi:10.7264/N3WH2N8D>>; Cael M. Keegan, ‘Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity’, *Genders*, 55 (2013); Keegan, ‘Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image’; Cael M. Keegan, ‘History, Disrupted: The Aesthetic Gentrification of Queer and Trans Cinema’, *Social Alternatives*, 35.3 (2016); Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*; Dan Vena, ‘Rereading Superman as a Trans f/Man’, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 25 (2017) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.1063>>.

strategies of many trans fans of *Doctor Who*. The Doctor, and in particular the process of regeneration, has been commonly used by trans fans as a useful analogy to explain their trans experience and identities.<sup>81</sup> With the changing of a few words, trans fans of the series have repeatedly used phrases such as “Wibbly Wobbly Gendery Bendery” or “Gendery Wendery” to title queer and trans Tumblr pages, profiles, posts, and in the creation of fan art and memes. Regardless of official canon or gender even being discussed in the series, the ephemeral essence of the series and the emphasis on change and movement has long drawn many trans fans of *Doctor Who* to interpret the Doctor’s regenerations through a trans lens.<sup>82</sup>

While I would certainly not argue that all transgender or nonbinary people interpret media in the exact same way, many trans fans have developed, either together or individually, distinct interpretive strategies of reading trans-ly.<sup>83</sup> As an interpretive community— a group of people who interpret and “make meaning of a text in similar or related ways”<sup>84</sup>—trans fans have utilized themes of malleability, liminality, and change to interpret non-explicitly trans objects, narratives, and characters through a trans lens. The experiences of the trans fans I address in this

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<sup>81</sup> Susan Jane Bigelow, ‘Same Old Me, Different Face: Transition, Regeneration, and Change’, in *Queers Dig Timelords*, ed. by Sigrid Ellis and Michael Damien Thomas (Mad Norwegian Press, 2013), pp. 214–22;

<sup>82</sup> Bigelow; Anna Wiggins, ‘Regeneration: A Personal History of Doctor Who’, *Eruditorum Press*, 2015 <<http://www.eruditorumpress.com/blog/regeneration-a-personal-history-of-doctor-who/>>; Jessica Lachenal, ‘On Doctor Who and My Struggle With My Trans Identity’, *The Mary Sue*, 2016 <<https://www.themarysue.com/doctor-who-trans-identity/>>.

<sup>83</sup> Eastwood; Keegan, ‘Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image’.

<sup>84</sup> Jenkins, ‘Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture’, p. 16.

chapter showcase a shared process of reading and experiencing the series *Doctor Who* as invoking a trans imaginary.

Combining autoethnography and analysis of fan-produced content, I argue in this chapter that many trans fans of *Doctor Who* have utilized the series as a tool for developing an understanding of themselves, for imagining that gender affirmation and euphoria are possible, and providing a way to envision their transness as lifesaving and affirming despite the world of violence trans people can face. While I do take a relatively optimistic perspective in this chapter, I do not believe that any arguments or analyses I make here are necessarily an intentional part of the series or something that makes *Doctor Who* in itself visionary, radical, or subversive—it certainly is not.

While the series itself may not be canonically trans, the themes and narratives in the series reflect what Eliza Steinbock has referred to as “shimmering images.” A shimmering image is the moment in a film in which the audience gets a glimpse of another possibility, image, personhood, or gendered world.<sup>85</sup> It is in these shimmers and the process of reading trans-ly that produces a transgender capacity between trans fans and *Doctor Who*. David Getsy defines transgender capacity as “the ability or the potential for making visible, bringing into experience, or knowing genders as mutable, successive, and multiple.”<sup>86</sup> This trans capacity has manifested in the lives of trans fans in material and affectual ways.

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<sup>85</sup> Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>86</sup> David J. Getsy, ‘Capacity’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.1–2 (2014), p. 47 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399542>>.

Trans fans have responded to the void of affirming or relatable trans and gender non-conforming representation in media through imagining ourselves into stories and characters that were not created with us in mind but nonetheless invoke a trans reading. One example of this can be found in Dan Vena's "Rereading Superman as a trans f/man," in which Vena reinterprets Superman's origin story through a trans narrative.<sup>87</sup> Vena points out Superman's origin story, experience of his body as different, and internal feelings of being an outsider regardless of how others perceive or read him parallel experiences of transness. It is worth noting that much of what Vena reads as trans in the character and origin story of Superman could also be said of the Doctor: the Doctor externally looks indistinguishable from humans even though they are not, their body does things that reminds humans that they are actually quite different, for much of the reboot of the series the Doctor is the only one left from their home planet and often experiences a sense of loneliness from this feeling.

In Andre Cavalcante's research on trans viewers' film and tv reception, Cavalcante found that the trans people he spoke with largely reported that the explicitly or canonically trans characters that they had seen were not relatable and often sparked unpleasant affectual responses.<sup>88</sup> Rather, trans viewers reported that they were more likely to identify with non-trans characters. Media objects that are not explicitly trans but hold a trans capacity can potentially be more reflective of trans

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<sup>87</sup> Vena.

<sup>88</sup> Andre Cavalcante, *Struggling for Ordinary: Media and Transgender Belonging in Everyday Life* (NYU Press, 2018).

and nonbinary people's lived realities or identities than explicitly or canonically trans characters.<sup>89</sup>

I am interested in what the series has provided or done for trans fans rather than what the series explicitly says or shows. It is the process of meaning-making by trans and nonbinary fans that I offer as evidence of the series' trans capacity and potential to impact trans lives. How have trans fans of the series interpreted and utilized the series to understand their transness? What affectual work has the series done for trans fans? In what follows, I explain how the use of, and engagement with the series *Doctor Who* can act as a powerful survival strategy for many transgender fans.

### Regeneration and Doctor Who

The iconic character of the Doctor is able to avoid death through a process of regeneration. When faced with death, the Doctor "regenerates" or transforms their body into an entirely new one. Through each physical transformation the Doctor undergoes in their regenerations, the Doctor remains, generally, the same person. The Doctor's core personality is largely consistent (clever, brave, impulsive, eccentric, and confident) but each transformation brings with it different personality traits, quirks, interests, habits, and aesthetic tastes. The Doctor's regenerations are similar to the process of moving homes. After a few thousand years of life and adventures, the Doctor's collected a lot of stuff. They move into each new body with all their previous experiences, histories, loves, and losses. However, like in most moves, they

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<sup>89</sup> Keegan, 'Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image', p. 28; Cavalcante.

also get rid of some things they realize are no longer serving them, that maybe aren't working anymore. Likewise, they get some new decorations and new things that do work with the new space. Every regeneration provides the Doctor with the change they need to keep on surviving. The Tenth Doctor loses loved ones and carries so much heartbreak that he regenerates into Eleven who does his best to be carefree and far more childlike. The Twelfth Doctor almost decides to refuse to regenerate because he feels he has lived long enough and is weighed down by loss, but then regenerates into Thirteen who is full of hope. The Doctor shows the viewer that change is essential to survival. Nothing stays the same for long in the Doctor's universe—companions, characters, location, the Doctor himself. Even the lore and rules of the series are inconsistent and often changing, as Thirteen explains “my rules change all the time.”<sup>90</sup>

Despite consistently taking on a humanoid physical form, the Doctor isn't human and is part of an alien (at least from an Earth human perspective) species called Time Lords. In spite of the androcentric name, there have been multiple references to the ability of Time Lords to regenerate into different genders over the course of the series (at least since the series' reboot),<sup>91</sup> as well as indication that they could choose a non-human form.<sup>92</sup> The ability of Time Lords to change gender during regeneration was made the most canonically explicit by the casting of

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<sup>90</sup> ‘The Woman Who Fell to Earth’, dir. by Jamie Childs, *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2018).

<sup>91</sup> One of the more explicit moments of this is in “The Doctor's Wife,” an episode guest written by Neil Gaiman in which the Doctor mentions another Time Lord who had been different genders a few times.

<sup>92</sup> In “Destiny of the Daleks”, a Time Lord named Romana, tries on multiple different forms during her regeneration with one being non-human in appearance.

Michelle Gomez as Missy/The Master <sup>93</sup> and Jodie Whittaker as the Thirteenth Doctor.

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I was in my mid-teens when I happened upon a VHS of *Doctor Who* episodes my father had taped off TV. They were in no particular order, clearly having been taped whenever he happened to find the show airing, and their disorder meant that I quickly saw two different actors portray what I thought was supposed to be the same person. When I asked my dad why this was happening, he responded saying simply “he changes faces.” I loved this. While I was drawn to the show for the aliens and adventures, what made me a fan of the series was the process of regeneration. Before I understood myself as transgender, there was something about the Doctor’s ability to transform in the face of death that called to me. I longed to transform like the Doctor.

Experiences of gender regulatory violence would lead me to many years of denial and self-loathing out of fear that I would again be targeted for violating cisnormative and heteronormative gender expectations. These years of attempting to perform as cisgender culminated with a suicide attempt in my early twenties. Later, while attempting to escape my emotional pain in a world of speculative fiction I found myself watching the Tenth Doctor absorb a fatal dose of radiation before

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<sup>93</sup> The Master is a longtime adversary of the Doctor who is a Time Lord like the Doctor. The Master had always been portrayed in the original and revival series as a man until the episode “Dark Water” S8E11, in which it is revealed that the villain calling themselves Missy is the latest regeneration of the Master. Michelle Gomez is superb.

evading death yet again by regenerating. As I sat there crying heavily over the (still painful) loss of David Tennant as the Doctor, I realized part of my tears and pain were caused by my refusal to allow myself to regenerate. While the Doctor's body attempts to regenerate instinctively, the Doctor has shown on multiple occasions their ability to prolong or resist the regeneration process, at least for a limited amount of time, and the pain experienced in doing so. Like the Doctor, part of myself knew instinctively what I needed to do to save my life, but I had not allowed that part of myself to be heard. I related to Ten's fear of regeneration, of what might result from such a change, and like Ten, my regeneration was inevitable if I was to survive.

The Doctor, as well as Time Lords in general, has represented for many trans fans what Cael Keegan refers to as a "trans media object."<sup>94</sup> Keegan defines a trans media object as one that while not being explicitly "transgender," still offers "an aesthetic space in which the subject might feel a way forward through the closed phenomenological horizon of binary gender."<sup>95</sup> While popular media generally relies on the ability of a media object to conjure personal and cultural feelings,<sup>96</sup> trans media objects invoke a specifically gendered possibility that aids many trans people in imagining and bringing our own selves into being.<sup>97</sup> Trans media objects do not need to be, and perhaps usually are not, canonically or explicitly transgender subjects, objects, or narratives; they are not defined but what they are, but rather what they do.

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<sup>94</sup> Keegan, 'Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image'.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> Henry Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (NYU Press, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Keegan, 'Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image'.

They offer a site of connection that involves the production of a trans affect or trans feeling for the subject by providing “a normally unseen transfer between seemingly irreconcilable points.”<sup>98</sup> Building upon Sara Ahmed’s concept of queer objects—objects that make the touching of bodies or lives that are not intended to touch possible<sup>99</sup> – trans media objects describe the moment of possibility that occurs when the viewer experiences the potentiality of moving from one gender to another.

The regeneration process of Time Lords provides a site to envision such a seemingly impossible transfer. *Doctor Who* didn’t make me trans, but it did make the possibility of transness tangible for me. The regenerations weren’t about gender, but my nascent transness felt them as such. Within a cisnormative paradigm, gender is immutable. Watching the Doctor’s body completely manifest into a new bodily form made the potential of physical transformation a possibility. *Doctor Who* helped call me into being, and I am certainly not alone in this experience. In a blog post describing her experience as a trans fan of *Doctor Who*, Anna Wiggins explains the first time she experienced the show invoking a trans becoming:

On screen, Romana (a character I like a lot) is trying on different bodies... the idea of trying on a new body is amazing. In the most secret part of myself, I wish I could do that. I wish I could look like princess Astra.<sup>100</sup>

Wiggins’ description of this scene, this spark of possibility, mirrors my own early experiences watching the Doctor. Both Romana’s regeneration for Wiggins and Ten’s regeneration for myself shimmered a sudden possibility that without being explicitly

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>99</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenologies: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>100</sup> Wiggins.

about gender, was phenomenologically trans. It provided an imaginative possibility for a type of bodily transformation that was thought to be impossible. Understanding that this moment sparked a possibility for herself that she hadn't fully understood before, Wiggins later states the potential of the more recent Missy/The Master regeneration storyline to serve as a similar moment of possibility for young trans people, stating "... [Missy] means that somewhere, a little trans girl might watch *Doctor Who* and think 'maybe I can do that too.'"<sup>101</sup> In this statement, Wiggins shows that in addition to providing her own moment of trans possibility, the series has also provided her with a certain optimism or hope for the lives of other trans people.

To imagine otherwise is essential for trans people to make ourselves possible. In a cisnormative society that enforces a gender binary, often violently, to imagine other gendered possibilities is itself a form of speculation. Judith Butler argues that "the thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity."<sup>102</sup> Similarly, in his research, Cavalcante found that the majority of trans people he interviewed had a moment of "possibility," in which they questioned whether or not a trans life was possible or realized it was.<sup>103</sup> By evoking trans possibility, the Doctor has acted as a conceptual tool for trans viewers to project

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004), p. 219.

<sup>103</sup> Cavalcante, p. 13.

their own self-exploration and envision alternatives to coercive, nonconsensual binary gendered categories.

This affectual and interpretive work reflects a form of tranifestation. To tranifest, a concept developed by Kai Green, is the process of manifesting the possibilities of trans existence and identity.<sup>104</sup> The concept of tranifestation is taken up as well by Calvin Warren who argues that the Black trans subject may never be able to manifest themselves in a society in which Black people are disallowed from the construction of the category of “human.”<sup>105</sup> A similar argument or examination can be found in the scholarship of C. Riley Snorton and Jian Neo Chen.<sup>106</sup> Snorton theorizes and evidences the way that Blackness has been connected to “trans” throughout U.S. history,<sup>107</sup> while Chen describes how trans women of color must manifest and make themselves possible to a colonial, white supremacist cultural imaginary.<sup>108</sup> Doctor Who itself has perpetuated a colonial, white savior narrative for much of the show’s sixty years on television; portraying the Doctor as the white, colonizing, British daddy coming to save not only the people of color on earth from themselves, but everyone across the galaxy.

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<sup>104</sup> Green, ““What the Eyes Did Not Wish to Behold”: Lessons from Ann Allen Shockley’s Say Jesus and Come to Me”; Green and Ellison.

<sup>105</sup> Calvin Warren, ‘Calling into Being: Tranifestation, Black Trans, and the Problem of Ontology’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 4.2 (2017), 266–74.

<sup>106</sup> Jian Neo Chen, ‘Memory: The Times and Territories of Trans Women of Color Becoming’, in *Trans Exploits Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies in Movement* (Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 75–100; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides A Racial History of Trans Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

<sup>107</sup> Snorton.

<sup>108</sup> Jian Neo Chen.

It isn't that the series itself provides a path toward trans identity, experience, or affect, but that in reading the series trans-ly, trans fans manifest a path toward a transing ontology. Through trans interpretation, an "exit scape" or sorts is created by trans viewers. Wibke Straube describes exit-scapes as moments, often musical interludes or dream sequences, in trans films that provide trans viewers an escape from cis-normative and restrictive gender systems.<sup>109</sup> In reading the series trans-ly, fans open up the potential for alternative and utopian sensibilities and possibilities. Trans people have long had to "craft imaginaries" in which living as a trans person is possible in order to survive.<sup>110</sup> In the next chapter I will return to the importance of escapism for trans fans. Every single person that I spoke with reported that speculative fiction was important for them because of the escape it provided. Trans fans' reading of change and rebirth in the Doctor aids many of us (trans and nonbinary fans) in not only viewing our gendered selves as possible but that we are able to pursue who we want to be and what lives we want to live. The utilization of the Doctor in coming outposts amongst trans fans discussed earlier in this chapter, provides a glimpse into the multitude of ways that the Doctor has been used by trans fans in their own process of speaking themselves into existence. Beyond the possibility of transness, the Doctor inspired me to imagine what a livable life could be.

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<sup>109</sup> Straube, p. 27.

<sup>110</sup> Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, p. 3.

## I Create Myself

Throughout the first season of the series revival,<sup>111</sup> the Doctor and Rose Tyler<sup>112</sup> continue to find the phrase “Bad Wolf” in random places throughout their travels in time and space. The phrase appears in graffiti multiple times in their journey across Earth: as a television station broadcasting the Face of Boe, as the name of a military helicopter, as a media corporation, and additionally appears in both German and Welsh.<sup>113</sup> The continued, repeated reappearance of the phrase throughout season one foreshadows the eventual season finale. In the finale, the Doctor learns that the “Bad Wolf Corporation” was a front for the Daleks (the Doctor’s biggest enemy and big fans of genocide) who are, yet again, attempting to take over the human race. Knowing the threat the Daleks pose, the Doctor sends Rose Tyler (against her wishes) home to Earth in the Tardis<sup>114</sup> in an attempt to save her life as he plans to sacrifice his own in order to protect the humans from the Daleks. Rose, refusing to have the Doctor tell her what to do with her own life, forces open the central heart of the Tardis and in gazing into it, absorbs the power of the Time Vortex that fuels the Tardis. Rose then uses this power to return to the Doctor at Bad Wolf Bay. When the Tardis door opens, we see Rose glowing with the power of the Tardis. She then states “I am the Bad Wolf. I create myself. I take the words; I scatter them in time and

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<sup>111</sup> The original television run of Doctor Who lasted from 1963 until 1989. In 2005 Russell T. Davies revived the series for television again as a continuation of the original series rather than a reboot.

<sup>112</sup> Rose Tyler is the first companion of the Doctor in the revival series. She is also the first companion to develop an overt romantic relationship with the Doctor.

<sup>113</sup> The phrase also appears after the culmination of the Bad Wolf story arc occasionally over the next few seasons.

<sup>114</sup> The Tardis is the Doctor’s space/time travel machine.

space. A message to lead myself here.”<sup>115</sup> We, the viewers, watch as Rose takes the words “bad wolf” from the Bad Wolf Corporation sign and sends them out across the universe. All the foreshadowing and signposting of the “Bad Wolf” throughout the season were all messages future Rose sent to her past self, leading her to this moment. Rose goes on to use the power of the Tardis to destroy the Daleks and bring pansexual hero Captain Jack Harkness back to life. The arc ends in one of the most painfully cheesy, eyeroll inducing moments of the series; with the power of the Tardis/Time Vortex being too much for a human body to handle, the Doctor absorbs the power by kissing Rose, leading to his own death/regeneration into the Tenth Doctor.

Despite the ridiculous ending of the Bad Wolf arc, it has remained one of my favorite storylines of the series to date. Over the years since its airing, I found myself often using the phrase “I create myself” when discussing my own transition. It is not simply the clear parallel between the phrase and the process of physical and social transition, although there is that, but the process of Rose laying a path for her past self to find her way to her future that gives the phrase meaning to me. Like *Doctor Who* providing moments of possibility for trans fans, Rose sends moments of possibility to herself. I like to imagine the many moments in my life that sparked a questioning of gender and sexuality norms, even when I didn’t realize them as such, as moments sent by a future me to help guide me to myself.

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<sup>115</sup> ‘The Parting of the Ways’, dir. by Joe Ahearne, *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2005).

While I engage with the bad wolf concept, this is not to imply that transness is about independent self-creation. I am not attempting to propose transness as “self-made”—despite the clear implications “I create myself” has for this type of reading. Gendered affect and becoming occurs through an exchange and engagement with something external to oneself. In Keegan’s framing of trans media objects, he draws upon and connects the work of Sara Ahmed and Gayle Salamon to elucidate the psychological, affectual, and phenomenological impacts of media on shaping the trans subject. In doing so, he illustrates trans becoming as happening in the space between the self and another.

Gender itself is forever in flux throughout time and space and what trans media objects do is perhaps allow the subject to catch in the corner of their eye a shimmer of a suggestion that something is, or could be, different than it might seem.<sup>116</sup> Salamon’s theorization of the body as always experienced and imagined in relation to others and cultural ideologies and norms, helps explain the relational role media can have in shaping the trans subject. Describing the role societal ideals and relationships shape the physical body, Salamon states:

...our bodies are always shaped by the social world in which we are inescapably situated... what we are able to imagine about what our bodies are or may become – even to decide about what ‘counts’ as a body and what does not – is structured by the history of how bodies have been socially understood, by what bodies have been....the same social forces that constitute a body as culturally legible or illegible also shape the very feelings of embodiment that would seem to be most personal, most individual, and most immune to regulatory injunction. What we feel about our bodies is just as “constructed” as what we think of them, and the power of social construction as a model of understanding embodiment stems from its insistence that these categories are not separate but always intertwined. (2010, 76–77)

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<sup>116</sup> Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*.

If transness is about movement and change, then there must always be points of which to move between. These points can change and where we find comfort in them may evolve, but they require us to be in relation to something other than ourselves—to be affected by something or someone else. The process of trans becoming then might be understood as the process of affect turning to emotion, from something precognitive to something understood. The usage of the phrase “I create myself” is therefore less about transness as self-made, and more of a reflection of the aftermath of the affect becoming emotion. Beyond simply provoking the possibility of trans-ness, *Doctor Who* tells trans fans that they can create themselves. It has provided an “intermediate space”<sup>117</sup> for many trans fans to explore and understand themselves through their interpretation and experience of the series. Outside of the confines and dangers of gender transgression in the real world, the escape offered by the series can act as a safer, imaginative place in which the trans subject can work through a process of self-excavation. Using the character of the Doctor as an imaginative agent onto which I could project my own self-exploration, the series expanded my own sense of who I could be: aiding in my own development of a slightly more, yet not completely, coherent identity.

When the Doctor regenerates, there is almost always a period of adjustment for the Doctor and their companions. For the Doctor, this can be getting used to a new body along with a bit of mental fog as their brain settles into its new form. For the Doctor’s companions, this can often mean adjusting to the fact that the person they

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<sup>117</sup> Duffett.

knew now looks entirely different and may have some new quirks or traits for them to learn. Oftentimes, the newly regenerated Doctor struggles with their companions not seeing them for who they are. The Doctor's regeneration from Eleven to Twelve provides a particularly poignant example of this; after the Doctor regenerates, Clara—the Doctor's current companion—struggles to see this new man standing in front of her as the same friend she knew before. In an impassioned plea for recognition, the Twelfth Doctor states: "You can't see me, can you? You look at me and you can't see me. Have you any idea what that's like?... I'm right here, standing in front of you. Please, just... just see me."<sup>118</sup>

Writing for the website *The Mary Sue*, Jessica Lachenal describes how this particular moment of the series felt deeply impactful and representative of her own gendered experience:

Most days are a struggle just to be seen as the woman I am...It's enough to make me feel invisible sometimes...I'm still seen as something I'm not... 'Please,' comes my silent plea to the people I love and want to love me back for who I am. 'Just see me. Just see me for me, please.'<sup>119</sup>

The Doctor's loved ones failing to see them for who they are draws a direct parallel to the experience of trans people who consistently face moments in their lives where their internal understanding of themselves does not match the way others read or interact with them.

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<sup>118</sup> 'Deep Breath', dir. by Ben Wheatley, *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2014).

<sup>119</sup> Lachenal.

The imaginative potential of the series can have tangible, material effects on the minds and bodies of trans fans. In a post for the website *The Time Ladies*, Emma Jones describes how the Doctor's experiences of regeneration helped her not only understand herself as trans but moved her towards actively becoming herself:

After dealing with his own identity crisis, the Twelfth Doctor says, '...you look at me, and you can't see me' and it immediately clicked. It allowed me to articulate my feelings about how it hurt to be misgendered, to feel like and know you're a girl but have everyone look at you and think and refer to you as a boy. Not too long afterwards I began my gender transition.<sup>120</sup>

Through identification with the Doctor, Jones manifested for herself a new possible life and future. Jones' experience in some ways parallels my own experience of the Tenth Doctor's regeneration. After denying who I was for years, it was through watching the Tenth Doctor letting himself regenerate that I would eventually choose to save my own life. It is worth emphasizing that the Doctor's regenerations literally save them from death. For many trans people, of course not all, transitioning can be lifesaving. Furthermore, I read the experience of trans fans of the series choosing to create or make manifest the gendered self that feels affirming, as its own form of fan art. Transgender people who choose to physically transition are in many ways, making their own transformative work. Taking the source material, assigned sex/gender at birth, and expanding or changing it in endless ways that work and feel better for the trans subject.

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<sup>120</sup> Emma Jones, 'Thoughts on Regeneration: A Trans Perspective', *The Time Ladies*, 2018 <<https://thetimeladies.com/2018/05/31/thoughts-on-regeneration-a-trans-perspective/>>.

Trans fans' identifying, or perhaps disidentifying, with the Doctor, has provided a path toward creating for themselves new embodied experiences. In reading the Doctor through a trans lens, in projecting oneself onto the character, fans have found a process for making oneself legible. The imagining, reinterpretation, or subversive reading of non-explicitly trans characters as trans, can itself act as a strategy of resistance and affirmation. Reading oneself into a narrative or character that isn't about you can be powerful for marginalized people.<sup>121</sup> Trans people continually move between moments of visibility and invisibility in various moments and places in our lives. The process of transition, whether social and/or physical, is often the process of making one's internal self, external. Because transness is relational, there is some value in being seen, at least figuratively, in the way the subject sees or understands themselves.

Sara Ahmed describes objects that make the touching of bodies or lives that are not intended to touch possible, as queer objects.<sup>122</sup> Trans media objects, like *Doctor Who*, provide a disorientation of sorts.<sup>123</sup> The messiness of *Doctor Who* breaks apart being oriented toward anything. If change is central to the Doctor, then so is disorientation. Ahmed's framing of the important role objects have in orienting us toward or away from happiness can also work to frame how trans media objects can have a transformative and life sustaining role in the lives of trans people. Trans media objects can provide a reorientation to gender and happiness, a way to find

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<sup>121</sup> Cynthia Walker, *Work/Text: Investigating Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (New York: Hampton Press, 2013), p. 291.

<sup>122</sup> Ahmed.

<sup>123</sup> I engage and discuss Ahmed's theorization of "disorientation" in the next section.

happiness in the object that we have been told should make us happy. Not just through the pleasure the object brings us on its own but how it also helps us imagine and redefine an unhappy object such as gender to one that does bring happiness.

### A Big Ball of Wibbly Wobbly Gendery Wendery Stuff (Or Getting Disoriented)

For many years, as much as I loved and enjoyed *Doctor Who*, I always considered myself a “bad fan” of the show. I have never related to the series quite like my other media and literary fandoms. I am not interested in the minute details, I forget character and planet names within seconds, and I just do not care when the show changes its lore and is full of inconsistencies. While these are all ways I engage with other fandoms, *Doctor Who* has always been different. What makes me a fan of the series has been entirely based on how the series has made me feel and how those feelings have helped shape my life.

*Doctor Who*'s ephemerality, the inconsistencies, and often utter incomprehensibility are what make the show important and impactful to me. In Susan Jane Bigelow's essay in *Queers Dig Timelords*, she reiterates a similar attraction to the series as a transgender fan, explaining that for her the series is fundamentally about change<sup>124</sup>. To use the Doctor's own words, the show itself is a big ball of wibbly wobbly timey wimey stuff. Very little lasts for long in the world of *Doctor Who*. The Doctor changes every few years, there's a different location or time period

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<sup>124</sup> Bigelow, p. 221.

every episode, the companions change more than the Doctor, and the lore of the series is consistently changing its rules. The Bad Wolf story line for example, relies on an understanding of self that does not exist in cis chronological time. Instead, Rose refers to time as a big ball of wibbly wobbly stuff that is always now, and then, and could be. The bad wolf arc is more circular. It begins and ends together. She doesn't just send signals back in time to herself, she sends them across many different times, and vastly different places with some of those places being her current future. Bad Wolf references appear in the series even after the storyline has supposedly ended. Rose sends the messages to what is conceivably her future as well as moments in time and places where she herself will not be. Her signals are relational and not always for herself, but reminders for the Doctor at times when he also may need them. The signals change based on their location, shifting format, placement, language, or clarity depending on the time and place they are. Each signal is designed to reflect the time and place in which it lands. The ever-changing nature of the show reflects many thematically trans elements and is what I suggest draws many trans and nonbinary fans to the series specifically.

Keegan describes how movement represents a trans thematic; whether it is through physical space, virtual space, time, or bodies.<sup>125</sup> Specifically, Keegan argues that movement as a trans aesthetic primarily emphasizes the concept of movement as an escape from oppressive systems or beliefs. Movement and liminality as trans aesthetics have been described by micha cárdenas as connected to the real lives of

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<sup>125</sup> Keegan, 'Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity'; Keegan, 'History, Disrupted: The Aesthetic Gentrification of Queer and Trans Cinema'.

trans women of color who experience “multiple forms of violence” daily, forcing them to learn to “shif[t] their bod[ies] and appearance as necessary for survival.”<sup>126</sup> Steinbock,<sup>127</sup> Keegan,<sup>128</sup> cárdenas,<sup>129</sup> and Halberstam<sup>130</sup> have each described liminality as an important trans aesthetic. Steinbock in particular uses the concept of liminal space in conjecture with their concept of the “shimmer” in film. The briefness of these moments is what makes them a “shimmer” or glimpse.<sup>131</sup> I do not suggest that *Doctor Who* itself is subversive, far from it, rather I see the in reading the series’ potential trans thematics, trans fans creates a potentially imaginative escape from a compulsory gender binary. Kai M. Green argues that engaging a trans reading can “illuminates those moments of fissure, contradiction, and coherence.”<sup>132</sup> The escape the series provides is an exit to an alternative imagining of life through an embracing of the liminal, malleable, and incoherent. A path toward a configuration of self-understanding that does not have to adhere to dominant norms of legibility. Change, movement, and liminality are celebrated in the world of *Doctor Who*. The Doctor avoids death by regenerating; it is change that the series offers as lifesaving.

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<sup>126</sup> cárdenas, “Shifting Futures: Digital Trans of Color Praxis.”

<sup>127</sup> Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*.

<sup>128</sup> Keegan, ‘Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity’; Keegan, ‘Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image’; Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*.

<sup>129</sup> cárdenas, ‘Shifting Futures: Digital Trans of Color Praxis’.

<sup>130</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005), pp. 76–96.

<sup>131</sup> Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*.

<sup>132</sup> Green, ‘Troubling the Waters: Mobilizing a Trans\* Analytic’, p. 67.

There is a paradoxical affect or feeling of change and sameness that exists always at the same time within the world of *Doctor Who*. It is the same Doctor, but it also isn't. Constant time travel means the present for the Doctor and their companions can at the same time be their past or their future. Paradoxes themselves can provide another example of a trans aesthetic within the series that may inspire the "impossible possibility of living one life in two genders or the illogical project of seeking to be recognized as a gender one already is."<sup>133</sup> The world of *Doctor Who*'s liminality presents itself in the ever-changing timeline. Viewers, and the Doctor, meet characters out of sync (i.e., River Song), and build relationships outside of the limits of chronological time. The series embraces a "yes/and" aesthetic and a world of paradoxes. Often the storylines are nonsensical but that is also something that makes the show delightful. The show continually requires the viewer to suspend belief, to avoid trying to make sense of it, and just enjoy the ride. As a non-binary, trans masculine viewer, this aspect of the show feels particularly pleasurable and affirming. One of the most common themes amongst trans related fan art is portraying or identifying the Doctor as nonbinary [Figure 1.1<sup>134</sup>]. The reading of the Doctor as nonbinary was popular before they canonically changed gender and has perhaps gained even more popularity since. In more recent seasons of the series, the show has made reference to the Doctor refusing to limit gender roles. In series 10, the Doctor reminisces about their past with their frenemy The Master saying: "I think she was a

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<sup>133</sup> C  el M. Keegan, 'Transgender Studies, or How to Do Things with Trans\*', in *The Cambridge Companion To Queer Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 66–78 (p. 70).

<sup>134</sup> alexmey-does-an-arts, Tumblr, *Two Hearts Not Two Genders* <<https://nonbinarydoctorwho.tumblr.com/page/2>>.

man back then. I'm fairly sure that I was, too. It was a long time ago, though." When Bill, his companion, asks the Doctor about Time Lords being fluid around gender he replies, "We're billions of years beyond your petty human obsession with gender and



*Figure 1.1: Cartoon fan art celebrating Nonbinary Person's Day featuring the Tenth Doctor wearing a suit skirt, trans flag tie, and holding a nonbinary flag.*

its associated stereotypes.”<sup>135</sup>

Trans people are consistently and historically expected to have concise, neat narratives of our transness or our gender. We are expected to make ourselves legible to a cisnormative world; to form a clearly coherent, stable identity. Even attempts to affirm trans people are often still functioning within a binary logic that often reinforces oppressive gender ideology back on to trans people. I think here about simplistic and ostensibly trans-affirming phrases like “trans men are men.” While such phrases and concepts are certainly affirming for many trans men, I personally have always felt erased in such attempts to interpolate myself into a simple gender

<sup>135</sup> ‘World Enough and Time’, dir. by Rachel Talalay, *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2017).

binary. My gendered past, my history, is for me, deeply a part of who I am and has shaped my social and political investments. Despite being a (albeit nonbinary) trans man, I personally do not identify with the category of “man” as we currently understand it. The “trans” part of my identity is essential; I refuse to form a stable gendered identity that leaves no room for possible movement. My own identity exists in and beyond these gendered spaces and cannot be easily categorized.

*Doctor Who* has helped me understand that in attempting to make my identity and body more coherent to myself, I do not have to make it coherent to others. Using the Doctor to describe the complexity of gender, fans often utilize variations of the

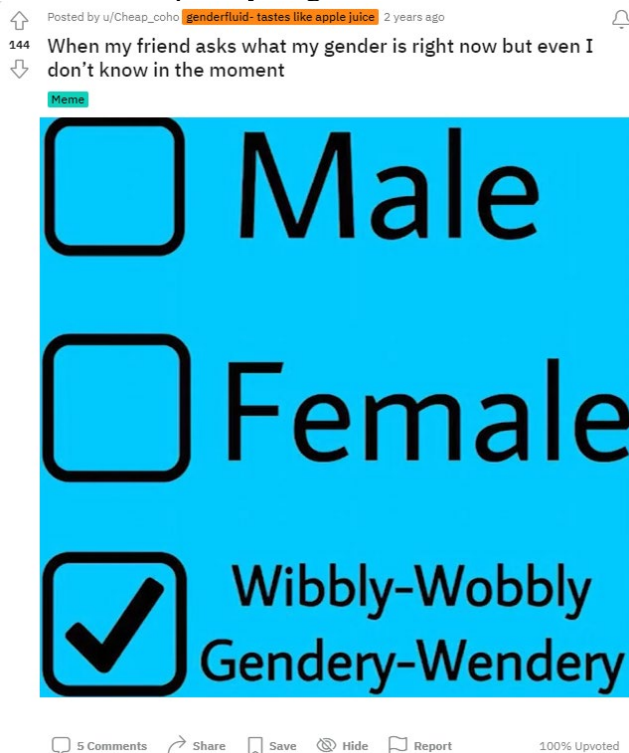


Figure 1. 2: Reddit post featuring a checklist with three boxes that say Male, Female, and Wibbly-Wobbly Gendery-Wendery in that order. The third box is checked.

“wibbly-wobbly” quote that began this chapter [Figure 1.2 <sup>136</sup>]. Another popular moment from the series that fans have used to play with the incoherence of gender can be found in a moment of season 10 where the Master is pretending to be the Doctor and refers to the Doctor’s companions, stating:

Master: “These are my disposables. Exposition and comic relief.”

Bill: “We’re not functions.”

Master: “Darling, those are genders.” <sup>137</sup> [Figure 1.3]



Figure 1. 3: Stills and dialogue from the episode *World Enough and Time*.

The Doctor’s fluxing liminality can help trans fans accept and embrace themselves outside of common conceptions of “pre/post” transition. For many trans

<sup>136</sup> Cheap\_coho, ‘When My Friend Asks What My Gender Is Right Now but Even I Don’t Know in the Moment’, *Reddit/Translords*, 2020

<[https://www.reddit.com/r/translords/comments/j2e8g2/when\\_my\\_friend\\_asks\\_what\\_my\\_gender\\_is\\_right\\_now/?utm\\_source=share&utm\\_medium=web2x&context=3](https://www.reddit.com/r/translords/comments/j2e8g2/when_my_friend_asks_what_my_gender_is_right_now/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3)>.

<sup>137</sup> ‘World Enough and Time’.

and nonbinary people, myself included, legible subjectivity is not achievable or something that is desired.<sup>138</sup> The series offers a way for trans people to potentially embrace who we have been, who we are, and who we will be as equally important in shaping our life and experiences outside of the commonly predictive understanding of transness as a forward progression between two opposing ends. The narratives of transness most commonly portrayed, what Atalia Israeli-Nevo calls “classic temporalities,” require trans people to make our identities temporally legible by creating a neat and clear linear timeline of identification and transition.<sup>139</sup> These types of temporally based understandings of transness are largely connected to the history of western medicalization of transness that have required a narrative of transness to have always been present in order to be perceived as valid.<sup>140</sup> I am referring here to the oft used phrase of “trapped in the wrong body.”

In Israeli-Nevo’s autoethnographic account of her own medical and social transition, she describes the pressure she experienced, from both trans and non-trans people, once openly identifying as a trans woman to begin medically transitioning. This pressure came from others’ desire for her to make linear temporal sense of her identity that could be simplified into a before and after period. The speculativeness of transness often forces trans people into a futurity focus that promises a stable, legible identity at the end of the path of transition that is not only unrealistic but encourages a lack of being present in the interim. This meditation is further taken up by Hil

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<sup>138</sup> Jeanne Vaccaro, ‘Felt Matters’, in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. by Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (Routledge, 2013), pp. 91–100 (p. 94).

<sup>139</sup> Atalia Israeli-Nevo, ‘Taking (My) Time: Temporality in Transition, Queer Delays, and Being (in the) Present’, *Somatechnics*, 7.1 (2017).

<sup>140</sup> Israeli-Nevo.

Malatino, who suggests that the experiencing of being present is often a privilege not granted to trans subjects.<sup>141</sup>

During her first episode as the Doctor, Jodie Whittaker's Doctor is asked how she deals with having lost her family. To this, the Doctor responds "I carry them with me. What they would've thought and said and done. Made them a part of who I am. So even though they're gone from the world, they're never gone from me."<sup>142</sup> While the Doctor is describing their lost loved ones, my immediate interpretation was as a commentary on their past regenerations—particularly as it is in the first full episode after Thirteen's regeneration. The concept of carrying your past selves within you and that they are always there, spoke to my own feelings around my past gendered selves. Upon finishing the episode, I went online to find the exact wording for this quote and what I found immediately was a Reddit thread for trans and gender non-conforming people centered around this specific quote. Trans contributors were utilizing the quote to describe their experience of remembering their different gendered experiences and lives lived. Within a day of the episode's first airing, there were already dozens of posts made by trans people, many of whom were juxtaposing the quote with older and current photos of themselves. Across most of the various posts was a repeated sentiment of feeling not only represented through the Doctor's regeneration but celebrated. This usage and reading of the Doctor's sentiment of remembrance alongside change is also mentioned by Bigelow when she describes looking at an old photograph of herself as a child and feeling how the Doctor perhaps sees or thinks

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<sup>141</sup> Hil Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), p. 35.

<sup>142</sup> 'The Woman Who Fell to Earth'.

about their previous forms: “A new me. I remember the old me. I remember that I was him, and he was like me... Parts of me are the same, but that transformation has irreversibly changed others.”<sup>143</sup>

With each regeneration, the Doctor may change their body and many personality traits, but they also forever carry their previous selves with them. Rather than feeling gender dissonance, discomfort, or pain at imagining, or looking at their former gendered selves, some trans fans have found that understanding their trans experience as a process of regeneration has helped them experience self-love or gratitude (which I address further in the next section). Bigelow describes looking at a photo of her young self and feeling an excitement for their future— a future that is her present. When I imagine my current self as the Bad Wolf, sending trans signals and signposts back in time to my younger self I experience this as a self-loving act. A method of loving all versions of myself—past, current, future, pre-transition, and beyond—and caring for myself. For myself and many other trans people, looking at old photos can be emotionally challenging or painful, but in imagining this person staring back at me as simply another regeneration, I have found a way to begin to heal that pain. That younger me got me to where I am now and while in some ways they feel estranged from my current form, like the Doctor, I will always carry them with me.

A similar point is made by Jessica Lachenal, when she describes how the Eleventh Doctor’s farewell speech before regenerating, spoke to her own gendered

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<sup>143</sup> Bigelow, p. 220.

experience.<sup>144</sup> Before regenerating the Doctor states: “We all change. When you think about it, we’re all different people all through our lives, and that’s okay, that’s good, you gotta keep moving, so long as you remember all the people that you used to be.”<sup>145</sup> Lachenal explains how at the time of watching this episode she had been struggling with accepting her gendered past and the gender trauma it came with. She explains how this moment helped her begin to accept who she has been and learn to love all of herself (the present and past):

The idea of separate selves...hit me like a proverbial ton of bricks...Just as it’s okay to change who you are, it’s okay to love and accept who you used to be. They did, after all, get me to where I am today, didn’t they? It’s not right for me to keep running from the people I used to be. I had to turn to them, face them, and embrace them as crucial parts of who I am now. More than that, I have to love them because despite the awful things they’d done to themselves, they are still me, and I am still them.<sup>146</sup>

Lachenal’s and Bigelow’s descriptions of learning to love their former gendered embodiments (or regenerations) speak to the impact the series can potentially have in building the self-worth or self-love of trans and nonbinary fans.

The imaginative space the series provides exists outside of linear conceptualizations of time and self-history, granting the trans viewer a chance to understand themselves outside of a binary of before/after that promises a supposed endpoint or complete coherent legibility. The Doctor in many ways represents what Israeli-Nevo refers to as “taking time.”<sup>147</sup> Taking time is a direct response to the push for linear, normative temporalities and instead “thinking and experiencing life

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<sup>144</sup> Lachenal.

<sup>145</sup> ‘The Time of the Doctor’, dir. by Jamie Payne, *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2013).

<sup>146</sup> Lachenal.

<sup>147</sup> Israeli-Nevo.

and body through delay and untimeliness.”<sup>148</sup> The Doctor exists outside of time and within time. The Doctor often runs into former or previous versions of themselves (or of their companions and friends) and in doing so lives forever outside of what Elizabeth Freeman calls “chrononormativity.”<sup>149</sup> Charlie Ledbetter argues that gender euphoria is not something that happens by “the successful erasure of [self] history,” or in the complete manifestation of a new physical form, but rather is “only legible and possible with reference to the past.”<sup>150</sup> This liminal, fluxing, non-linear understanding of the self can help lead the trans viewer to a path of healing some gender trauma and towards a potential gender euphoric affect.

### Affirmation and Gender Euphoria

*Doctor Who* has drawn transgender fans to the series through its representation of mind and body transformation. It has invoked trans possibility and offered a world outside of the confines of strict, linear legibility. In offering up a trans possibility, the series has additionally provided trans and nonbinary people a space to manifest new material, embodied sensations and experiences. Emma Jones describes how as she worked through and struggled in understanding and accepting herself as a trans person, *Doctor Who* “became an escape.”<sup>151</sup> Jones explains that the universe

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<sup>148</sup> Israeli-Nevo, p. 42.

<sup>149</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>150</sup> Charlie Ledbetter, ‘The Dysphoric Body Politic, or Seizing the Means of Imagination’, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 34 (2020) <<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1751>>.

<sup>151</sup> Emma Jones.

the series offered to her gave her a chance to envision a life where gender affirmation, and potentially even euphoria, was possible:

*Doctor Who* can often be an escape from something, from harsh realities. But that also means it's an escape to something as well-- to a place where gender and its associated stereotypes are irrelevant and where if you want to be a woman, you can.<sup>152</sup>

As discussed previously, the series often showcases the Doctor's companions struggling to adjust to the Doctor's new regenerations, but Bigelow argues that for her these moments have provided a source of optimism or hopeful possibility. She explains that while the Doctor's companions often respond with shock and confusion to each new regeneration, each companion eventually works through their emotions, adapting and understanding the Doctor as both different and the same. The types of negative responses companions enact in the series are all too real for many transgender fans who experience a full spectrum of responses from those around them to their gender identities. Bigelow explains how the way the Doctor's friends work to adapt and support the Doctor has helped her imagine a world where those around trans people respond with love rather than revulsion.<sup>153</sup>

The trans fans' experiences I have addressed in this article, reflect the potential for the Doctor to aid in the self-acceptance and self-love of trans fans. Bigelow specifically explains that the Doctor helped her to understand and accept herself throughout her transition. She describes how after each regeneration the Doctor has been known to find something they like about their new body even if it is

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<sup>152</sup> Emma Jones.

<sup>153</sup> Bigelow, p. 220.

unexpected, stating “There’s always a sense that because this body is his, it is therefore excellent.”<sup>154</sup> Western transgender narratives and medical models have historically relied on framings of being born or trapped “in the wrong body.” The Doctor’s body is never portrayed as being the “wrong” body, even after they officially changed gender between Capaldi and Whittaker’s Doctors. In reading the Doctor trans-ly, trans fans may engage in a subversion of the restrictive, violent and colonial gaze of what gendered bodies should be. Continuing to explain how she has used the Doctor’s post-regeneration body positivity to accept her own body as it changes, Bigelow states “because it’s mine, and it finally feels right, this body is excellent.”<sup>155</sup> Additionally, the common post-regeneration scenes in which the Doctor tries on multiple outfits, styles, and aesthetics before settling on a new look, additionally reflect Bigelow’s own experience with learning how to dress her body in a manner that felt authentic and affirming for her. She explains how these usually comic scenes helped her feel more forgiving and judge herself less harshly for struggling to learn how to express her gendered self.<sup>156</sup>

When the Doctor most recently regenerated from Peter Capaldi (the Twelfth Doctor) to Jodie Whittaker (the Thirteenth Doctor), Emma Jones experienced the Doctor’s excitement as a moment of gender euphoria:

having the Doctor be ecstatic, with that big grin...I felt I could relate to her feelings of excitement... Having the Doctor be thrilled seeing herself is such a powerful thing to see as someone who’s struggled with accepting their body.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>157</sup> Emma Jones.

The moment of Thirteen's regeneration was a moment that spoke to my own trans experience as well. The Twelfth Doctor resists regeneration for a period of time, thinking that perhaps it is time for him to finally die. After eventually deciding to allow himself to regenerate, the Doctor begins a speech to the future version of himself. He tells them what they should make sure to keep from his regeneration and what he hopes for his future self. The Doctor has hopes and desires for their future self but knows they cannot control the path their regeneration will take. Similarly, trans people often have hopes for some of the changes social and/or physical transition will bring but cannot always predict what or how those changes will manifest. When Twelve eventually regenerates into Thirteen, the first-time viewers see the Doctor as a woman, she immediately grabs a monitor to look at herself and upon seeing her new reflection simply states, "oh brilliant!" Thirteen's excited response, the sheer joy she displays, reads like a moment of gender euphoria. Like Jones, seeing the Doctor's sincere and ecstatic response to her regeneration felt like an affirmation and reflection of my own trans experience.

*Doctor Who* has provided, at least some, trans fans a mechanism or strategy for survival. This emotional impact of the series helps transgender fans envision our transness as lifesaving and affirming despite the world of violence trans people can face. The Doctor regenerates to save their life, and for many trans people, social and/or physical transitions can be lifesaving. The Doctor tells fans that change and regeneration are good and in a world in which trans people face exceptionally high rates of violence, suicide, housing insecurity, unemployment, and isolation, that message is powerful. It is not an exaggeration to say that for myself, *Doctor Who* is

one of the reasons I have survived to this point. While it certainly has not impacted every trans fan of the series in the same, or even similar way, my own experience offers evidence of the series' usefulness in imagining trans possibility and the way that possibility can have material impacts in the lives of trans fans. The liminal, ever-changing, and complicated world provided by the series acts as a path or tool for transgender fans to learn to affirm, accept, and love themselves as a trans person. Jessica Lachenal describes how the show has done this for her specifically, stating: "I wasn't always a fan of the show. But thanks to it, I've found a way to be a fan of myself."<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Lachenal.

## Chapter 2 | “At Least I’m Not the Only One Dreaming”

I move in this chapter to exploring ways that trans fans of speculative fiction have engaged and utilized fandom and fandom practices in personal, affective, collective, and material ways to help support them in surviving a deeply trans antagonistic world. By fans, I refer to individuals who have and maintain a deep, affectual connection to one or many cultural objects such as media, literature, music, or sports.<sup>159</sup> Those who may be considered or self-identify as fans commonly engage with a piece of media or cultural object through a variety of different fan practices that can include the writing/reading of fan fiction,<sup>160</sup> the creation of fan art,<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; Lawrence Grossberg, ‘Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective Sensibility of Fandom’, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. by Lisa A. Lewis (Routledge, 1992), pp. 50–65; Hills; Francesca Coppa, ‘A Brief History of Media Fandom’, in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. by Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (McFarland, 2006), pp. 41–60; Duffett; Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom 2.0: New Media Studies*, Digital Formations, Second (Peter Lang, 2017), CXIV; Jenkins, ‘Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture’; Karen Hellekson, ‘The Fan Experience’, in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. by Paul Booth, First (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 65–76.

<sup>160</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; Bacon-Smith; Christine Scodari, ‘Resistance Re-Examined: Gender, Fan Practices, and Science Fiction Television’, *The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 1.2 (2009), 111–30 <[https://doi.org/10.1207/S15405710PC0102\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15405710PC0102_3)>; Coppa, ‘A Brief History of Media Fandom’; Joanna Russ, ‘Pornography by Women for Women, with Love’, in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (University of Iowa Press, 2014), pp. 82–96 <[10.2307/j.ctt20p58d6.10](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20p58d6.10)>; Lothian, Busse, and Reid; Francesca Coppa, ‘Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance’, in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (University of Iowa Press, 2014), pp. 218–38 <[10.2307/j.ctt20p58d6.19](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20p58d6.19)>.

<sup>161</sup> Francesca Coppa, ‘Women, “Star Trek,” and the Early Development of Fannish Vidding’, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 1 (2008) <<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2008.044>>; Hills; Anne Collins Smith, ‘It’s Real for (All of) Us: Wizard Rock and the Audience as Co-Creator’, in *Harry Potter and*

cosplay,<sup>162</sup> interaction with the makers/performers/athletes of the cultural object of which they are invested,<sup>163</sup> and/or the engagement with communities and subcultural spaces devoted to their cultural object. Fandom itself often refers to the interpretive communities formed around a specific cultural object and the practices engaged by fans. Because of the increased engagement with a media object, trans and nonbinary fans are more likely to have emotional investments and feel emotionally and socially more impacted by a piece of literature or media than those who do not engage in fan practices. Fan practices themselves are often engaged in the trans-ing of cultural objects and ideas. Popular forms of fan created works such as fan fiction and vidding, or even cosplay, all involve some form of transformation. Engaging in many fandom practices is literally transcending the original concept to become something different. Of course, not all trans or nonbinary people would consider themselves fans of speculative fiction, but many of us have been drawn to the worlds and possibilities it offers. Fan Communities and practices showcase how engagement with a cultural object can have psychological, social, and physical impacts on the lives of trans people.

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*Convergence Culture : Essays on Fandom and the Expanding Potterverse*, ed. by Amanda Firestone and Leisa A. Clark (McFarland & Company, 2018), pp. 67–76.

<sup>162</sup> Nicolle Lamerichs, ‘Stranger than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay’, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 7 (2011) <<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0246>>; Shelby Fawn Mongan, ‘Finding Truth in Playing Pretend: A Reflection on Cosplay’, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Performance and Performativity in Fandom, 18 (2015) <<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0634>>.

<sup>163</sup> Booth, CXIV; Jenkins, ‘Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture’; Bethan Jones, ‘#AskELJames, Ghostbusters, and #Gamergate: Digital Dislike and Damage Control’, in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. by Paul Booth, First (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 415–29.

## Methodology

I make my argument in this chapter by way of a series of focus group type conversations I conducted with trans and nonbinary fans. I originally conducted five conversations with two trans/nonbinary fans each and two individual conversations. The individuals I spoke with were contacted through online fan boards, groups, and word of mouth. When recruiting participants for these discussions, I made clear my intentions for the “focus groups” to be less of a traditional question and answer session, and more of a guided conversation. I referred to the sessions as “collective geeking out.” While I did ask each group the same general questions, each conversation was unstructured and flowed naturally around these topics. In each group session, I shared my own experiences and participated with fellow trans and nonbinary fans in not only sharing about our experiences but in discussing the media and literature we love. With my other chapters focusing more on the affective interiority of trans readings of speculative fiction, I wanted to engage in these conversations to emphasize and explore the relationality of speculative fiction fandom and the ways fandom itself engages a form of trans-ing.

These collective geeking out sessions were initially intended to include four to five people each, but due to scheduling issues, only two people showed up to the first two sessions and the conversations were so rich that I decided the smaller number of participants actually allowed for more detailed responses from everyone. Every session lasted significantly longer than originally expected and included multiple moments of excitement fueled tangents about media that at times moved beyond even the scope of this project. At the end of every conversation, my collaborators consistently mentioned how the experience of having fannish conversation with other

trans and nonbinary people was a joyous experience. I think it is worth noting for a project that centers trans affect and survival strategies the value that in even engaging in these conversations there was at least a brief pleasurable affect created. During each initial discussion, I tried to engage my collaborators in conversations about more critical aspects of fandom and ways that the violence of our world seeps into fandom communities as well, however, discussants overall did not want to engage in discussion about the negative aspects of fandom. By and large everyone admitted to fandom being a place with racism, classism, sexism, transphobia, and antisemitism, but many actively disengaged from these conversations. I think this might be the result of this being something I brought up usually in the latter half of the discussions and how the affect of the discussions had already been firmly established. These discussions were fun and enthusiastic. Everyone seemed to want to stay in this place of joy and did not want to discuss the negative parts.

Four individuals reached out after our conversations to let me know they would love to continue the conversation again if I chose to do follow ups. I ended up conducting two more collective geeking sessions with these individuals which resulted in more complex exploration of topics around potential harms of fandom engagement and communities that participants had seemed resistant to in the earlier conversations. The names of everyone I spoke to have been changed for this project, with each person either choosing their own pseudonym or having me choose a random name from popular fandoms.

When developing this project, it was essential to me that I use my position of power in writing this dissertation to feature the words of other trans fans of

speculative fiction. I start this project through my own experience and with this portion of my research I purposely wanted to provide space for those I spoke with to have their own stories read. With that being said, I use long quotes throughout the chapter rather than attempting to summarize what participants said—which I still do as well—as an intentional decision.

### Escaping and Surviving

My conversations with trans fans provided insight into some of the reasons and topics that have attracted trans people to speculative fiction. In each conversation I asked people what fandoms they are currently or have been previously engaged in, as well as what media they are particularly drawn to. I was somewhat surprised to find very little overlap<sup>164</sup> in the specific media objects that participants were drawn to, however there was significant similarities in the themes, narratives, and characters that participants discussed.

Many of my discussants shared that they had noticed at some point that there was a significant amount of overlap between the trans communities they were a part of and a love of speculative fiction. Cecil, an Indian trans man in his early twenties stated that while facilitating a trans youth group on their university campus, they used an icebreaker in which they asked students for a character or piece of media that they felt resonated with them or reflected them in some way and that overwhelmingly the characters people mentioned were in the worlds of speculative fiction. “I think I even made a joke about it when it happened because it was like, everyone was either a superhero or alien or was magic [laughing]” he explained. Sharing a similar

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<sup>164</sup> The most common fandom that those I spoke with shared was Harry Potter, Marvel, and Pokémon.

experience, Xena—a white trans femme in her mid-twenties, shared that the trans youth she has worked with have often created art to represent themselves that manifests as fantastical of anime style characters.

In response to these experiences, Cecil suggested that superhero narratives might be particularly attractive to trans people because the stories often involve some type of physical, emotional, or psychological change that makes them different from how they once were and the experiences of navigating that change can resonate for trans people. His theory was supported through the experience of Xena, who said that her initial attraction to speculative fiction was centered around storylines in which a character’s body (or gender) changes in some way that is (often) out of their control<sup>165</sup>. She stated that she is drawn to things that involve transformation or “some way of, like, changing yourself outside of the bounds of what you’ve been relegated to in society, or breaking the rules of that society.”

Ramzi Fawaz has argued that the world of American superhero comics has engaged in a form of radical imagination; arguing that this imagining can produce and inspire alternative ways of imagining identities, relationships, and bodies.<sup>166</sup> Fawaz describes the flexible bodies of many American superheroes are often able to morph and mutate in ways that provide them unique abilities, powers, and strength. Describing these moments of superhero bodies transforming or changing as exhibiting “fluxibility,” Fawaz argues that these moments represent “a state of material and psychic becoming characterized by constant transition or change that

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<sup>165</sup> I explore this idea and Xena’s experiences in more depth later in this chapter.

<sup>166</sup> Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York University Press, 2016).

consequently orients one toward cultivating skills for negotiating (rather than exploiting) multiple, contradictory identities and affiliations.”<sup>167</sup> While Fawaz does not compare or directly connect his concept of fluxibility to trans identities or aesthetics, or at least not at length,<sup>168</sup> his description and interpretation of flexibility clearly reads as a trans thematic or aesthetic that was reflected in the shared attraction to superhero narratives discussed by the trans fans I spoke with.<sup>169</sup>

The desire for media and narratives that centered characters challenging oppressive systems, societal rules, and what even constitutes “human,” was mentioned by every single trans fan I spoke with. Ash, a Black nonbinary person in their early thirties, shared that they are generally most interested in stories that challenge the parameters of what we consider to be human and the rules by which we define the human. For them, this manifests into an attraction to stories involving robots and human conflict. The interest in narratives that center robots came up a number of times in the collective geeking out sessions:

*Willow*: “...that’s one reason I’ve always loved Star Trek, cause there’s this dynamic that I don’t think I’ve seen in other places or at least not like, developed as much. That you have all these different types of people, or aliens I guess, that work together and interact and while there’s lots of conflict, there’s also a certain amount of normalizing that happens around difference. Like it’s not weird to have these difference species working in the same place, and it’s usually not a big deal, and sometimes it is but it’s about them learning how to engage with each other through their differences. And you have so many storylines that involve people being a hybrid of multiple species and constantly battling with their identities and are they more of this or that and I can’t think of another sci-fi example that does that so much...”

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<sup>167</sup> Fawaz, p. 11.

<sup>168</sup> Fawaz does draw a parallel between The Fantastic Four character The Thing and trans theory briefly on page 80, he does not expand this comparison and centers most of his discussion of fluxible bodies around sexuality.

<sup>169</sup> See also, Vena.

*Korra:* "...I think of Jenny in *My Life as a Teenage Robot* as totally a trans character. The whole show centers around her trying to be a regular teenager but she's a robot and she doesn't quite fit in. I know a lot of trans people that identify with the show. I know I used to see just, so many memes and art on Tumblr that would point out the transness of the character or, you know, use meme's from the show to talk about being trans... she's [Jenny] a robot whose body transforms into different weapons and things she uses to save the day and she wants to be a regular girl, but then you have the mean girls at her school that bully her because she's not a 'real' girl. And her mom takes a long time to respect her as a girl and not just a robot which was super relatable for me. I remember there's a scene where Jenny is, I think talking about her body and her mom brings up an old photo of her from one of her previous builds and she's like, mortified, [laughing] yeah, relatable....maybe it's too on the nose with how trans the character is [laughing] but it isn't canon."



*Figure 2.1: Screen stills from My Life as a Teenage Robot (Season 2, Episode 2b)*

Korra's trans reading of Jenny is certainly a common one as there are extensive memes and posts making reference to the character as trans across fan and social media networks. The experience of trying to fit in within a world that doesn't see you for who you are or doesn't view you as human is also certainly not a uniquely trans reading. While discussing their interest in robot/human narratives, Ash described how "...as a Black person who's nonbinary, it [robot/human narratives] definitely hits multiple experiences" for them. C. Riley Snorton describes how "race and gender are inextricably linked yet irreconcilable and irreducible projects"<sup>170</sup>



*Figure 2.2: Screen stills of My Life as Teenage Robot (Season 1, Episode 12b)*

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<sup>170</sup> Snorton, p. 8.

Two individuals additionally stated that they found characters in stories that were neurodivergent to be the most trans coded characters: Cecil: “For me specifically, whenever there is a character that’s also in some way kind of autistic coded where they are like ‘why is gender the way it is?’ or like, not feeling the way you are expected to feel about something...That’s such a moment of like, oh, you get it.”

In his research on trans audiences’ media responses, Andre Cavalcante found trans individuals expressed a desire for trans characters that are mundane or ordinary. This was something that repeatedly came up in my discussions with trans fans that the reading of non-canonically trans characters as trans was often related to a desire to see characters who were trans whose narratives had nothing to do with their transness. The desire for gender to be irrelevant was in fact a theme that appeared across my conversations. Those I spoke with repeatedly made reference to liking a character or cultural object because of how little gender was part of the story. Cecil stated that they almost never found canonically trans characters who are “just allowed to exist without their entire story surrounding their trans identity. And it's very annoying sometimes when you just want to see a character that does a bunch of other shit, and then just is trans, not they’re trans and that's why you all the other shit happens to them.” He explained that for him, this was a major reason he found non-canonically trans characters more relatable and appealing than trans characters. The lack of trans characters in popular media that connect with trans audiences encourages trans

individuals to read media “perversely”<sup>171</sup> and find themselves within characters that are non-canonically trans but better reflect their own experiences.

*Escaping Societal Boundaries*

Many I spoke with expressed that science fiction and fantasy genres tended to let them have some relief from reality, particularly at times when the everyday felt like too much to bear. Trans fans I spoke with emphasized the way speculative fiction provided for them a path to move “beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, [to] the not yet actualized or the not actualizable.”<sup>172</sup> Fandom offered a place to investigate fictional universes with different societal norms, structures, identities, and bodies than those we encounter in our “real” lives<sup>173</sup>. For trans and nonbinary people, this escape can provide a space to “knowingly negotiate the configuration[s] of [one’s] own body within a framework of subject formation.”

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Peter, a white trans masculine person in his later 30s, shared how his first real exposure to the idea of transness not being a horrible thing was in gender swap fic:

“I was in my early to mid-teens I think, somewhere in the late 90s I think, and I came across fanfic and went in hard [laughing]. I was really into Buffy fic and there was one where Willow and Xander are gender swapped and Buffy had to figure out how to put them back and then at the end Xander decides he doesn’t want to go back...I could definitely be remembering it wrong cause it’s been so long, but I think everyone is totally cool with it in the story. No, that had to have been how it goes

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<sup>171</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Queer and Now’, in *Tendencies* (Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–20 (p. 4).

<sup>172</sup> Judith Butler, p. 28.

<sup>173</sup> Stephen Duncombe, ‘Imagining No-Place’, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10 (2012), para. 1.

<sup>174</sup> Nat Hurley, ‘The Little Transgender Mermaid: A Shape-Shifting Tale’, in *Seriality and Texts for Young People: Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature*, ed. by Mavis Reimer and others (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 258–80 (p. 274).

cause what I remember the most was that it was maybe the first place I had ever read something about someone changing gender and it be something people were cool with. At that point in my life I'd really only seen, um, Ace Ventura or stuff like that and the tone was just so different...I had never considered it wasn't a bad thing before...Oh wow, yeah, I wish I could thank that author [laughing]"

Korra described how she was drawn to anime originally because of what she saw as gender ambiguity in the artistic style:

"Oh I mean the genderfluidity or like, ambiguity? [I offer the word "androgynous"] Yeah that, that's like present in anime is just [laughs] it's just THERE [laughs]. And as a "boy" who wasn't a "boy" watching a "boy" in a show that was visually the same as the "girls" in the show, where the only reason you know they are a boy is because it's mentioned, it just was like... UuuGH.. I don't know the word for it but that's what it was [laughing] just that feeling."

When I asked her to put a word to the feeling she described, another discussant suggested the word "euphoric" to which Korra agreed. Prior to having a vocabulary to describe her trans identity or experiences, Korra found comfort in watching characters who she viewed as less gender coded than in her everyday life. Throughout our conversations (of which we had two), Korra emphasized that the ability to step away from western, colonial conceptualizations of gender, even if momentarily, while watching anime acted as a balm that soothed her own gender anxiety and trauma. Korra, who identifies as biracial, and emphasized in our conversation that her experiences of gender as a young person were deeply complicated and intertwined with her experiences of racism:

"I look more like my mother (who is Korean) than my father, and I think both my parents wanted us [Korra and her siblings] to fit in so much that they were probably harder on us doing anything outside of "traditional" gender roles—and by traditional I mean American—and I know it was hard on both of my sisters too, but as the only "boy" in the family I had a lot of pressure to not have anything feminine about me. Anime was an

escape from all that. Not to say that anime is like some gender utopia! It's not, for sure. But for me it was one of the only places I had access to that"

She elaborated by explaining that while she did not see anime as necessarily subversive, it did offer a space to view gender and the breaking of rigid gender boundaries as something pleasurable: "I mean, team Rocket was always in drag, and it's never really made into a big deal. I know that's so cliché at this point, but [shrugs]. Maybe we are meant to laugh at it, or I guess it's queer coding a villain. But for me, it was fun and that was it. Like, playing with clothes and styles and things could be simply fun." The joy Korra experienced through the gender transgressiveness that she found in certain anime series was palpable in our discussions. She talked at length about moments where Jesse and James (the characters of team Rocket) engaged in crossdressing and how it left her with a feeling of gender as whimsy. This type of gender playfulness stood in stark contrast to the gender trauma she described experiencing at home.

Speculative Fiction media allowed some to feel less aware of their body and their discomfort with it. The alternative bodily formations and norms that can be found within speculative fiction can provide a temporary escape from societal bodily expectations and standards:

*Cas, a multiracial Latinx, nonbinary femme identified individual in their early forties:* "...like when I'm watching Star Trek there's so many different alien species and colors and just, different bodies. And yeah some of them are supposed to be more attractive than others, but there's just something to the diversity of people, and non-people [laughing] that hits differently with that show. I'll spend an afternoon binging *Voyager* and then decide to put on something that's, um, real life based, and suddenly I'm like, 'oh yeah these people all look the same' and now I'm back to feeling the pressure of how I'm supposed to look a certain way. Plus, it's boring. Most bodies on screen are just so boring. I'm more

likely to feel like I see someone that looks like me in a show with aliens than I am on most regular TV.”

Cas wasn't the only trans of color fan who made reference to feeling more likely to see someone that looks like them in a speculative fiction genre than in most popular television. Cecil described how the way we read gender through a colonial western context is itself something that causes them dysphoria and that they sometimes feel like they might be more likely to see someone like themselves in fantasy worlds. “There's not a lot of brown dudes with long hair in lots of like, everyday kinda media but I feel like I find it more in like fantasy than not... It's just such a colonizer or American perspective to see short hair as masculine. It's like to be a man with long hair you have to be a wizard or something.” Cecil, Cas, and Korra's experiences address the way transness intersects with race.

Every white fan I spoke to in the geeking out sessions talked about engaging in fan practices and communities whether online or in person, however, this was not such a given for the trans fans of color. Ash described how they do not always feel as welcome in fan spaces: “It's not that anyone has ever said I'm not welcome, but I have gotten a vibe from a few of the places I've gone to, which could just be about where I live, where people do not want to think about race or are, like, angry to see a racebending cosplay.” Ash's description of their experiences reflects not just the insidiousness of white supremacy and racism within fan spaces, but also how the field of Fan Studies has ignored or actively neglected to address the way race intersects with fandom broadly. Scholars such as Rebecca Wanzo, Benjamin Woo, Rukmini Pande, and Mel Stanfill have addressed the void in Fan Studies on work that directly

centers the voices of fans of color. Wanzo explains that while Fan Studies does in fact often reference the whiteness present in fan studies' research, most research has not done anything to address this exclusion beyond paying lip service to it.<sup>175</sup> Black voices have been left out of much research in Fan Studies, as Wanzo explains, because the field has conceptualized and imagined "the fan" as white and has shaped the field to often exclude Black fandom.<sup>176</sup> Kristen Warner adds to Wanzo's argument and argues that "fandoms erase [racial] Others from the notion of fandom altogether."<sup>177</sup> Wanzo and Stanfill both state that the privileging of science fiction media fandoms (something I am doing as well with this project) over other types of fandom, specifically music and sports fandoms, has helped to exclude fandoms that might contain higher numbers of Black fans.<sup>178</sup> In his critique of the whiteness of Fan Studies, Benjamin Woo also makes this claim, stating that whiteness has been "baked into the way that fans and fan scholars conceptualize the field", referring to the fact that who is often included or counted as a "fan" is overwhelmingly imaged as a white subject within the field.<sup>179</sup> To challenge Fan Studies further marginalization of fans of color, Stanfill suggests naming and referring to fandoms as "Predominantly White

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<sup>175</sup> Rebecca Wanzo, 'African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 20 (2015) <<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0699>>.

<sup>176</sup> Wanzo.

<sup>177</sup> Kristen J. Warner, 'ABC's Scandal and Black Women's Fandom', in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Elana Levine (University of Illinois Press, 2015), pp. 32–50 (p. 33).

<sup>178</sup> Wanzo; Mel Stanfill, 'The Unbearable Whiteness of Fandom and Fan Studies', in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. by Paul Booth, First (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 305–17 (p. 305).

<sup>179</sup> Benjamin Woo, 'The Invisible Bag of Holding: Whiteness and Media Fandom', in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (Routledge, 2018), pp. 245–52 (p. 249).

Fandoms” in order to disallow “fandom’s whiteness to be neutral, [and instead] to flag its particularity.”<sup>180</sup>

For the fans who were attracted to and engaged in person fandom spaces, many highlighted how they felt these spaces provided a potential space for self-actualization through cosplay. Cosplay, the act of dressing up in costume of a fictional character, provides a space for fans to feel further connected to a character or source material, as well as play with parts of their own identity. Nicolle Lamerichs<sup>181</sup> explains that when fans choose a character to cosplay they construct their own identity in relation to the fictional character. Fans choose characters to cosplay for many reasons but often because there is an aspect of the character that they identify with.<sup>182</sup> Because fans may identify with or enjoy many different aspects of a specific character, it is common at fan conventions to see people engaging in cross-play (dressing up in costume as a character different from the gender one was assigned at birth or identifies as).<sup>183</sup> This practice is not necessarily tied to one’s own gender identity or transness, at least not for everyone. The more normalized attitude toward cross-gender cosplay at fan conventions allows transgender fans a possible space to present in a more authentically gendered way, even if they are in costume.

Willow, a white trans woman in her early thirties, explained that cosplaying played an important role in her understanding of herself and in building self-

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<sup>180</sup> Stanfill, p. 306.

<sup>181</sup> Lamerichs.

<sup>182</sup> Lamerichs.

<sup>183</sup> Lamerichs.

confidence. She shared her experience in which cosplay gave her an avenue for the first time she ever wore gender affirming clothing in a public setting:

“I had cosplayed for years beforehand but always as male characters, and I think I would have been around 23-24, I think, when I decided I wanted to try to cosplay as Seven of Nine. I usually wore, like, baggy hoodies and things usually to hide my body, and when I put on the jumpsuit for the first time and saw myself I just, [Pauses and laughs] I just, it just felt so good, I don’t really know how to describe it exactly. I ended up bringing my outfit with me to the con and changed there, cause I was so afraid of even wearing the wig in public. Like even on the bus on the way there I felt like the wig in my bag was, like, contraband or something... So I get there and I have to change so I go into the men’s bathroom, which, I know... and when I stepped out of the stall there was a dude using a urinal in full Bob Ross cosplay who did a double take at me and I had this moment of sheer panic before he just sorta nodded approvingly and turned away and that was that. Yeah, so I guess the first person to ever see me in women’s clothing in public was a dude peeing, dressed as Bob Ross [laughing]... and just the amount of compliments I got that day and just the way people smiled at me was better than I had expected. I’m sure someone there probably made a comment to a friend or laughed at me or something, but I never noticed any of it. The first time I wore women’s clothing in *public* public was not nearly so positive...”

The experience of gender affirmation Willow describes was a major motivating factor for her to begin wearing the clothes she wanted to in her daily life. Similarly, Cecil shared that an experience cosplaying as Harry Potter provided them a moment of gender euphoria and affirmation: “it felt really good man. I was like, wow, ok, yeah, this is nice.”

A similar experience was described by Luke, a black trans man in his late thirties, who described cosplaying as Marvel superhero Luke Cage at a time when he says he was still mostly read as a woman in public:

“I mean, yeah some people do make comments or think you’re doing it as a joke, but like... that dude over there is dressed like a fucking wookie

and that dude is some kind of transformer or something, so me as a “girl” [emphasis in the original] dressed as a man is literally the least interesting thing in this room. So, no one cares all that much.”

Zubernis and Larsen describe how fan spaces like conventions, can serve as “a transitional” or liminal space in which “temporary transgression[s]” of sexuality and gender norms may be allowed that would not be within the larger cultural norms.<sup>184</sup> Shelby Fawn Mongan<sup>185</sup> describes how cosplaying allowed her to understand and appreciate parts of herself that she previously attempted to hide or ignore: “Rather than trying to be something or someone that I’m not, I’m teasing out things already inside of me... Spending time in these characters’ skins helps reminds me of who I want to be and who I already am... The act [cosplay] itself unearthed something inside me.” Much like how drag may be used by transgender people to experiment with gender presentation, cosplay provides an outlet for transgender people to experiment with their gender presentation in a more socially sanctioned environment. The risks for a trans person to cosplay a different gender at a fan convention can be far less than the risk of presenting authentically while walking down the street.

Mélanie Bourdaa describes fandoms as “safe havens” for fans to express or discuss their identities.<sup>186</sup> While this was true for many I spoke with, the intersections of racism, classism, and cissexism complicated the “safety” of fan spaces. Like Jenkins’ description of interpretive communities, different fandoms

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<sup>184</sup> Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen, ‘Make Space for Us! Fandom in the Real World’, in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. by Paul Booth, First (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 145–59 (p. 149).

<sup>185</sup> Mongan.

<sup>186</sup> Mélanie Bourdaa, “‘May We Meet Again’: Social Bonds, Activities, and Identities in the #Clexa Fandom”, in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. by Paul Booth, First (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 385–99 (p. 386).

have different value systems. Different fandoms create their own rules of engagement, expectations, and ideas about what is acceptable.<sup>187</sup> For transgender fans, this means that some fandoms may provide a more welcoming and supportive space or a more hostile space for trans fans. How trans fans' experience their identities in relation to fandom and media objects varies greatly across different genres and fandoms. In my collective geeking out sessions, fans addressed that there are some fandoms they find to be less accepting or directly hostile to their identities. One such fandom that was brought up by two individuals was Star Wars. Ivy shared that they felt more misogyny and homophobia within Star Wars fandom than they had in others: "Most of the Star Wars fans I know are all women, so I don't think its about there just being more gross dudes that are fans of it than its about them just being louder and making it about themselves."

Perhaps the most salient and tangible utilization of fandom by trans people is present in the escape it can offer. The alternative ways of existing and being in the world provide a place for trans fans to go when our reality feels too violent. Without a doubt the sentiment that was expressed by almost all of those I spoke with was that being able to escape to another world, another reality, has been truly essential for their own survival.

*Finn:* "...that escape probably saved my life. Yeah.. it totally did. Those years where I was constantly on the verge of suicide were when I was reading and writing fic the most. When I felt like I couldn't fucking do this anymore and wanted to kill myself, I would just go and read fic for hours until I forgot how horrible I was feeling. I would write fic that had myself in it to really imagine I was anywhere but this reality.. And I did that for a few years. It was definitely my coping strategy and I mean, I'm still here so it couldn't have been a bad one right?...I rarely read fic

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<sup>187</sup> Hellekson, p. 65.

anymore and I haven't written anything in years [pause] which I hadn't really thought about until now [laughs] but I guess I don't need it anymore like I did then..."

Fan spaces provided a buffer for many of my discussants in times of emotional distress, mirroring Zubernis and Larsen's claim that engaging in fandoms can "increase motivation to continue their personal struggle."<sup>188</sup> Xena and Julian expressed similar experiences to Finn's that emphasized the essential role of escapist fandom in their own lives:

*Xena*: "[it] was a very big coping mechanism for me, a very big way for me to, like, feel um, you know, disconnected from my personal experiences there...and I think granted me some way to access something I couldn't in my real life"

Julian, a white nonbinary person in their early twenties, echoed the importance of escape in their own survival sharing:

*Julian*: "Oh I absolutely have used it [reading fantasy] to keep myself going. Anytime I've like, gone through something big or stressful like moving to another country or cutting my parents out of my life, I return to those books [their favorite fantasy YA series]. I just reread them every time things are hard and by the time I'm done, I'm more able to handle things."

As argued in the previous chapter, an escape offers a path toward something and for the trans fans I spoke with, that something was a way to survive.

Identifying with a fandom or part of a fan community can potentially increase feelings of self-worth and provide some form of support against feelings of isolation and depression.<sup>189</sup> The role fandom can play in supporting the mental wellbeing of

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<sup>188</sup> Zubernis and Larsen, p. 148.

<sup>189</sup> Nyla R. Branscombe and Daniel L. Wann, 'The Positive Social and Self-Concept Consequences of Sports Team Identification', *Journal of Sports and Social Issues*, 1991, 115–27; Daniel L. Wann, 'Examining the Potential Causal Relationship

fans isn't unique to trans people. Much has been said about how those who engage in fan communities often find emotional and life support within these spaces making it unsurprising this might be something trans and nonbinary people experience. In her discussion of the impact of fandom for queer fans, Rosalind Hanmer has argued that engagement in fan practices can be "beneficial in a therapeutic way that can enhance the outcome of their life narratives"<sup>190</sup>. Mark Duffett argues that media fandom can provide a "safe haven for the knocks that life can throw at each of us."<sup>191</sup>

Cecil explained that they have utilized fantasy and sci-fi stories that involve characters having to hide their true identity in some way, whether it was gender based or not, has helped them cope with moving through the world as a young trans person experiencing dysphoria and lack of gender affirmation. He explained that "every time my mom would be like, 'you have to wear the dress to go to the place.' Mentally, I'd just be like, ok I'm just some dude that's under cover and I'd like, imagine myself in one of these undercover stories and it just helped me feel more comfortable."

Such an escape also provides a space to imagine a better life, a more livable life, and to experience a desire to reach for that, to manifest this new possible world and life. Cecil echoed a similar sentiment that to escape to an alternative, imaginary world, has been essential in keeping them alive: "I know it's like, bad to like, live in a fantasy or whatever or like be an adult playing make-believe, but this world sucks

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between Sport Team Identification and Psychological Well-Being', *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 29.1 (2006); Duffett, p. 117; Zubernis and Larsen.

<sup>190</sup> Hanmer, p. 150.

<sup>191</sup> Duffett, p. 119.

man. Of course, I wanna be somewhere else! [laughing] Like, loving fantasy isn't weird, liking this world is [laughing]. I don't trust that."

Mark Duffett argues that while fandom might be imagined in the larger culture as an unhealthy obsession or signaling some form of lack or void in one's life, fandom is often more so a "boost" for fans' self-esteem, sense of community, or creativity rather than a substitution.<sup>192</sup> This boost can become "a source of sustenance that helps people to get through difficulties in their lives."<sup>193</sup> Fans have generally been culturally framed as pathologically out of touch with reality, childish, and living in a fantasy world not the "real" world. Similarly, transgender people have pathologically been framed as mentally ill and unable to accept "real" gender categories. The obsession present in fandom that is often pathologized in popular culture's portrayal of fans, is itself a possible tool for survival for trans fans. As Octavia E. Butler, the greatest speculative fiction author of all time,<sup>194</sup> described, obsession can be "a useful tool if it's a positive obsession... a way of aiming yourself, your life, at your chosen target. Decide what you want. Aim high. Go for it."<sup>195</sup> Trans fans "obsession" with their media object can provide not only an affectual and social comfort but can also potentially help a trans or gender non-conforming person in living and moving toward a more gender affirming life.

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<sup>192</sup> Duffett, p. 120.

<sup>193</sup> Duffett, p. 138.

<sup>194</sup> Fight Me.

<sup>195</sup> Octavia E. Butler, 'Positive Obsession', in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, Second (New York: Second Stories Press, 2005), p. 129.

### *Understanding the Self*

Fandom provided an “intermediate space”<sup>196</sup> where the trans people I spoke with could engage in a process of self-discovery and understanding as they engaged with and understood their relationship to different media objects. Fan engagement provided a variety of ways to affirm the identities of those I spoke with and a place to experiment with gender through the writing of fanfic, creation of fandom art, and through cosplay. Media fandom can also provide a place of becoming for fans as Cornel Sandvoss explains:

Fandom provides one of the most stable eggs in the [self-esteem] basket... in this sense fandom is not an articulation of inner needs and drives, but is itself constitutive of the self. Being a fan in this sense reflects and constructs the self.<sup>197</sup>

Speculative fiction fandom presents trans fans new models of possibility that may only be possible in the realm of the speculative.

The important role of fanfic for trans fans was also a recurring theme in discussions. Multiple people I spoke with shared experiences that showcased the, sometimes pivotal, role that fanfic played in their own lives. Fanfic came up in various different ways throughout our discussions.<sup>198</sup> One of the most common ways that fic was discussed was through the discussion of “genderfuck” or “gender swap” fanfic. Gender swap fanfics are typically stories in which the gender or sex of one or

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<sup>196</sup> Duffett, p. 117.

<sup>197</sup> Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Polity Press, 2005), p. 48.

<sup>198</sup> Fanfic came up in various different ways throughout our discussions. The three primary ways it appears was through its utilization as a method of self-discovery, as an escapist practice, and as an outlet for reparative interpretations. I discuss each of these throughout this chapter.

multiple characters is changed from their canonical gender and physicality to a different gender.<sup>199</sup> These gender swaps are often done through some form of magical or technological intervention, “comedic” mishap, or for being in disguise.<sup>200</sup>

In Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian’s examination of the gender swap genre, they found that many or most of these stories are not written with the possible interests and concerns of trans people in mind.<sup>201</sup> Rather, the changing of a character’s gender is often used as a romantic plot device or as a means for the (presumably) cisgender creator to work through their own understandings of gender and sexuality. These stories often end with characters being returned to their previous gender and physicality.<sup>202</sup>

While genderswap fic may commonly be a place for cisgender writers to produce a political or social commentary or complicate rigid binary ideas around sexual identity,<sup>203</sup> it can also serve as a potential space for trans fans to experiment

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<sup>199</sup> Primarily gender swap fics focus on the idea of changing bodies through a male/female binary, but some gender swap stories do portray characters as nonbinary as well.

<sup>200</sup> Gender swap narratives do not all fall into these tropes, many gender swap fan fics are also ways of reimagining an entire story or universe with characters of different genders than is canon and some fics do show characters making active decisions to change their genders.

<sup>201</sup> Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian, ‘Bending Gender: Feminist and (Trans)Gender Discourses in the Changing Bodies of Slash Fan Fiction’, in *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, ed. by Kristina Busse (University of Iowa Press, 2017), pp. 57–77.

<sup>202</sup> It is worth noting that gender swap fanfic often utilizes the colonial and medicalized narrative of being born (or magically transformed) in the “wrong body.” These stories often engage in similar and harmful tropes as what has historically been used in popular media’s cisgender-ly imagined trans narratives.

<sup>203</sup> Ann McClellan, ‘Redefining Genderswap Fan Fiction: A “Sherlock” Case Study’, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 17 (2014) <<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0553>>.

and explore gender possibilities.<sup>204</sup> In his examination of transfic for the BBC series *Sherlock*, Jonathan Rose found that transfic can be a useful mode of self-narrative writing for trans people who can use these stories to create their own trans representation that counters the representation in popular media. However, Rose also suggests that transfic is often more focused on educating a cisgender reader about trans issues than about writing for a trans audience.

Ika Willis describes slash fanfic as providing a potential “world making practice” for trans and gender non-conforming people to work through ideas and identifications of gender.<sup>205</sup> Slash fic emphasizes that gender categories are “permeable; that sexual experience is translatable across bodies... and that any individual—cis or trans—may...experience a gendered disjunction between their corporeal body and their felt body.”<sup>206</sup> Willis argues that some slash fic fans have “used slash as a route to transition.”<sup>207</sup> One such fan is Ororo, a Black nonbinary trans femme in her early thirties, who explained in our conversations that it was, at least in part, the writing of fan fiction that helped her understand herself and eventually identify as transgender. Describing herself as a “prolific” writer of fic, Ororo shared that as a teenager, when she was possibly writing and reading fic the

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<sup>204</sup> Busse and Lothian; Ika Willis, ‘Writing the Fables of Sexual Difference: Slash Fiction as Technology of Gender’, *Parallax*, 22.3 (2016), 290–311 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2016.1201920>>; Jonathan Rose, “‘My Male Skin’: (Self-)Narratives of Transmasculinities in Fanfiction’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 24 (2020), 25–36 <<https://doi-org.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/10.1080/13825577.2020.1730044>>.

<sup>205</sup> Willis, p. 291.

<sup>206</sup> Willis, p. 303.

<sup>207</sup> Willis, p. 292.

most, she would consistently write fic in a first-person perspective as various different women characters:

*Ororo*: “I didn’t actually notice I was doing it for a while, but then someone messaged me on LiveJournal and said something about how she’d read some of my stories and liked them but totally thought I was a girl [laughing]. She said something about being sorry or embarrassed and I was just like ‘oh girl don’t apologize that’s a compliment.’ [Laughing] I mean, I thought it was funny but then I kept kinda going over what she said when I’d be writing and eventually that voice got loud.”

Ororo’s story reflects a certain relational aspect of media fandom in which the trans subject begins to understand themselves as trans through the way they are mirrored back to them. It is the sharing of these experiences, identifications, interpretations, connections, and affects with other fans of a media object that makes it more significant because it is the engagement with someone else and the mirroring back upon oneself.

In our conversations Xena described how at some point she noticed a pattern in the type of fan fiction she was consuming and seeking out. She noticed that what she was continually looking for was genderswap fan fiction in which a person’s gender is changed in some way that is out of their control:

*Xena*: “I used to spend a lot of time looking for gender swap fic that used storylines where someone’s gender changed, but like, without their consent kind of...you hoped for yourself to wake up as a girl someday, and then your parents were like, what’s going on? And you’re like, ‘Oh I didn’t do it! I’m just as confused as everyone else here, but like, I guess this is just the way it is now though, sorry. I guess you know it’s not my fault. I didn’t ask for it...So looking for stories that echoed that, and yeah, in some way through outside agency gave a person permission to be who they were.’”

*Reparative Imaginings*

When consuming a media object, viewers, readers, and listeners create their own meaning.<sup>208</sup> These meaning making processes can resemble the complex structures of meaning making in the larger society.<sup>209</sup> Engaging in this process can “offe[r] ways of filling cultural lack and provid[ing] the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital.”<sup>210</sup> The imaginative potential of speculative fiction can be particularly attractive to marginalized individuals as a place to engage in subversive and resistant readings of cultural texts.<sup>211</sup> Resistant readings of media objects that reject the work’s original meaning can act as a source of power for marginalized readers.<sup>212</sup> The importance of subversive or transgressive readings of media objects by trans fans was evident among each collective geeking out session. Trans fans shared stories that showcased the potential power in inserting oneself into a story that was likely not created for you.

As the majority of genderswap fic is not created for a trans audience or with trans identities and experiences in mind, trans fans commonly found themselves frustrated with the genre:

*Xena*: “I used to often start reading some genderswap fic and be like, yeah, yeah, oh, oh no. Very quickly it would turn into something that,

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<sup>208</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Encoding/Decoding’, in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, ed. by Stuart Hall and others (Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 128–38; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; Jenkins, ‘Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture’; Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

<sup>209</sup> John Fiske, ‘The Cultural Economy of Fandom’, in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. by Lisa A. Lewis (Routledge, 1992), pp. 30–49.

<sup>210</sup> Fiske, p. 33.

<sup>211</sup> Hurley; Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (New York University Press, 2019).

<sup>212</sup> Walker, p. 291.

yeah, was off putting to me. Whether that was explicitly like transphobia or homophobia... it's almost worse to get into a story and then the transphobia pops up...I don't really read much of it anymore."

Elaborating further, she described how she often found "no homo" type entries into genderswap fic where at some point the author would work to try to make it clear that the person wasn't actually trans or gay. Xena's description of it being worse to think or begin to feel that something might connect to your own trans experience only to have it turn the corner, than to not have it at all spoke to a type of loss she felt. Having also stated that she never expects to find trans characters in most media, her pain over the cissexism of genderswap speaks to how the bait and switch made her have hope for something that was then denied—which caused her a pain that would not have been present otherwise.

Xena's experiences of finding genderswap fic that would begin interesting and then become another narrative flavored by cissexism and heterosexism was similar to the experiences of other trans folks. Cecil also described often struggling with genderswap fic because of the same issues as Xena: "...yeah when the story ends with them going back to their previous gender, it's kinda like being cis saved the day." For a couple individuals this led them to avoid the genre or even discontinue their reading of fanfic entirely. In contrast to these reasonable reactions, Peter described how he has found a therapeutic practice in re-writing canon stories as well as fanfic that he feels is "transphobic." He described this as a practice he didn't begin intentionally, but developed in response to the abundance of misunderstanding and education around trans identities and experiences he found in fic:

*Peter:* "I couldn't tell you when I started to do it, or what it was that I had read, but sometime in the last eight years I started taking existing

genderfuck that would just get us so wrong and redo it. I'll literally copy paste a fic and then go through and rewrite sentences or scenes or words that just are wrong...[I asked him what he meant by "wrong."] I would say most often its language issues where they use outdated or fucked up language. Other times it's because it was clearly not written by a trans person cause it's just not how we talk about ourselves. And sometimes its overtly transphobic and makes the gender swap a joke or something... So sometimes all I do is change the language and sometimes I'll rewrite a whole slash scene that's way more reflective of trans experience, or at least my experience... I've even used it [the rewriting of fanfic] in therapy. It feels like some kind of relief when I read through my own version of it. Like I know the original one is still out there, but it's like it doesn't hurt anymore because I've done this thing for myself at least. It's hard to explain how it feels, I've only done it to my therapist [laughing] so I'm not really sure how else to explain the feeling."

Peter further explained that he has sometimes uploaded an altered fic if he felt like the original was "just too bad" to let it go, but most of his revised fics are for his own personal fulfillment and emotional support.

Peter's revised fics reflect a common fandom concept and practice of "fix it with fic"—the act of using the creation of fan fiction to correct, repair, or directly address what fans view as problems with the original story. Many of these fix it fics are attempts to address what fans view as plot holes, lackluster writing, or bad narrative or character choices. Fix it fics can also be a place for marginalized individuals to address harmful tropes or lack of representation in the original media object.

Like Peter, others I spoke with showcased how the reparative gesture of fanfic was a place in which they could engage in a type of healing practice for themselves. Even when these fics are created to critique and challenge their existing source material, the act of writing the fic is inherently a loving act. Luke noted this feeling as important for his own process of discovering self-love:

*Luke*: “When I think about it, I think writing fic that critiqued Harry Potter and directly addressed the antisemitism and racism in the books and turned the books into something that was just generally better, helped me realize that just because I didn’t like the way my body looked didn’t mean I had to hate it just that I needed to make it better.”

Similarly, Charlie Ledbetter argues that fanfic can be used as a tool to address gender and bodily dysphoria.<sup>213</sup> Ledbetter explains that in order to experience gender euphoria, there must be some form of gender dysphoria first that you are able to challenge and move beyond. Creating an appreciation of sorts for gender dysphoria. Ledbetter describes how fan fiction provides the possibility of reworking the source material to something that you like better. Trans fans engage a similar practice in the process of becoming. Turning the speculative no longer speculative.

The creation of fix it fics for trans people can act as a space to embrace trans rage. Susan Stryker defined trans rage as coming from “the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against [her] survival”<sup>214</sup> that is tied to the “failure to satisfy norms of gendered embodiment.”<sup>215</sup> Reading trans-ly is necessitated by the void of canonically trans characters and the reality of living as a trans person in a trans antagonistic world. For fans like Luke, the reimagining’s of racist and cissexist fanfic as well as original media, provided a tool to chip away space for themselves in a society that has never granted such space. T. L. Cowan builds on Stryker’s trans rage by engaging it with Sara Ahmed’s feminist kill joy to describe the “transfeminist kill/joy”—a process by which the presence of trans women and transness more

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<sup>213</sup> Ledbetter.

<sup>214</sup> Stryker, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix’, p. 244.

<sup>215</sup> Stryker, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix’, p. 249.

broadly disrupts the enjoyment of those who center feminism around non-trans women exclusively. Cowan refers to transfeminist kill/joy as “an assemblage of affects that reorients feminist happiness toward rather than against trans women” that uses “anger and love to resist” trans exclusion.<sup>216</sup> Both Stryker and Cowan’s use of trans rage additionally speaks to the underlying love that motivates much of the fix it fic that trans fans produced. Through love for themselves and/or other trans people, there is a refusal to ignore anti-trans narratives and tropes.

The trans rage engaged by fans wasn’t only an act of resistance, but also a source of pleasure, joy, and care. Those I spoke with were overwhelmingly elated when discussing their own and others’ trans readings of characters and narratives. Cecil shared that even when he sees someone reading a character as trans and he personally doesn’t agree, it does not change how much enjoyment he gets from the reading. Cecil’s enjoyment of other trans folks’ trans interpretations mirrors an aspect of what Hil Malatino describes as trans care. After critiquing the band Fall Out Boy, Malatino explains that even if he has a deep disdain of the band, he is happy that they can bring joy to another trans person. He states that he wants other trans people to be able to “maintain the kind of wide-eyed silliness and unabashed enthusiasm that we associate with childhood but that, in fact, only the most privileged and unharassed kids get to experience.”<sup>217</sup> Seeing and reading other fans’ trans readings of non-canonically trans characters brings him joy not just because he wants more trans

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<sup>216</sup> T. L. Cowan, ‘Transfeminist Kill/Joys: Rage, Love, and Reparative Performance’, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.4 (2014), 501–16 (p. 502) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815201>>.

<sup>217</sup> Malatino, *Trans Care*, p. 18.

characters and stories, but because he finds pleasure in knowing other trans people are imagining a world in which they might live. I see Cecil’s affective response to the trans readings of other characters and an aspect of t4t care and love praxis, which I discuss in the fourth chapter. In reading non-canonically trans characters trans-ly, trans fans “extract sustenance from the object of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”<sup>218</sup>

While I have focused primarily on the potential for fandom to be transformative in the lives of trans fans, this is based on the stories and perspectives shared by those I spoke with and are not necessarily a representation or statement on fandom as a whole. Fans’ transformative works hold the possibility of being meaningful and powerful subversive tools for some marginalized groups but may not for every fan.<sup>219</sup> Many transformative works created by fans may feel liberatory for some marginalized groups while engaging in harmful, exploitive, or violent ideologies toward other marginalized groups.<sup>220</sup> Wanzo elaborates further on the issue of centering the possible subversive aspects of fandom, explaining that the focus on the potential subversiveness of fandom and fan works has acted to ignore Black fans as many Black fans may not be looking for subversion but rather looking for something to challenge the othering and marginalization that is already happening to them in their everyday lives.<sup>221</sup> Wanzo’s argument is similar to the one made by

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<sup>218</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 149.

<sup>219</sup> Scodari; Pande; Wanzo.

<sup>220</sup> Scodari; Pande.

<sup>221</sup> Wanzo.

Andre Calvacante regarding trans people's engagement with media and the desire for a distraction or ordinary-ness.

Christine Scodari also criticizes the scholarship and interpretation around slash fic and "Mary Sue" characters as revolutionary or subversive.<sup>222</sup> Instead, she says that while certainly some fic writers and consumers are using the genre for that reason, many are not. She describes multiple examples of internalized misogyny from women on fanfic and fan sites and how many appear to refuse more positive and/or flawed women characters while venerating the male characters. She further argues that slash fic for many women is actually based on only viewing men as truly equal to other men and/or worthy of the love of another male character.<sup>223</sup> Julie Levin Russo has suggested a more middle ground between the debate of whether or not fandom is subversive, arguing that while some fanfic may not be revolutionary or radical in itself, it can do revolutionary work at times for the people who write it.<sup>224</sup>

For transgender fans, this reinterpretation of a media object through a trans imaginary was a purposeful choice of centering transness in their fandom, but at other times it was simply a place to find pleasure in a media object. Fans often find pleasure in the creation of fan works, the discussion of shared interests with other fans, and through intensely engaging a media object.<sup>225</sup> Sometimes the important role of fandom is simply that it feels good. There is joy in getting excited about

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<sup>222</sup> Scodari.

<sup>223</sup> Scodari.

<sup>224</sup> Julie Levin Russo, 'The Queer Politics of Femslash', in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (Routledge, 2018), pp. 155–64.

<sup>225</sup> Bourdaa.

something, in sharing something with others, and in going on about something. I don't want to downplay the importance of just feeling good, particularly for marginalized people. Throughout my discussions with other trans fans, we collectively got excited about the things we loved, but also shared excitement for other's when they discussed the things they love. There was a kind of joyous, communal experience that occurred. I want to emphasize that this was something I am incredibly grateful to have experienced. While this was research and formal, these conversations were a treat and a pleasure.

As I have argued previously, speculative fiction is a trans genre. A defining feature of media fandom is the creation of transformative works—creative works that take the source material and turn it into something different—such as fanfiction. In many ways the experience of transition could be understood as a form of fan art or transformative work. Trans fans have utilized fandom to engage in transformative work that can shape their lived reality far beyond the imagination. Trans individuals mirror fan practices by transforming existing gender concepts into alternative gendered ways of being.

## Worldbuilding and Dreaming

### *Community Building*

For some, fandom's coping mechanism was most useful in helping build community. Fandom, like transness itself, is relational. It relies upon the relationship and connection between the fan and another---whether the creator, other fans, or even simply the text itself. It involves moving beyond what exists of the media object itself and using it outside of its original form. Fandom is about connection to something outside of the self. The object and the self-work to shape one another and the

experience of both. The worldbuilding trans fans engage through fandom practices shows that utopian dreaming relies on the collective and being in relation to one another.

Speculative fiction provides a survival strategy for trans people through not only the possibilities it invokes in our imaginations, but through the communities we build around fan objects. The communal experience of fandom is often at the heart of fans' engagement with a media object.<sup>226</sup> Jenkins argues that it is in the sharing of these experiences, connections, identifications, and affects that make the fan's associations with the media object culturally significant.<sup>227</sup>

Fan engagement and spaces can provide a particularly important place to build relationships, social bonds, social systems, social support networks, and find people like themselves.<sup>228</sup> One of the most common experiences described by trans fans was the role that fandom communities had in making them feel connected to other people and in building relationships. This experience seemed to be particularly salient for those who were not yet out as trans or were physically, and socially isolated, especially younger trans/nonbinary folks.

In multiple ways, whether it centered around gender, sexuality, or neurodivergence, fandom was talked about repeatedly as a place where people finally felt a sense of belonging and that a part of them was recognized that they had thought was just them. Trans fans described feelings of isolation that at times lead them to be

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<sup>226</sup> Sandvoss, p. 10.

<sup>227</sup> Jenkins, 'Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture', p. 6.

<sup>228</sup> Branscombe and Wann; Wann; Collins Smith; Zubernis and Larsen.

more involved in fandoms than they were at other times. Mélanie Bourdaa explains that fan communities can help individuals build social bonds, lasting friendships, and provide a “sense of belonging.”<sup>229</sup> These relationships that are built through fandom can help inspire and motivate fans into doing things in their “real” lives that they may not have done otherwise without the community support.<sup>230</sup> This may provide a particularly important aspect of fandom for trans people. Receiving affirmation and support from other fans might help a trans fan move toward a more gender affirming life.

For many, online fandom communities were the first place they were able to meet other trans or queer people. It was at a fan convention as a teenager that Korra--- a multiracial identified trans woman in her late twenties, says she first experienced gender affirmation.

*Korra:* “I saw someone dressed as Shinobu Kocho [from Demon Slayer] and like at first I couldn’t tell if they were male or female, which was already exciting [laughing], but then I realized that they were not cis. Like, maybe trans, maybe in drag, maybe cosplay, I dunno. And as we were walking by I told them that I liked their costume and that they looked beautiful and they turned and looked at me for a second, smiled, and said ‘so do you.’ I wasn’t in costume, and I wasn’t wearing anything feminine (I wouldn’t have even dared at that point). Like, I had longer hair but that’s like, whatever. I just felt like in that second she read me somehow.

*Me:* “did she say anything else?”

*Korra:* “No she just said, ‘so do you’ and like, floated away. [laughs] I mean probably not literally but that’s just how I always think of it. [laughs]... At the time I felt like, both fucking terrified and thrilled. Like, I wanted to throw up immediately cause I immediately thought I had fucked up somehow and was giving myself away you know? But I also

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<sup>229</sup> Bourdaa, p. 387.

<sup>230</sup> Jenkins, ‘Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture’.

felt fucking seen for the first time. I think that's why I remember it so clearly still..”

For Korra, this was also the first time seeing someone who crossed gendered boundaries in real life. She explained that her conservative Baptist parents had put parental controls on her computer to block sites containing explicit gay or trans content (amongst other things) and it was in using fan sites, such as Tumblr, that she was able to get around her parents' prohibitions. Because it was a “fan” thing, Korra was allowed to attend the convention when she would never have been able to attend a trans focused event. Another discussant, Finn- a white trans man in his early twenties, similarly mentioned that their parents didn't want them to join the GSA at their school, but they were allowed to join the anime club which they said ended up being almost all the same people.

Among the conversations I had, a theme of using fandom as a specifically queer and/or trans space, to find other people within the communities appeared. Fandom acted as a site of connection for trans people I spoke with who explained that it was primarily through fandom that they found other trans people. Online fandom communities provided a particularly useful space to build relationships for trans youth who felt they didn't fit in with those around them. Cas described how fandom was where they first truly felt like they had a community:

*Cas:* “I've had lots of queer friends and a few trans friends, but I've pretty much always felt like I was at least in some way never fully fitting in right. I was either too bi for the gays or too non bi for trans people [laughs]. I felt way more like I had found my people when I found fandom on LiveJournal. The people in the community near me [LGBTQ community] were very, like, normal? [laughing] I mean, like suburban, bland [laughing]. But when I started to find my people in fandom it was like [pause] like I took a full breath for the first time. I had no interest in the Will and Grace gays, I wanted the people wearing cat ears and

angel wings or wrote really hot queer fic. [laughs] I got one of my partners because she loved one of my fics [laughs]. I wanted, needed other weirdos and I only found them in fandom.”

Trans fans talked about the writing of trans fic, creating different fan arts, and sharing their creations provided them a subcultural space that felt like an essential escape for them. This process in some ways reflects trans care practices of community. Much of fan culture involves a gift economy in which fans create artistic works that they share with other fans for free. Malatino’s trans care includes “voluntary gender work”<sup>231</sup>—the unpaid labor that trans people perform to educate cisgender people about trans issues and to help support other trans people.<sup>232</sup> I am drawn to certain parallels in the way some trans fans strive to create specifically trans fan works in the hope that it will bring some amount of pleasure to other trans people. Peter’s fix it fics are their own form of voluntary gender work as he does so in order to educate cisgender audiences and provide trans stories for other trans fans. Ororo too described how when she writes trans fic she often thinks of a young version of herself or another young trans kid finding their fic amidst the copious amounts of cisgender gazed fanfic. I was struck in my conversations at how common it was for those I spoke with to want to create fan works that might potentially work to support other trans people. In doing so, these trans fans engaged in a type of community care work that worked to support their own survival, while also striving to care about the survival of trans people generally.

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<sup>231</sup> “Voluntary gender work” is a concept and term developed by Rupert Raj and discussed by Malatino.

<sup>232</sup> Malatino, *Trans Care*, pp. 19–25.

*Dreaming*

As I stated in the previous chapter, an escape implies movement, that someone is going from one thing to another. The idea of escapism being negative, or a problem can also be a way of stopping us from imagining and building something different. Escaping is a trans act. The ability to escape to somewhere else, to cross from our reality to an alternative way of being and living, is a trans act.

The role of speculative fiction in the lives of many trans people is in some ways, a lighthouse. It isn't hard to feel adrift or sinking as the world around us continues to be hostile and violent toward our existence. While state and federal legislators continually work to legislate our death and disappearance. Speculative fiction can act like a shining light of possibility ahead. There is no knowing what world is awaiting beyond that light, but it gives us the chance to imagine something else, somewhere else, and if we imagine it we can work to build it. Fantasy and imagination help us to challenge the limits of what seems to be possible and what could be possible <sup>233</sup>. When asked what role speculative fiction has had in her life, Xena answered:

“Hope. Yeah that sounds corny, but I think that’s the main thing I am looking for. Maybe not everyone does, but I need that. If you don’t have hope, like for yourself or for others, what’s the point in keeping going?”

Luke’s description of their own trans reading of Harry Potter provides an insight into how trans fans may find a way to utilize trans readings of texts to give themselves some type of hope:

“So I’ve clearly been a big Harry Potter fan, and in spite of J.K. Rowling, or maybe like, defiantly [laughing], I felt like those books

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<sup>233</sup> Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York University Press, 2014), p. 26.

helped me believe that things could get better. Like, you have this kid who knows he is different somehow, but not in a way you can see necessarily. But still [he] just doesn't fit in with people the way he's expected to. And then suddenly you get a letter telling you that there's a whole school and world of people who are weird like you and that there's all this new life and friends and stuff that is waiting for you. That just felt really good. Like, I was just waiting for my trans school letter to come in and take me to this world of people like me."

Walidah Imarisha describes visionary fiction as a form of speculative fiction in which liberatory futures and possibilities are imagined.<sup>234</sup> While very little of the source material of the fandoms trans people spoke about could be considered visionary fiction itself, the imaginative works and practices of trans fans itself was a form of visionary fiction.

*Oro*: "...fantasy has better trans potential than any other genre or media or anything. That's just the reality of it. Black trans femmes exist in most media to just be a body, like a dead body or a fetishized body. But in fantasy you can make it be whatever you want. In fantasy, we get to live, cause you can't control my imagination."

What Oro describes reflects the way Imarisha describes visionary fiction as "imagin[ing] our own futures rather than accepting the ones presented to us."<sup>235</sup> Oro writes fic that imagines a path toward survival and a way of escaping the violence of her lived reality. Oro and Xena's experiences showcase the way that the process of engaging in fandoms and consuming or creating speculative fiction acts as a way for trans people to imagine not only a means of surviving, but of imagining the world or future they wish to have.

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<sup>234</sup> Imarisha.

<sup>235</sup> Exangel.

All but one of the people I spoke with shared similar sentiments that whether they were creating alternative worlds or escaping to others' imaginations, speculative fiction gave them a motivation to keep going in some way. And like fandom, speculative fiction can remind us that we aren't alone, as Cecil said during our conversation: "It helps to know I'm not the only one dreaming."

### Chapter 3: “Long Live the New Flesh”<sup>236</sup>

“For me the imagery of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* was always perfect because the Black Lagoon is the dark pool of the unconscious and of course there are creatures within it. The exercise is to jump down into the Lagoon to see what is going on down there and to say ‘hello’ to the creature”  
 —David Cronenberg: Date spoken- 1983, cited in Drew 1984.p. 57

Dozens of eager people stand around the edges of a large room, an operating theater<sup>237</sup> of sorts. In the center of the room lies a large coffin sized pod. The camera scrolls up this object which appears to be part of some unearthly creature covered in dark, chitinous plates connected by thick, black, fleshy webbing. Suddenly the supposed exoskeleton opens revealing a naked human torso and multiple mechanical arms equipped with scalpels eagerly hovering over the body. Like the pod itself, the mechanical arms look to be made of bones and alien organic material. What at first appeared to be the body of a living thing, is instead a technological device created to conduct autopsies. The spectators around the room stare in excited reverence, taking photos and recordings as the human inside this strange coffin sized pod is shown to be alive— and awake. Multiple TVs are placed around the pod, displaying only the words “BODY IS REALITY.” A woman wearing a sexy, form fitting, low cut dress circles the pod. Pressed against her upper stomach, directly under her breasts is another mechanical device that also appears to be alive itself. The device resembles a

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<sup>236</sup> Content Note: This chapter is gross. I will discuss graphic moments of body horror that would make many understandably uncomfortable. There are mentions and descriptions of mutilated bodies, loss of bodily autonomy, child murder, and violence. I apologize in advance to my dissertation committee who did not sign up to read about melting bodies and now find yourselves here.

<sup>237</sup> Emphasis on *theater*

misshapen toad with soft, glowing buttons going up its back (see Figure 3.1). The woman sensually glides her fingers along the object's buttons, all while pressing it firmly against her body. The woman's heavy breaths are laced with arousal as she uses the device to control the mechanical arms within the pod. With great precision, the mechanical arms begin to perform surgery on the conscious man's abdomen [Figure 3.2]. The man releases a pleasurable gasp upon the machinery entering his body, licking his lips with ecstasy as the mechanical arms probe deeper inside of him. The camera flashes to a nervous, excited, and tantalized audience continuing to watch quietly from the edges of the room. Suddenly a mechanical arm pulls an organ out from inside the man— it is tattooed and unfamiliar. The audience gasps at the sight of it. The man sighs with pleasure as the mechanical arms seal him back up.



*Figure 3.1: Caprice, played by Léa Seydoux, performing surgical theater. Image still from David Cronenberg's "Crimes of the Future"*



*Figure 3.2: Saul Tenser's, played by Viggo Mortenson, abdomen moments before surgery begins. Image still from David Cronenberg's "Crimes of the Future"*

The preceding scene is from the 2022 David Cronenberg film *Crimes of the Future*. Like his long list of previous films, Cronenberg's latest work has largely fallen into, and influenced, the body horror genre. A subset of the horror genre, body horror lives up to its name. The genre uses bodily mutilation, mutation, dismemberment, disfiguration, uncanny body morphology, as well as parasitism. The fear of losing control over one's own body and of the body becoming something unrecognizable, "monstrous," or inhuman fuels the genre. Unlike many other subcategories of horror, body horror's threat, monster, or villain is largely an internal one. Rather than an external threat of a serial killer stalking teenagers at a summer camp, an alien invasion, or a haunted house, body horror forces the subject to face an internal monster that makes its way to the outside. In this chapter, I continue my argument for the inherent transness of speculative fiction by way of analysis of the

body horror genre. I explore the way the body horror as a genre can and has been utilized by trans people as a way to describe and work through experiences of bodily and social dysphoria. I additionally meditate on the connection between trans disassociation practices aid in the affective experience of body horror, and perhaps horror more broadly. To further this analysis, I provide a reading of Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* as a trans text.

It is important to note that while the heart of my analysis remains on trans interiority and affect, I do give a significant amount of attention to issues of body dysphoria and the materiality of the body in this chapter. Some of this focus comes from the mere subject matter itself that centers the body (I'm talking about body horror after all). It is important to note that in centering dysphoria in this chapter I am in no way framing dysphoria as a universal or necessary trans experience. Many trans people never experience body dysphoria or perhaps not to the degree of others discussed in this chapter. Likewise, many trans people do experience dysphoria, and such dysphoria can have a range of effects on trans lives. Like the rest of this project, the experiences, readings, and import of body horror for trans people cannot and is not intended to speak for trans people as a whole. Additionally, whether or not a trans person personally experiences body dysphoria, society is still obsessed with trans bodies. At the time of this writing there have been 461 anti-trans bills proposed across the U.S. in 2023 alone.<sup>238</sup> The vast majority of these proposed legislations target or impact the bodies of transgender people. Whether or not we as trans people

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<sup>238</sup> 'Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures', *ACLU*, 2023 <<https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights>>.

experience dysphoria around our own bodies, they are still being made into a battleground that reflects many of the themes present in the genre of body horror and specifically, in *Crimes of the Future*.

### An Affecting Genre

Like other subcategories of speculative fiction, horror contains numerous and continually evolving subcategories—slasher, supernatural, alien, body horror, creature feature, gothic, etc. It is in some ways hard to give a solid definition of horror that applies across these subgenres outside of the potentiality or intention to invoke some sort of fear or sense of unease in the consumer. With that being said, there are certainly countless different examples of non-horror genre films that may provoke a rush of adrenaline through fear. A new parent watching a dramatic movie in which a small child is potentially dying or at risk might find such a plot produces an intense sense of dread and fear. Likewise, not all films that fall into the horror genre are necessarily meant to produce a deep sense of foreboding or fear anxiety. Splatter films for example often rely on such an excessive use of blood and gore that they are more likely to elicit disgust than fear necessarily. What makes something fall into the category of horror might be the intended desire by a creator to produce an unpleasant affect within the consumer, rather than just fear.

Horror is an affective genre. What makes something fall into the category of horror is less about style, form, content, or narratives than how the audience is intended to feel. Perhaps more than other genres, horror is an audience focused genre. While horror creators certainly are focused on telling some type of story, in order to actually produce the intended affect in their audience, horror creators must

continually imagine how their audience might react and how they can illicit the intended reaction.

As mentioned previously, the genre of horror is vast with greatly divergent styles, content, and aesthetics. A film might be considered horror despite not containing any implied or explicit bodily harm or may potentially contain less death than a traditional Disney cartoon film. On the flip side, something might be considered horror that relies on superfluous gore and violence that doesn't so much invoke fear as much as it invokes disgust or revulsion. A horror novel might contain no true villain or monster beyond a distressing location, such as a lone shipwreck survivor stranded at sea. Film scholar Brigid Cherry suggests that the intense variations and subcategories of the horror genre are a large factor in the genre's appeal and longevity.<sup>239</sup> Cherry further describes horror as a genre in constant "flux," whose borders and parameters are continually changing and shifting.<sup>240</sup> Horror defies consistent or coherent identification with any specific description or style for long. If horror creators wish to invoke feelings of fear, dread, shock, or disgust, they must continually develop new strategies, aesthetics, styles, and narratives as a society's fears evolve and change. The cultural sensibilities that found Bela Lugosi's 1931 portrayal of Dracula as horrifying are far away from the cultural tastes that produced more modern vampire entertainment such as *True Blood* or *Blade*. Like other speculative fiction categories, horror reflects back to the viewer/reader the larger cultural anxieties and concerns of the current moment. Over time, horror fans begin to

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<sup>239</sup> Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>240</sup> Cherry, p. 3.

notice and predict the scares and chills of horror film and literature based on common patterns and tropes creators have used to induce such responses. While not making the object necessarily less entertaining, it does reduce the likelihood of producing the creators intended audience response. This means horror creators are continually having to evolve in their strategies and styles.

There is of course no shortage of trans villains or trans themes in horror as a genre. Many have written about the way the “other” or monstrous in horror has been used to marginalize many, including trans people, let alone the numerous outright trans coded or canonically “trans” villains in the genre. The monsters of horror are largely a reflection of cultural fears and anxieties, particularly as the fear of the “other” is involved. Many popular horror films of the 1950s-60s were fueled by the Red and Lavender Scares. Films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Night of the Living Dead* portrayed cultural fears that the person you thought you could trust, who looks perfectly “normal,” might secretly be a monster (or worse, a gay communist). Cherry describes horror film as a “history of the way other people and groups exhibiting markers of difference have been regarded and depicted by their society.”<sup>241</sup> The perpetually shifting styles, strategies, and aesthetics of horror are one way the genre could be considered trans.

### The Transness of Body Horror

Body Horror is ripe with trans themes and readings. Film critic Willow Maclay describes body horror as the “closest thing mainstream cinema has to

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<sup>241</sup> Cherry, p. 176.

transgender cinema in terms of cinematic language.”<sup>242</sup> The experience of transness is often a process of the internal being made external which mimics the basis of the body horror genre—the monstrous comes from the inside out rather than manifesting as an external thing. The body is portrayed as the battle ground in which simple characteristics and boundaries of what constitutes the self, the mind, the body, or the other are dismantled.<sup>243</sup> A prime example of the collapsing of boundaries of the body within body horror cinema can be found in the work of David Cronenberg, whose films Jesse Strommel describes as being:

...about upsetting these sorts of distinctions, about bodies devouring, about being devoured, about parasites that invade our bodies, about bodies mutilated and aroused by car crashes, about the intersection between biology and technology, about the limits of sexual desire (or the lack of limits). About flesh that eats and is eaten simultaneously—a sexual devouring but more often actual physical devouring as a metaphor for sex (in his films *The Fly*, *Videodrome*, *Rabid*, etc.). His films are about how we construct (or fail to construct) our relationship to our bodies and our sexuality.<sup>244</sup>

Body horror’s fundamental focus on the body draws parallels to trans experience. Trans people are particularly aware of our own bodies, whether it is because of body dysphoria, an awareness of how our bodies are perceived by others, or the threat of/literal acts of violence enacted on our bodies. Characters in body

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<sup>242</sup> Willow Maclay, ‘Body Talk: Conversations on Transgender Cinema with Caden Gardner: Part Six’, *Curtisies and Hand Grenades*, 2018 <<http://curtisiesandhandgrenades.blogspot.com/2018/06/body-talkconversations-on-transgender.html>> [accessed 25 July 2022].

<sup>243</sup> Mark Jancovich, ‘Introduction’, in *Horror: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>244</sup> Jesse Strommel, ‘“Pity Poor Flesh”: Terrible Bodies in the Films of Carpenter, Cronenberg, and Romero’, *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 56 (2007) <[https://brightlightsfilm.com/pity-poor-flesh-terrible-bodies-films-carpenter-cronenberg-romero/#.Yu\\_z\\_3bMK3A](https://brightlightsfilm.com/pity-poor-flesh-terrible-bodies-films-carpenter-cronenberg-romero/#.Yu_z_3bMK3A)>.

horror stories are afflicted with something that they often did not desire or choose and cannot control. Whether being bitten by a werewolf, infected with a parasite, or having a large endless void suddenly opening in their abdomen, they must find a way to grapple with their internal monstrosity in order to survive or they will likely die. While this is certainly an exaggeration and non-universal allegory for trans experience, it has provided many trans people with a way to process their own dysphoria and understanding of oneself.

In some ways, the audience in a great deal of body horror is being placed in a type of trans positionality. We, the audience, are being expected to feel horror at the idea of our sexed bodies appearing to be different than how we believe and expect them to be. This imagining of crossing gendered, sexed, and bodily boundaries is believed to be horrifying. I understand this trans positionality to be different from the ‘transgender look’ Jack Halberstam has theorized.<sup>245</sup> Halberstam’s transgender gaze describes the way audiences are made to look “with, rather than at, the transgender body.”<sup>246</sup> The body horror examples I discuss here have nothing to do with viewing the transgender body, representation, or of the process of looking itself, but instead are about the feeling of trans affect. Body horror audiences are not generally viewing trans experience or gazes, but as an affective genre, they are being made to feel the

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<sup>245</sup> Cáel Keegan has argued that Halberstam’s transgender look fails to actually provide a trans gaze as the audience is still expected and assumed to be cisgender. While this gaze can encourage the cisgender audience to view the trans subject “with” or how the character may view themselves, by centering the experience of viewing for a cisgender audience, this type of gaze does not actually work to produce a perspective that can challenge “the structure of cissexism itself.” Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski*, p. 25.

<sup>246</sup> Halberstam, p. 92.

unease, fear, disgust, or displeasure of the body manifesting in a way you wish it would not. This type of affective attachment and identification is part of horror's "subversive tradition" in which the audience is encouraged to build an "attachment to the monstrous and [a] rejection of the repressiveness of the normative."<sup>247</sup>

### Body Horror as Catharsis for Trans People

Body horror makes the interior exterior. The feeling of helplessness, at odds with one's body, and the idea your body is on a path you cannot alter is something unique for body horror. The name itself can even be misleading, as it's not necessarily the physicality of the body that is the horror, although it certainly is a lot of it, but it is the threat from within. Even in moments where it may not seem like the horror is internal (an arm being cut off for example) there is still an internal struggle of feeling disconnected from the body in terms of what you expect from your body and it not meeting those expectations. It is the anxiety produced by not having your interior sense of self reflected back by the external other.

Like other speculative fiction genres, horror can provide a safer, imaginative space to process through and cope with the things we cannot control about ourselves, our lives, and our world. Horror provides the manifestation of cultural and political fears and anxieties into material monsters and villains. These effigies of internalized fears serve as a tool to practice facing, defeating, and healing from our real pain and trauma. While this practice is often considered part of the appeal of horror as a genre, for trans people this can be particularly useful in addressing experiences of dysphoria.

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<sup>247</sup> Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*, p. 45.

Body horror is a transgressive genre certainly, but it may also be recuperative. As it manipulates and violates the body, it also provides a place to reclaim the same parts it appears to violate. We fear losing control of our bodies and the genre brings that to the forefront, allowing us to engage with how that fear might manifest in our real lives. Film scholar Steven Jay Schneider argues that horror movies offer a place to address repressed fears or anxieties, particularly those from childhood that are “relegated to the unconscious...either because they are too unpleasurable in and of themselves or because they conflict with more acceptable/appropriate mental content.”<sup>248</sup> Cherry also argues that horror as a whole represents a “replaying” of cultural and personal anxieties within our unconscious, and in doing so provides a place for us to process those anxieties in a lower stakes environment as the viewer.<sup>249</sup> Body horror provides a space for trans people to examine and address our own feelings about bodies with a certain amount of distance from the corporeal reality of our own bodies. At least momentarily, we may be able to take the horror we experience of our own bodies and abstract it onto imaginative bodies.

In fact, horror scholars have suggested that those who enjoy horror might be individuals who have learned better coping skills in handling their own fears.<sup>250</sup> Many horror fans find the genre at a younger age, and horror films are often created with a young targetted demographic in mind. The fact that the genre often appeals to young people, particularly teenagers, may be related to emotional growth. Teens

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<sup>248</sup> Steven Jay Schneider, *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 2–3.

<sup>249</sup> Cherry, p. 100.

<sup>250</sup> Cherry, pp. 37–39.

learning to address, control, and experience their emotions may be drawn to the genre as a tool with which they can learn to handle their own fears.

The pleasure that can be found through the horror genre often involves a certain amount of disassociation. In the most basic sense, the viewer must be able to view the images on screen as performance and not reality—a process that requires a certain amount of disassociation from the subject on screen. Trans people are often experts at disassociating.<sup>251</sup> I believe that at least part of the attraction to body horror amongst trans people may be in connection to our skills of disassociation. Whether it is what draws us in or simply what makes it easier or more pleasurable to consume, our own experience of disassociation serves to support the genre's affective usefulness. This disassociation may be a purposeful decision or a position we are forced into within a trans antagonistic world.<sup>252</sup>

Whether through disassociation with being in our bodies, or from being present in the world, as trans people we are intimately aware of the usefulness of disassociation for our own survival. Referring to disassociation as, at least partially, “the name for an embodied capacity for survival,” Cameron Awkward-Rich has theorized the usefulness of disassociation for trans people.<sup>253</sup> Engaging the work of Ann Cvetkovich and Aaron Devor, Awkward-Rich speculates that rather than perform a simplistically destructive role in the lives of trans people, disassociation

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<sup>251</sup> Cameron Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment*, Asterisk (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), pp. 91–95.

<sup>252</sup> Israeli-Nevo, p. 38.

<sup>253</sup> Awkward-Rich, p. 98.

may instead show how pain, displeasure, and trauma might also “produce inhabitable selves and worlds.”<sup>254</sup>

The familiarity of disassociation and bodily dysphoria may also provide a paradoxical comfort for the trans subject. If we are immersed in a society that does not support trans life, we can become accustomed to the feelings of abjection. These feelings may even feel safer for us than narratives in which the characters do not experience bodily dysphoria. This argument is largely produced by my own experience as a horror fan. My love of horror has often come as a surprise to many in my life as it seems to stand in contrast to my generally caring or friendly demeanor. When I first met my husband, he was shocked that I found the experience of watching film and television that are affectively “happy” (such as Disney cartoons, family films, romance, or comedies) to be largely unpleasant and emotionally disturbing. In contrast, I will put on a horror movie in the background to take a nap. This is largely due to the role disassociation has played in my own life and survival.<sup>255</sup> I know how to disconnect from the gruesomeness of horror, but the “happy endings” of other genres often fill me with a sense of loss, pain, or anger as they can serve as false promises.

While clearly my experience of these genres is not universal—my husband who loves all things cheerful and whimsical is also trans—I do think I can argue that I am not alone in the sense of comfort provided by the unpleasurable affects of horror. Filmmaker Tiffany Wice describes her love of horror stemming from the “strangely

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<sup>254</sup> Awkward-Rich, p. 95.

<sup>255</sup> Shoutout to my therapist.

cathartic” space the genre provides.<sup>256</sup> Witnessing the human body be stretched to its breaking point and distorted beyond recognition in such a visual manner provides a peculiar sense of comfort. Fan Studies scholar Henry Jenkins suggests that horror, monsters, and mutants can provide a way “to imagine radically different ways of living within our bodies.”<sup>257</sup> These moments horror’s bodies that change, mutate, or transform can therefore “alter our conception of what makes us human, and, in doing so, enabl[e] new conceptualizations and visualizations of the monstrous.”<sup>258</sup> The horror of our real-life bodies and the lack of control we have over them can pale in comparison to the bodies portrayed in body horror. It makes our real bodies feel that much more boring and mundane and, for some, there is comfort in that. Like the escape offered through other forms of speculative fiction discussed so far, horror can also simply be experienced as fun or play, providing a relief from tangible stresses and fears. Horror films that rely more on the speculative or utilize special effects more can provide a space for the viewer to become “lost in play” and “in the rush of the immediate experience.”<sup>259</sup>

The impact of horror for fans is more than emotional, but also physical. Horror makes us shiver, we get goosebumps, we tense up, we might feel nauseous, feel our skin crawl, jump, or throw our arms up. Of course, the physiological response

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<sup>256</sup> *How I Realized I Was Trans by Making Terrible Horror Movies*, dir. by CBC Arts, 2022 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpVKVATTrkY>> [accessed 25 July 2022].

<sup>257</sup> Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*, p. 49.

<sup>258</sup> Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*, p. 49.

<sup>259</sup> William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 422.

isn't exclusive to horror. We may cry during a dramatic movie, laugh during a comedy, or feel tensed reading an exciting thriller. However, the body is deeply foundational to horror as a genre in every way. Linda Williams refers to horror as an example of a "body genre." Body genres are genres that elicit physiological responses from the consumer.<sup>260</sup> Body genres are often particularly judged as being good or bad depending on how intense the physical response to the cultural object is.<sup>261</sup> Reports of people passing out, needing to go to the hospital, vomiting, et cetera are often used in advertising horror movies. News coverage of the early *Exorcist* (1973) screenings reported that a "man in Berkeley is said to have thrown himself at the cinema screen in an attempt to get rid of the demon, and in Toronto four women were said to be so traumatized they required psychiatric treatment."<sup>262</sup>

Perhaps body horror offers a space for trans people to embrace our own madness. Western medicalization of gender nonconforming lives has resulted in decades of debate regarding the relationship between transness, disability, and madness.<sup>263</sup> Cameron Awkward-Rich explains that "transness and disability [were] produced alongside one another...insofar as they were caught up in similarly confining double binds with respect to law, medicine, and entertainment."<sup>264</sup> Many trans activists have pushed for transness to be distanced from mental illness and disability, while others have utilized their proximity to advocate for increased

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<sup>260</sup> Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. by B.K. Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003).

<sup>261</sup> Williams.

<sup>262</sup> Cherry, p. 58.

<sup>263</sup> Awkward-Rich, pp. 31–59.

<sup>264</sup> Awkward-Rich, p. 57.

protections and medical access for trans people.<sup>265</sup> Awkward-Rich counters the disarticulation of trans from disability to propose a more complicated and perhaps unpleasant, theorizing of transness as often in kinship with disability and transness as maladjustment.

Trans people are considered mentally ill or mad; we are excessive. In pointing to the speculative foundation of transness and its claims of making something visible that was previously imperceivable, Awkward-Rich draws comparison to what might be considered madness is merely something new that we have yet to perceive to be real.<sup>266</sup> La Marr Jurelle Bruce’s description of phenomenal madness as “an intense unruliness of the mind—producing fundamental crises of perception, emotion, meaning, and selfhood” and of psychosocial madness—“radical deviation from the normal within a given psychosocial milieu” could be applied to the experience of transness for many.<sup>267</sup> I speculate that the attraction to body horror for many trans people exists in conjuncture with an experience of madness in which we may find pleasure in that which is deemed unpleasurable.

Horror produces visceral reactions. This can be one of the ways the genre is particularly useful for trans fans. The skill of disassociation trans people possess can mean we are often disconnected from our bodies. For fans who feel disconnected from their body, reading or watching horror might allow one to be in their body, be

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<sup>265</sup> Eli Clare, *Exile & Pride: Disability, Queerness & Liberation* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2009); Awkward-Rich.

<sup>266</sup> Awkward-Rich, p. 59.

<sup>267</sup> La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*, Black Outdoors (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), p. 6 & p.8.

present with it, without the sensation of dysphoria. The physicality of body horror, the way it manifests physical sensations in our lived body, can offer a sort of mindfulness practice of our bodies. While watching *Crimes of the Future*, there are numerous moments in which I could feel my physical body reacting to the images on screen: the churning of my stomach, the tightness in my chest and belly as I watch the surgical blade enter Tenser's abdomen, the uncomfortable fidgeting of my body as the life-like mechanical arms dig through Tenser's organs, the releasing of my muscles from a clenched position as the surgery is complete. Each of these sensations makes me aware of my own body, the way it feels, and the space in which it exists. The bodily impact of watching these horrific scenes generates a bodily awareness that can be a struggle to find during moments of body dysphoria. I am reminded here of the concept of "the hoodie" within trans spaces; the common use of baggy clothing to cover one's body during times of dysphoria. In these moments, the baggy clothing, or hoodie, acts as a way to not only prevent one's body from being perceived by external eyes but as a way to hide one's body from an internal gaze. By covering, I am better able to ignore my body and detach myself from it. The physicality of body horror brings me back from any potential disassociation from my body to a place of bodily recognition that is not overtly flavored by dysphoria.

Hil Malatino describes his experience of disassociating from the world around him for years by actively tuning out the auditory world around him.<sup>268</sup> This cultivated detachment from society developed as a preservation and survival strategy. In order to tune out the incessant micro and macroaggressions experienced as a trans person,

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<sup>268</sup> Malatino, *Trans Care*, pp. 49–51.

Malatino survived by turning inward. While this worked to support his quotidian life, it resulted in a type of social isolation. Israeli-Nevo describes the pressure for trans people to medically transition, and to do it quickly after identifying as trans, forces the trans subject into an out of body experience. Rather than truly feel and experience one's current body, the trans subject is propelled into a focus on the imagined future body that will supposedly bring some type of end to their unhappiness. Israeli-Nevo proposes instead, the act of 'taking one's time' with transition. Using her own autoethnographic experience, she argues that the process of taking time may allow the trans subject to more fully experience and sense their present moment and body rather than focusing on a supposed futurity.<sup>269</sup>

Filmmaker Tiffany Wice describes how a body horror scene in one of her own movies provided her with her own trans awakening. She explains that while editing a scene in which an alien character rips off his own skin, she had an epiphany<sup>270</sup> about her own identity and bodily experiences. As she edited this scene, Wice felt the sensation of removing her own skin and how this was reflective in some way of her feelings and anxieties toward her own body. Like the monsters of body horror become a catalyst of change for our protagonists, the physical sensations and affects of watching the body being manipulated in body horror can serve as a catalyst for self-awareness for the trans viewer. The sensations of body horror reflected the way Wice felt during her experimentation with clothing and gender presentation. She describes feeling as if she was a character in a body horror film, who had to fight

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<sup>269</sup> Israeli-Nevo, p. 39.

<sup>270</sup> *How I Realized I Was Trans by Making Terrible Horror Movies.*

against or accept the monster coming from within. Vice describes feeling herself to be monstrous during this time, and how she felt she was body horror <sup>271</sup>.

“Body is Reality”: Trans Thematics in Cronenberg’s *Crimes of the Future*

David Cronenberg’s *Crimes of the Future* <sup>272</sup> explores governmental control over bodies, the pleasure possible from the control or manipulation of one's own body, and fears of human evolution and our relationship with technology, all the while being flavored by concerns over environmental destruction. Written twenty years before it would eventually be released, Cronenberg wasn’t writing specifically about trans bodies, but upon release of the film many pointed out the potential transgender commentary underlining his story. Speaking with *Vanity Fair* in 2022, Cronenberg acknowledged the prescience of the film in our current cultural climate amongst a barrage of political attacks against trans lives:

When I wrote it 20 years ago, I wasn’t thinking of that specifically, but this is always a go-around about who controls the bodies of citizens. Who controls women’s bodies, who controls the bodies of transgender people. It’s like, are you allowed to do that? Can the government actually tell you what to do with your body or not, even if it doesn’t affect anyone else? <sup>273</sup>

The premise of the film centers in a future Earth in which human bodies have begun to evolve in response to human made ecological disasters and environmental destruction. Some people’s bodies are beginning to grow new organs for unknown

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<sup>271</sup> CBC Arts, ‘How I Realized I Was Trans by Making Terrible Horror Movies’, *CBC*, 2022 <<https://www.cbc.ca/arts/how-i-realized-i-was-trans-by-making-terrible-horror-movies-1.6505498>> [accessed 25 July 2022].

<sup>272</sup> Cronenberg wrote and directed the film.

<sup>273</sup> *Viggo Mortensen, Léa Seydoux & David Cronenberg Break Down ‘Crimes Of The Future’ Surgery Scene*, dir. by David Cronenberg, Notes on a Scene (*Vanity Fair*, 2022) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIfKwL43Cg>>.

purposes—although we learn that at least many of these new organs are human bodies evolving to digest plastic. Those whose bodies are creating new organs are referred to as having “accelerated evolution syndrome.” While some people’s bodies are evolving “naturally,” others are having (often illegal) surgeries on their bodies to make them able to consume plastic as a way to address our environmental impact. Some people are having their new organs surgically removed, sometimes as performance art as in the scene that opens this chapter. We also learn that humans have evolved to have significantly less pain sensors, something that leads to surgeries being conducted by anyone and everyone. Throughout it all the U.S. government is trying to eliminate those who have evolved to consume plastics or embrace or celebrate their strange new organs—referring to them as no longer human. Cronenberg describes these new organs as a “kind of weird internal organ rebellion against normality.”<sup>274</sup>

What the government is afraid of is that people are “deciding what to do with their own bodies—and that they are in control of it and deciding whether to remove these organs or allow them to continue to grow.”<sup>275</sup> *Crimes of the Future* is saturated with trans thematics involving questions of what constitutes the human, what is “natural,” governmental control of bodies, and the challenging of bodily, gendered, technological, and sexual boundaries.

*What is “Human”?*

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<sup>274</sup> Viggo Mortensen, Léa Seydoux & David Cronenberg Break Down ‘Crimes Of The Future’ Surgery Scene.

<sup>275</sup> Viggo Mortensen, Léa Seydoux & David Cronenberg Break Down ‘Crimes Of The Future’ Surgery Scene.

The opening image of the film is of a cruise ship, turned on its side and stuck in the somewhat shallow water of a beach. We are defamiliarized from the cruise ship until the camera pans out far enough to see its entirety in the background as a small boy is seen playing on the beach while paying no attention to the cruise ship in the background, indicating the normality of the discarded ship in this current world. The small boy is warned by a woman, who we assume to be his mother, that she doesn't want him to eat anything he finds down by the water. After watching the boy brush his teeth, we see him sit on the floor and begin to eat what appears to be a plastic trash can. While the boy eats the plastic bin, his mother watches him with a flat expression that reads of disdain and possibly fear. In the next scene we see the mother watching the boy sleep with a similar flat expression before she crawls on top of the boy and suffocates him with a pillow. We then see her sitting in the bathroom, nudging the partially eaten trash can with her foot, an added sadness to her generally defeated demeanor, as she answers a phone call and tells the person on the other line

“I want you to tell Lang that if he's interested in picking up the corpse of that creature he calls his son—yes, yes, I mean the Brecken thing—So you tell him to come to the address I gave you. It will be here, and I won't be.”

She then begins to weep into her hands. In referring to, who we will learn was her biological son, as a “corpse,” “creature,” “thing,” and “it,” the audience is callously introduced to a central theme at the heart of *Crimes of the Future* (*CotF*), the question of what constitutes the human.

The main character of the story is Saul Tenser, a performance artist who is experiencing Accelerated Evolution Syndrome (AES). AES causes his body to repeatedly develop new organs with “no known function.” Tenser and others with this

syndrome are required to register their new organs with the newly created government agencies: New Vice and the National Organ Registry (NOR). The New Vice unit is a new federal bureau focused on “body crimes.” Later in the film it is mentioned that this new unit was almost originally called the “Evolutionary Derangement” Unit, but they decided that the word Vice sounded sexier. I find this original name worth noting as it speaks to how—and whose—bodies are being targeted for criminalization. Those who, whether by choice or through natural bodily processes, defy what this future society conventionally has viewed as normal are considered criminal.

The criminalization of bodies that differ from what is considered normal that grounds much of the film speaks to themes of trans and disability justice which I will focus on throughout this chapter. Early in the film, Tenser and his partner Caprice, visit the newly created National Organ Registry (NOR) where they meet the two employees of this agency who are concerned with tracking human evolution out of fears that these evolutionary changes make people no longer human. The government in *CotF* is beginning to track the developments of new organs in human bodies, and making those whose bodies grow these new organs register them with the new NOR. This is in an attempt to control human evolution and prevent the loss of “humanity.”

Along with the NOR, the New Vice unit is focused on regulating and eliminating bodies they view as becoming less human. The government’s interests in the film are portrayed mostly through the character Cope, played by Welket Bungué. Cope is a detective from the New Vice Unit focused on stopping individuals from altering their bodies in ways that the government views as less human. When

discussing individuals with AES or who have surgically altered their bodies in order to digest plastics, Cope refers to them as “freaks” who are “evolving away from the human path...[and] It can’t be allowed to continue.” Throughout the story Cope shows disgust toward those whose bodies and their functionality differs from what he views to be normal.

Theorizing around what it means to be “human” has been a central theme of Trans Studies, but these theoretical examinations are deeply indebted to Black Feminist Studies. Sylvia Winters and Hortense Spillers in particular have significantly shaped theorization around the human and the body.<sup>276</sup> Tenser is considered transhuman as his body transcends the current understandings of what constitutes the human body. There are some clear parallels between the concern and control the U.S. government has with Tenser’s changing body with the increasing regulations of trans bodies in our present day. Legislation and administrative governance are pivotal in determining what bodies, and modes of being, are viewed as natural and acceptable.<sup>277</sup> Tenser and others like him, are perceived as a threat to the government and society that is designed around “humans,” because if the definition of what constitutes a “human” body—and relatedly what constitutes a

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<sup>276</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’, *Diacritics*, 17.2, Culture and Counteremory: The “American” Connection (1987), 65–81; Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, ‘Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations’, in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 9–89.

<sup>277</sup> Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2011).

gendered body—is mutable and inconsistent then who is governable is brought into question.

Body horror continually asks the viewer to examine the condition of being a human or having a body within a gendered society. Greatly present throughout most of the filmography of Cronenberg is the questioning of bodily boundaries and the limits of where our internal and external bodies meet. Body horror forces us to imagine bodies that go beyond binary limits of the human, gender, and sexuality, often capturing a trans narrative in the process.

As a genre, body horror portrays bodies as being in some way excessive.<sup>278</sup> Trans bodies too are often viewed as being excessive: excessive gender or anatomical parts, being too much or beyond what hegemonic conventions determine gendered bodies to be. *CotF*'s Tenser literally embodies bodily excess. His body produces additional organs that are referred to as having “no known function.” While we do learn the true functionality of his new organs later in the narrative, he spends years removing these excesses from his body. This is something that Whippet, the registrar at the NOR, points out to Tenser after Tenser joins the Internal Beauty Pageant. Whippet notes to Tenser’s performance history and how he has historically viewed his own body as needing to be reduced, stands in stark contrast to his decision to be in a beauty pageant that is all about “acceptance, acknowledgement, and aesthetic empowerment,” when Tenser has repeatedly approached his body with “anger and rebellion, and rejection by scalpel.” This observation causes Tenser to doubt his

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<sup>278</sup> Williams.

choices and attempt to retreat back from the emotional progress he has made to potentially liberate his mind from normative and ableist views of his own body.

Returning to the scene that opened this chapter, the phrase “Body is Reality” that Tenser and Caprice use during their live operation highlights a hypocrisy in the way they understand and approach Tenser’s body. Rather than accepting the reality of Tenser’s body, they decide to repeatedly alter and dismember his body, viewing these organs as unnecessary simply because they do not yet know of any function they may provide. This stands in additional contrast to the way “unnecessary” bodily modifications that are encouraged in the film.

I am particularly interested in the idea that Tenser’s body has apparently never developed the same organ twice. While this is not stated in the film itself, since each organ is tattooed, removed, and recorded, it seems to logically follow that if there had been overt similarities or duplicates in the organs his body developed that at least Caprice, who spends countless hours looking at and tattooing his organs would have noticed any similarities or patterns. Rather than attempting to repeatedly create the same necessary organs again and again, Tenser’s body appears to try a different strategy or composition each time. His body refuses to accept his repeated disavowal of these new organs and tries something different each time until he is finally forced to accept the reality of his own body.

*What is “Natural”?*

*Timlin: “...I’m worried about him.”*

*Tenser: “He seems in fine form.”*

*Timlin: “Well that’s a very dangerous form to be in.”*

*-Crimes of the Future*

Body horror challenges the naturalness of bodies and subverts our cultural expectations of “natural” bodies. What is natural is a primary question at the heart of *CotF* and links directly with the way much of transphobia and cissexism is rooted in a controlling what we consider to be natural. Body horror centers the unnatural and the uncanny. In some ways it is the idea that what is natural itself that can be horrific. Cronenberg’s filmography argues that the body is the source of most horror itself. We fear losing control of our bodies, but doing so is itself a natural part of life and often the privilege of aging. So much of our modern society is spent focusing on making our bodies as unnatural as possible, trying to prevent aging, wrinkling, sagging, weight gain, changes in skin color, etc. *Crimes of the Future* forces us to strip away any preconceived notions we may have of what constitutes a natural or normal body. In the world of *CotF*, humans have largely lost the ability to feel physical pain caused by injury to the body and because of this, continue to seek out sensation in any way they can. This leads most to engage in surgery and body modifications casually.

Arguments that trans bodies are less natural are framed within an ideology that claims the “natural” to inherently mean “good.” Natural itself does not mean good of course, it is “natural” to die of cancer, but we sure do try to intervene in that “natural” process. The use of cancer to highlight that natural does not always mean good is present in a scene in which Caprice is speaking to the LifeFormWare employees working on their surgical unit when she is asked about Tenser’s “disorder.” After explaining it as an example of the human body attempting to develop new organs that might serve future generations, one of the techs points out that Tenser isn’t letting that happen and instead keeps removing these “new and

improved organs.” Caprice responds by saying that the development of the new organs is “pathological” and not healthy: “It’s a breakdown of the system. An organism needs organization. Otherwise, it’s just designer cancer.” With this metaphor, Caprice emphasizes that while this might be a “natural” bodily process, she, and others, still consider it a pathology that should be corrected rather than allowed to occur on its own.

Despite being his strongest “supporter” and his partner, Caprice continues to reflect the idea that by deviating from the anatomical makeup and functions human bodies are expected to have, his body is inherently pathological. As a former doctor and surgeon, Caprice represents a medicalized perspective of what Awkward-Rich describes as the “lumping together of bodies designated as disjunctive, ungended, and strange.”<sup>279</sup> Tenser’s body is “dis-ordered,”<sup>280</sup> it is pathological because it lacks or rejects the normative way of ordering organs and their functions. Eli Clare points out that the idea of order and disorder are essential to Western medical understandings and beliefs about the body. Western medicine cannot possibly support or accept alternative or flexible bodily formations because to do so would break apart the foundation of the Western medical industrial complex that is entirely based on equating difference with disorder.<sup>281</sup>

Throughout *CotF*, Cronenberg blurs the boundaries between the natural and the technological. Each piece of advanced technology is purposefully designed to

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<sup>279</sup> Awkward-Rich, p. 48.

<sup>280</sup> Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 43.

<sup>281</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, p. 43.

look organic and lifelike. How alive these pieces of technology look, works to create a great amount of the unease the audience experiences with the film. The otherworldly, lifelike technology further challenges the separation of the natural and unnatural and the body and the other. There is a persistent concern about what happens when technology alters our understandings and perceptions of gender, sex, and desire. This theme of body/technology border crossing is addressed most directly in *CotF*, when Lang describes his, and others', decision to have their bodies altered to process plastics saying that it is time for human evolution to "sync up with technology."

When we first are introduced to Tenser in *CotF*, he is inside an organic looking pod suspended in the air by "wires" that look somewhere between tentacles and intestines that connect him to his bed. He is awoken by Caprice, and they discuss how his bed is no longer "anticipating [his] pain" and he is struggling to rest. Soon we see him in another seemingly, although it isn't, organically alive chair that appears to be made of bones and fleshy material. The chair, like the bed, shifts and moves to supposedly assist Tenser in digesting as he struggles to swallow and digest. The chair, like the bed, is no longer responding to his body appropriately. Tenser's AES is presumed to be the cause of his pain and his disability.

The primary company that makes these products is called LifeFormWare and we are introduced to two LifeFormWare employees early on who appear throughout the film. Eventually we learn that these LifeFormWare employees are murdering individuals who are supporting those with AES or are choosing to undergo surgeries that allow them to digest plastics. With these characters, Cronenberg portrays a

critique of capitalism mixed with disability politics. These LifeFormWare employees portray the economic investment in defining what constitutes body-mind trouble that Clare has described as a defining feature of the medical industrial complex.<sup>282</sup> These employees, who appear to be acting on behalf of the company, are financially invested in people with AES living in pain, or else they do not have a job and there is no use for the companies' products. Not only do they need those with AES to experience pain, they do not want anyone with AES to know that their bodies could actually be pain free if they simply changed from trying to eat what had been historically considered food humans consumed to instead eating "toxic" plastics.

When Lang tries to convince Tenser of the importance of and value in their decision to alter their digestive tracks, Lang asks Tenser if he has ever considered that by engaging in these organ removal performances, they "might simply be interfering in a fantastic natural process that [Tenser] should surrender to?" This critique comes through the most clearly at the end of the film when Tenser who is struggling to swallow and consume anything while in his shifting LifeFormWare chair, decides to attempt to ingest the plastic bar given to him earlier in the film. This is a dangerous gamble as it will immediately kill anyone who has not evolved to be able to eat plastic. In the last moment of the film, we watch as he chokes down the plastic, coughs for a moment, and then exhales a sense of relief. The film ends on Tenser's eyes as we see his moment of recognition, and first moment without pain. The disability politics framework, that also mirrors many trans rights frameworks, that it is a society that is inaccessible and designed for a privilege few that leads many to be

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<sup>282</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, pp. 72–80.

viewed as disabled rather than their own bodies functioning differently,<sup>283</sup> is woven throughout the film.

Further connections between Tenser's character arc, disability politics, and trans narratives falls in the way he continually has his organs removed as a means of staying "human." Despite his body insisting he is different, Tenser ignores this, viewing his body through an ableist and cis gaze. Tenser spends the film often sulking in shadows, wearing clothes that cover his entire body except for his eyes, and being incredibly exhausted. He is comfortable with his entire body being on display through performance but is uncomfortable with his body being perceived outside of art. He does not accept his own body and hides it under clothing that reminds me personally of "the hoodie" (a joke within trans communities about the oversized clothing many trans people will wear to cover or hide their body in public due to dysphoria). Additionally, he is exhausted by living in a world that was not designed for him to exist within it. This part speaks to disability and trans narratives. He is exhausted by trying to be what he is expected to be within larger society. Tenser finds real freedom only when he stops trying to force his body to function and exist the way he is told it should and instead listens to what his body actually needs.

Tenser's shame and fear of non-normativity is contrasted in the film with the liberatory potential of choosing non-normativity, self-acceptance, or celebration of bodily differences. Tenser is repeatedly faced with those who view bodily difference as beautiful. Throughout the film characters refer to Tenser's neo-organs as "inner beauties," and he is eventually introduced to a doctor who is installing zippers in the

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<sup>283</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*.

bodies of the Inner Beauty Pageant contestants to have easy access to viewing their insides. This doctor and Whippet (the NOR worker and registrar for the Inner Beauty Pageant contest) both serve to provoke Tenser towards a path of self-acceptance or appreciation.

Halfway through the film, Caprice attends the performance of a friend, Odile, in which Odile is having long, angled cuts made across her face that share a resemblance to gills. Caprice, who continually encourages the pathologizing of Tenser's body, is deeply affected by Odile's performance. When the two speak afterwards, Odile describes how it was hard for her to find plastic surgeons who "understand that [she] do[es] not wish to be made more beautiful" [Figure 3.3]. Caprice is so moved that she decides to attend an afterparty in which she has half-moon shaped implants placed in her forehead [Figure 3.4].

When Tenser sees Caprice's new face, he is clearly unsure of how to feel but portrays a certain amount of annoyance with her. His frustration does not appear to be in the decision to alter her body, but the desire to add to her body something (an excess) that serves "no known function." This lands as a moment of hypocrisy around what forms of bodily differences are viewed as beautiful and those that are viewed as needing to be eliminated, corrected, or cured. The desire to have breast implants for a trans woman is viewed as excessive, unnecessary, or pathological within Western society, while it is increasingly more acceptable for cisgender women to choose to alter their breasts. With this juxtaposition, Cronenberg furthers the critique of what and who exactly faces control of their bodies and who is more supported or even celebrated in their body modifications.



*Figure 3.3: Odile's, played by Denise Capezza, post-performance face, featuring four deep cuts across her forehead and three horizontal cuts across each cheek. Image still from David Cronenberg's "Crimes of the Future"*



*Figure 3.4: Caprice's face post-surgery, featuring four crescent moon shapes horizontally across her face. The two on the right are facing the right side of her face and the two on the left are facing toward the left side. Image still from David Cronenberg's "Crimes of the Future"*

Tenser has continually removed his new emergent organs as they have developed because he has understood them to be the source of his pain, of his disability. What truly caused his pain, however, was the removal of these organs. By finally allowing his body to function in what may be “natural” for his body even if it is “unnatural” or “inhuman” in the world he lives, provides him with true freedom from pain. The final scene from the film is a close up shot of Tenser’s face (in black and white shot through Caprice’s ring camera) as he swallows a bite of the toxic plastic snack bar <sup>284</sup> and then for the first time in what seems to be decades, he is able to swallow. This freedom is more than a freedom from physical pain, but of the freedom that aligning the body-mind may provide. Tenser’s organs and body are defined as “trouble”<sup>285</sup> by the government, doctors, and the general public. He is still in danger from the government and the capitalistic interests of LifeFormWare, but he finds an internal sense of relief by no longer fighting his inner “monster” and by recognizing his body is not the trouble. Right before the film cuts to the end credits, we see a single tear fall down Tenser’s face as he experiences a brief, and life altering, moment of inner peace.

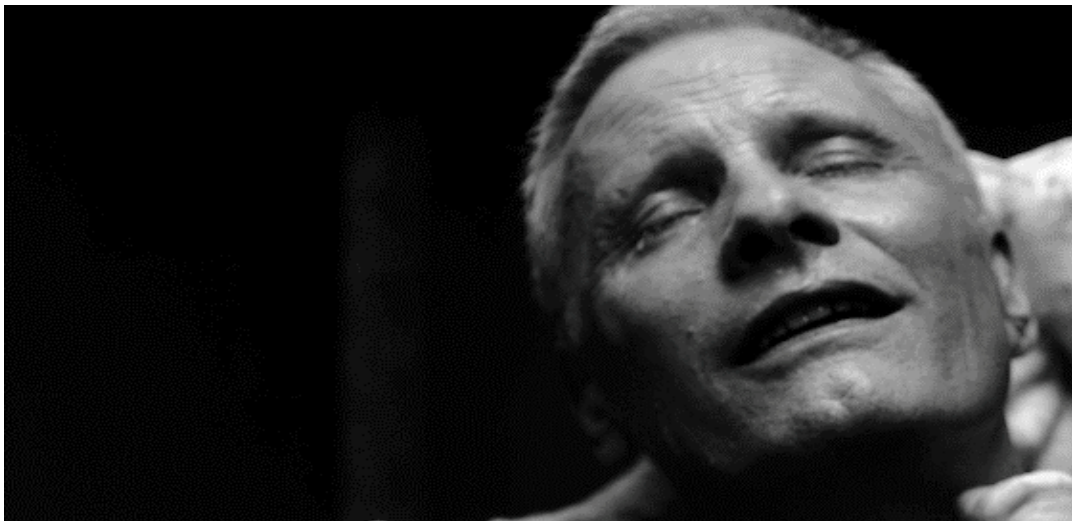
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<sup>284</sup> Which looks pretty delicious to me, but I could be alone on this one.

<sup>285</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, pp. 74–75.



*Figure 3.5: Saul Tenser in his LifeFormWare Breakfast Chair. He struggles to swallow a spoonful of mushy food while the chair rotates and shifts his body. Image still from David Cronenberg's "Crimes of the Future"*



*Figure 3.6: Saul Tenser in the final shot of the film. The image is black and white and shot through Caprice's camera. After swallowing the synthetic plastic bar and experiencing no pain while eating for the first time, he smiles and sheds a tear. Image still from David Cronenberg's "Crimes of the Future"*

### *Gender and Sexual Boundaries*

While Cronenberg's films, and body horror more broadly, utilize the body as the source of fear, discomfort, or disgust, the heart of these narratives is consistently

still internal. The focus isn't solely on having the body mutate or change in some uncanny way, but how we respond to the changes of our bodies. How do the changes of our bodies change our own interiority? Body horror relies on societal and individual fears around the boundaries of our bodies. We are forced to reckon with the reality that our bodies are material things that can be altered and manipulated either by choice, by nature, or by some other force. We fear not only losing control over our bodies, but when the borders of our bodies are blurred with that which is not our body.

Body Horror utilizes gender as one of its primary modes of invoking fear. The genre uses the naturalized or taken-for-granted aspects of gendered bodies and boundaries and exposes these boundaries as malleable. Our bodies serve as boundaries of our internal sense of self and the exterior world. Body horror provokes us to question where the boundaries between ourselves and the world exist and what would happen if these boundaries were to be crossed. Andrew Tudor, theorized that horror is an exploration of the transgressing of bodily boundaries into something “unrecognizable and perverse.”<sup>286</sup>

It is often the changing of bodies from what they are expected to be because of one's gender that is central to the genre. Transgressing sexual norms that dictate how people engage in sexual behavior repeatedly is used to invoke fear and discomfort. The challenging of sexual, gender, and sex-based boundaries in body horror works to represent internal fears around gender and gender roles for trans and

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<sup>286</sup> Andrew Tudor, 'Unruly Bodies, Unquiet Minds', *Body & Society*, 1.1 (1995), 25–41 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X95001001003>>.

non-trans people. Take for example the 1989 film *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, in which the main character is in the process of turning into a machine and grows a comically large metal drill for a phallus. In the same film, a woman develops a phallic-type hose that she uses to penetrate her boyfriend. Both of these moments utilize transgressive gender and sexual process to induce horror affects. *Tetsuo* and many other body horror films are obsessed with genitals, not unlike the way much of society focuses on trans people's genitals. Growing or developing phalluses or new vaginal, physical cavities are overly common tropes amongst body horror.<sup>287</sup>

In *CotF* however, Cronenberg diverts slightly from the genital obsession of body horror but maintains a focus on how we have sex and what sex means in our lives and interior minds. Timlin, the NOR worker who is desperately sexually interested in Tenser, refers to the intimacy of the surgical performances and asks Tenser if he would agree that “surgery is the new sex.” *CotF* makes it clear that in a world where people have lost the ability to feel pain from injury, there is a desire to find new sources of sensations and pleasures. Throughout the film, surgery is repeatedly shown as pleasurable and erotic. In one scene we see Tenser practicing the surgical maneuvers of their next performance while Caprice lies naked in the surgical pod. He accidentally slices across her chest, causing Caprice to moan with pleasure. He then decides to join her in the pod, and the two lay in a naked embrace while the machine makes numerous short surgical cuts across their bodies [Figure 3.7].

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<sup>287</sup> See also: Cronenberg's *Crash* and *Videodrome*, and the Netflix series *Brand New Cherry Flavor* for some examples.



*Figure 3.7: Caprice experiencing sexual pleasure in the surgical pod. Image still from David Cronenberg's "Crimes of the Future"*

Additional parallels can be drawn between the public and political fascination with trans bodies and with the spectacle of Tenser's body. Tenser and Caprice are well established performance artists who engage in public surgeries in which Caprice tattoos Tenser's new organs, while they are still inside his body, with artwork of her own design. She then surgically removes them in front of a live audience. Their performances are packed with people who appear to be excited, intrigued, aroused, and disgusted by the process. Throughout the film we are introduced to numerous examples of body modification as performance art. Body modification and surgery is a public spectacle in the world of *CotF* and bodies like Tenser's are particularly viewed as fascinating. When Lang says that his ex-wife wouldn't care about their son's body, Tenser retorts that he "got the feeling she was obsessed with his body."

The way characters obsess over Tenser's body represents societal fetishization of trans bodies. Timlin, played by Kristen Stewart, serves as a representation of the fetishization of trans people and those who "chase" trans people as sexual objects

rather than full human beings. Each time Timlin appears on screen she is practically drooling over Tenser and continually, and exclusively, asking him about his neo-organs. Caprice on the other hand showcase a more nuanced reality of societal attitudes and obsession with trans bodies. On the surface Caprice may appear to be the supporting partner to Tenser but throughout there is an underlying tension centered in both Caprice's pathologization of Tenser's body and her own sexual control over it. In the later half of the film, when Tenser expresses that he might let his current batch of newly developing organs to stay a bit longer inside his body out of possible curiosity. Caprice immediately bristles at the idea and responds that he shouldn't let them wait around too long because it's a pathological disorder after all.

While her reaction to Tenser is presented with a politeness and a superficial investment in his wellbeing, it is clear that underneath that exterior projection she is annoyed and angry. She is supportive of Tenser in so far as she is able to use and display his body as she sees fit, as it benefits her professionally and sexually. At the end of the film, she does offer Tenser the plastic snack bar when he is struggling to eat his food mush, portraying her care and concern for him. While this suggestion does work out for Tenser in the end, I do not read this moment as Caprice finally affirming and supporting the potential reality of Tenser's body, but rather a continued portrayal of her using Tenser's body for her own benefit. When she goes to fetch him the plastic bar, she also stops to grab her camera and begins recording Tenser as she hands the bar to him. Caprice is fully aware that Tenser might die, and if her previous statements of viewing his body of pathological and not simply a natural deviation of human anatomy, then she likely believes she is about to film his death. Tenser may be

fine with the filming, but he doesn't ask her to do it. It feels safe to assume that if Tenser had died, Caprice would have made a performance piece out of the video of his death and likely of his physical body.

The monstrous feminine is additionally rampant in body horror films, and Cronenberg is particularly guilty of this. One of the most overly used tropes within the body horror genre is the sudden developing of a new cavity in one's body—often in men's bodies. This imagery plays on fears of penetration and the idea of being entered as submissive, vulnerable, and weak. There is an underlying misogyny that plays across much of body horror that frames the ability to be entered as horrific for the cisgender male audience. The monstrous feminine in body horror also works to question or challenge the boundaries of our bodies [Figure 3.8].



*Figure 3.8: Example of Cronenberg's previous use of vaginal type openings used in body horror. The still is from Videodrome. James Woods' character develops a vagina like openings down the length of his belly. He reaches into it and pulls out a gun that then begins to fuse with the skin of his hand until the gun is part of his body and he has a literal handgun. Image still from David Cronenberg's "Videodrome"*

In *CotF*, when Tenser elects to have a zipper installed in his belly for easy access to his organs, Caprice is initially unsure of how she feels about the zipper that makes her worry their surgical (and sexual) performances are made obsolete by this new bodily entryway. However, the scene quickly turns away from her uncertainty to an erotic moment as she kneels before Tenser and unzips his belly before placing her mouth on his opening. As she tongues his insides, the camera moves to Tenser's face as he falls back against the wall behind him in obvious pleasure. This scene acts as a break from Cronenberg's previous work that has framed the development of vaginal openings in male characters as something to be disgusted or terrified of. While clearly still grotesque, the scene is performed and shot like an average, conventional oral sex scene [Figure 3.9]. Within the context of the film, this scene adds another level of potential transness to Cronenberg's Tenser. Compared to his previous work that repeatedly uses the idea of vaginal type openings happening to bodies, Tenser makes the decision to add the opening to his own body and find pleasure from it. As surgery is the new sex, Tenser's surgical decision changes the way Caprice penetrates him. Previously Caprice used the technology of their surgical pod to penetrate Tenser, but in this scene we see Caprice use her own body to enter Tenser's for the first time—first with her fingers and then her mouth.



*Figure 3.9: Caprice kneels in front of Tenser and moves to place her mouth on his new abdominal zipper opening. Image still from David Cronenberg's "Crimes of the Future"*

### *Controlling and Punishing Nonnormative Bodies*

Cronenberg's work is an example of the way the genre of horror has long been used as medium for critiquing institutions that work to control or regulate identities and bodies.<sup>288</sup> Tenser's continued organ removal is shaped by more than a desire to remain what he considers human, but additionally through his fears of what might happen if he leaves his organs alone or even acknowledges his own difference. He knows his nonnormative body makes him a target of the government. As long as he removes his organs, he is safe from government interference, control, and possible murder. It isn't simply that Tenser refuses to acknowledge the reality of his own body, but that he knows the dangerous reality of the world in which he lives is not

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<sup>288</sup> Jenkins, *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*, p. 45.

designed to allow those like him to survive. I read this aspect of his character as a desire to denounce that which makes him different. One aspect of the long medicalization and pathologization of transness in Western history is the reality that to have on medical record that you in some way deviate from the norm can cost you your freedom.<sup>289</sup> Whether this is through autistic parents being deemed unfit for custody in the court systems or transness being perceived as a mental illness, many deny the potential mental and physical care and support they may need in order to adhere to society's mythical norm.<sup>290</sup>

The young boy we see murdered at the beginning of the film, Brecken, we learn later in the film is the son of Lang, one of the primary organizers of an underground movement of people choosing to undergo surgeries that allow them to digest toxic materials like plastic. While we see Lang lingering around Tenser's performances throughout the first half of the film, his first direct interaction with Tenser occurs when he approaches Tenser one evening and asks if he would be willing to conduct an autopsy during his next performance. Lang asks Tenser the question: "How radical are you?" before revealing that it is his own nine-year-old son he wishes Tenser to use in his show. While it is not revealed at this point in the film, we later learn that Brecken was the first (at least that is known by the characters of the film) person to have been born with the new digestive tract needed to digest plastics.

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<sup>289</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, pp. 41–42.

<sup>290</sup> Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*.

Prior to Brecken, this ability was only available to those whose bodies “naturally” grew the new organs later in life or by undergoing surgery. Brecken, Lang says, was the first to be born “naturally unnatural.” The second half of the film focuses primarily on his autopsy and Brecken’s body itself. Brecken’s body becomes a battleground that is to be used to pursue a larger political aim by multiple sides. His father wants the autopsy done in order to make public the evolutionary direction that humans can and should (according to him) be taking. Tenser and Caprice both have an interest in the attention they could gain from the performance and possibility in conducting the autopsy. Part way through the film it is revealed that Tenser has been secretly meeting with Cope to give him intel on what he knows about those with AES. Tenser confides in Cope about the autopsy and voices his mixed feelings about doing it. Cope encourages him to go forward with the autopsy. In what is perhaps the climax of the film, Caprice and Tenser decide to go through with the autopsy, only to find the boy’s body is filled with miscellaneous, partially rotten, and tattooed organs. Tenser and Lang realize that somehow the New Vice Unit got their hands on the boy’s body and swapped out his organs prior to the surgery.

There is a great deal to this storyline that deserves attention. First, Brecken never speaks a word in the film outside of his suffocated cries for his mother to stop killing him. He exists in this film as a literal body, removed from its humanity. He is used as a tool to either create or stifle a human body revolution. There are two central questions at the heart of the film: what is natural and human? And who controls individual bodies? Tenser and Brecken embody both of these core thematic questions. The fear the U.S. government has of human beings evolving away from their

humanity and the need to control that, is represented in their fear and need to eliminate Brecken. The National Organ Registry and the New Vice Unit both feign a concern about human bodies becoming less human and being altered, and both flavor their concern through commentary about digesting plastic as not natural. After the disastrous autopsy, Tenser confronts Cope about what the government did to Brecken's body. When Tenser asks Cope what they found when they mutilated the young boy's body, Cope says that it was "...pretty weird inside. You wouldn't have recognized a thing, but the hell of it was that it was all natural. He was born that way." When faced with the reality that a child was born, with a naturally occurring digestive tract that consumes plastic, the investment in destroying what is unarguably his "naturally" formed body exposes their concern of what is "natural" for humans has nothing to do with what is natural or unnatural.

Body horror is largely, or primarily, grounded in our fears around consent and bodily autonomy. In *CotF*, Brecken is used to signify issues of choice, freewill, and consent. Brecken is given no say in his life or afterlife of his body. While his father does appear to love him and does appear to think see the autopsy as a way to make something positive come about from the young boy's death, he is also choosing to use his son's own body to meet his own investments. When she is faced with the reality of the murdered child's body, Caprice questions the ethics of whether they should do the performance saying that consent is essential in performance art. While their intents and interests are vastly divergent, both Lang and Cope weaponize Brecken's body for their own means. In some ways, body horror also reflects some of society's fears of trans people. That we may transcend our given bodies. That to have surgical

interventions that alter our sexed bodies is in and of itself body horror for many cisgender people.

Who is able to control others' bodies and what they are allowed to do with them has clear trans parallels, but the film also repeatedly poses the question of whether Tenser's body is naturally creating these new organs or if he somehow is choosing or willing his body to make them. The debate over choice vs nature reflects the long and boring question of whether or not there is a biological basis for transness, or queerness, or if it is a choice. In *CotF* there are some people who are making changes to their bodies in order to survive and others whose bodies are changing "naturally". Both are feared, but those who are actively choosing to do so are viewed as more criminal in the eyes of the government. In meditating on the role that choice has in *CotF*, I am struck by a connection to the experience shared by Xena during our collective geeking out session. Xena described having a long-standing interest and enjoyment in genderswap fic in which the character has no control over their gender change, and therefore cannot be blamed. I see parallels in Xena's desire to be able to live a gender affirmative life without being blamed for "choosing" to be different with the narrative present in *CotF* on the criminality of choosing to move away from what is viewed as human.

## Chapter 4: Trans Worldbuilding and t4t Imagination

At last, we have reached the final chapter of this dissertation. So far, I have taken you through the productive work of trans imaginatory practices on speculative fiction created originally through a cis-gaze. In this last chapter, I guide you through examples of the worlds and imaginations of two trans people: Blue Delliquanti and Gretchen Felker-Martin. Expanding on Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant's <sup>291</sup> concept of a queer world, a trans imaginary reflects a possible trans world. A trans world is one that is repulsed by borders, binaries, and restrictions. Where it is continuous movement, flexibility, fluidity, and change that allow for lives to flourish. A trans world embraces and celebrates change. A trans world finds new ways of connecting and being in relation to one another that may not seem possible.

By exploring examples of trans worldbuilding, I aim to provide insight into the possible speculative and critical worlds of trans interiority and what could happen when this *felt* space becomes a tangible reality. With this I engage trans worldbuilding as both a process by which trans creators imagine alternatives and how these imaginative practices are reliant on the interrelationship of the creator and reader. I return with this final chapter back to the grounding question of this dissertation: How do we survive as trans people? The two texts I highlight in this chapter both address different forms of survival and engage in different trans imaginatory practices—albeit in the most diametrically opposed ways.

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<sup>291</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'Sex in Public', *Critical Inquiry*, 24.2 (1998), 547–66 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1344178>>.

One difference between the texts discussed in this chapter and the ones I have previously showcased, is that explicitly trans characters are central to these texts. This work has never been about representation, even if ideas of feeling represented by or reflected in media has surfaced at times, the cultural texts used so far have been created through a cis-gaze. It is not surprising that in the works of speculative fiction by trans creators there may be explicitly trans themes, characters, and narratives. I have had no interest to examining how non-trans people imagine us, but in imagining our own survival, we must also imagine ourselves into the worlds we build. Trans imagination does not have to be explicitly trans or include trans characters, but I selected texts that do directly address questions of how to we survive. I view this question to be at the heart of most trans imaginatory practices. I ask here how the imaginary worlds created by trans people shape and make possible the real lives of trans people? What possibilities or strategies does a trans imaginary build for trans, and non-trans, people?

To focus my analysis on trans worldbuilding and the potential of trans imagination I focus on two works of speculative fiction in this chapter: Blue Delliquanti's three-part graphic novel *O Human Star* and Gretchen Felker-Martin's 2022 novel *Manhunt*.<sup>292</sup> Much of this dissertation has focused on visual creative works, and with this chapter I turn my focus on literary (and yet still visual in the case

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<sup>292</sup> Content note: *Manhunt* has *almost* every single kind of violent act one could think about mentioned at some point in the novel. In discussing it there are a lot of horrific things I will mention or discuss in detail. A general list of what is present in this chapter's discussion of the novel includes: rape, sexual assault, murder, cannibalism, anti-trans violence, violence against children, loss of bodily autonomy, non-consensual surgeries, suicide, extreme torture, slavery, incest, racial violence, and body mutilation.

of Delliquanti's work) texts. I partially choose these two texts because they could not be more dissimilar. *O Human Star* leans into optimism and hope, while there is not a single shred of hope or happiness present within Felker-Martin's *Manhunt*. *OHS* wants to make you feel held, hopeful, and loved. The series isn't entirely puppies and kittens—it does address trauma, pain, heartbreak, and metaphors for suicide—but throughout its three parts, it wants to make the trans reader feel held. Here, Delliquanti says, take this nice warm cocoa and let me wrap you up with this soft, fluffy blanket and hold you close while we process our pain because it can get better. *Manhunt* turns that blanket into heated barbed wire that continually tightens around you until you cannot breathe—oh and there's glass in the cocoa, drink up.

Despite their radically different affects, both texts highlight the role and importance of trans care, kinship, and love practices.<sup>293</sup> In exploring these two disparate ways of trans worldbuilding and imagining, I hope to create a broader understanding of how trans imagination engages and thrives across affects. The ways these two stories converge reflects what I argue is at the heart of trans imagination: finding ways to survive, the necessity of care, and the destruction of bodily, political, social, and imaginative boundaries.

### Reflection, Becoming, and *O Human Star*

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<sup>293</sup> V Varun Chaudhry, 'Trans/Coalitional Love-Politics', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 6.4 (2019), 521–38 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7771681>>; Nash, 'Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality', *Meridians*, 11.2 (2013), 1–24 <<https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1>>; Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Malatino, *Trans Care*; Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*; V. Jo Hsu, 'T4t Love-Politics', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 9.1 (2022), 101–18 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9475551>>.

Blue Delli quanti’s three volume comic series, *O Human Star (OHS)* began in 2012 and as a single page a week web comic. Eventually, the series developed into three volumes, with the last volume being published in 2020. *OHS* exemplifies numerous trans thematics—questioning the human and natural, questions of bodily boundaries, and the importance of movement and change to name just a few examples—but it additionally offers an example of the role trans care practices have in trans imagination and worldbuilding. Delli quanti describes the series as a “science fiction family drama.”<sup>294</sup> The series’ main protagonist is Alastair Sterling (referred to as Al), a robotics engineer and inventor who develops, with the assistance of his partner Brendan Pinsky, the first functional artificial intelligence program and the first robots to use it. Unfortunately, Al does not live to see the impact of his inventions as he dies suddenly.<sup>295</sup>

The story mostly begins sixteen years after Al’s death, with Al waking up in what appears to be his old bedroom and the same position from when we last saw him. He awakens to find himself in a robot body, albeit one that looks and feels identical to the one he had when he died. He appears to retain all his memories and knowledge from before his death up until the day he died. After waking up, he does to find answers to how and why he has been brought back from his old partner. On the way to Brendan, he finds a world full of robots living and working amongst humans—his A.I. literally changed the world.

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<sup>294</sup> Blue Delli quanti, ‘FAQ’, *O Human Star* <[www.ohumanstar.com/faq](http://www.ohumanstar.com/faq)>.

<sup>295</sup> His unexplained death is the first scene of the comic. He is shown bleeding from his mouth as he falls onto his bed before the story jumps to the same image but 16 years later.

When he reunites with Brendan, he is introduced to Brendan's "daughter" Sulla, a robotic teenage girl who looks identical to Al. The series moves between three primary timelines that are differentiated by color: the timeline of Al and Brendan's relationship prior to Al's death, Brendan's actions and experiences after Al's death, and then after Al's rebirth. Over the course of the series, it is revealed through flashbacks that Brendan was more than Al's protégé but was also his lover. After passing out on his bed (the opening scene of the series) Al is taken to the hospital where he is in a coma like state for a few hours before eventually passing away. During this time Brendan rushes to the hospital to try and capture a copy of Al's brain onto their A.I. system, but Al passes away before the upload can be fully completed. Heartbroken, Brendan then tries to duplicate Al in an attempt to bring him back, but the incomplete data resulted in the creation of a child version of him.

He then ends up secretly raising the robot child version of Al as his own child and repeatedly building new bodies for him as he ages mentally. When Sulla reaches preteen-ish age, she voices to Brendan that she wants a girls' body for her newest upgrade and while Brendan is surprised and unsure about this change, helps Sulla build the body she wants. Throughout the series Al tries to find out who and how he was brought back, and this mystery drives most of the narrative. While Al originally assumes it was Brendan, Brendan is just as surprised by Al's reappearance as Al is, and also searches to find an answer on how he was able to be brought back. It is revealed that Brendan had tried repeated times to bring Al back over the past sixteen years, but it was never successful. In the end, it is revealed that Sulla secretly built and brought back Al. She is able to find a way to fix what was thought to be a corrupt

file of Al's brain and brings him back so she can maybe understand herself more and because she sees how much Brendan misses Al. What Sulla did not know in bringing Al back, was the relationship that actually existed between Al <sup>296</sup> and her father.

Chaos ensues.

The first time Al was alive, her body felt out of place from where and what she felt it to be, and upon her second chance at life, she awakens to find her body doubly so. When Al emerges into the world in her new synthetic form, she is confused and disoriented. Sara Ahmed describes disorientation as moments of “bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground.” <sup>297</sup> She struggles to find the ground on which to stand and on what way to orient herself—either toward findings answers about how she came back, about what happened after her death, about how to exist in this vastly changed and disorienting world that is both familiar and irrevocably alien.

Al's disorientation is intensified when she meets Sulla, and sees a potential line <sup>298</sup> her life could have taken. This moment reflects what Avery Dame refers to as the encounter or the “moment when a person recognizes their experience in the trans

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<sup>296</sup> A note on Al's pronouns in this chapter. In this beginning synopsis I use the pronouns “he/his” for Al in order to follow the narrative and pronoun use of the original story as it unfolds. After this section I refer to Al using “she/her” pronouns. Al's pronouns are never addressed in the series, additionally what her gender is, is never fully articulated. Al refers to herself as “not a man” and never refers to herself as a woman—however, in the final scene when Al's consciousness is transferred from her masculine body to a feminine one, Al and Brendan refer to Al's new body as “she” and “her.” I use this as an indicator of how Al thinks about herself (since this is her body after all) and therefore use these pronouns throughout this chapter.

<sup>297</sup> Ahmed, p. 157.

<sup>298</sup> Ahmed, pp. 15–20.

other.”<sup>299</sup> The entire comic series focuses itself on Al’s process of becoming oriented both in a world in which most of the things she knew to be reality have shifted, and her rules for being part of that society have shifted to and oriented to her own physicality. Her ability to find some form of solid ground throughout the series is reliant on the care and love of those around her. Malatino describes the act of aftercare as a trans act, stating that being trans involves an “upheaval and emergence into a social world with shifting and shifted parameters.”<sup>300</sup> For Al, these relationships work to both provide a guiding hand toward orientation and as a space to find herself reflected.

Sulla is a mirror for Al. She is a speculative dream of a potentiality that Al was never able to experience in her human life. In describing the process of finding orientation through disorientation, Ahmed explains that the “body emerges from this history of doing, of paths not taken, which also involves the loss, impossible to know or to even register, of what might have followed from such paths.”<sup>301</sup> Sulla serves not only as a mirror but as a corporeal signifier of the paths Al’s life did not take, and even purposely oriented herself away from. The disorientation that Al feels upon seeing Sulla acts as the catalyst for her finding her reorientation—what Malatino describes as “a moment of grounding and settling that enables one to piece the self back together, at least partially and contingently.”<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Avery Dame, ‘Talk amongst Yourselves: “Community” in Transgender Counterpublic Discourse Online, 1990–2014’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2017), p. 152.

<sup>300</sup> Malatino, *Trans Care*, p. 3.

<sup>301</sup> Ahmed, p. 159.

<sup>302</sup> Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*, p. 52.

Outside of the social constructs of society that forced Al to fit in, Sulla is able as a young person to voice her desires around self-expression and identification. Early in the series Sulla describes the freedom that she has to be who she is because she is outside of the constraints of organic human social constructs: “There’s a lot you can change about yourself when you’re synthetic. There’s this kind of freedom that organic people don’t really have from the start.”<sup>303</sup>

The mystery of who, why, and how Al was brought back shapes much of the series, but her affect changes when she is forced to face the specter of the life she did not have. Upon reawakening in the future (present?) Al is originally confused (as anyone would likely be), fascinated, and somewhat angry. Her anger is mostly directed toward her former lover whom she believes to have done this to her and she does not trust his intentions immediately. However, her affect changes after meeting Sulla. Besides the obvious shock that such a scenario would induce, Al is immediately upset not at the fact that there is yet another robot version of her, but that the robot is a girl [Figure 4.1]. After confronting Brendan about Sulla’s gender, Al walks away and shows for the first time a deep sadness. Al goes outside to be alone and places her head in her hands in a clear moment of pain [Figure 4.2].

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<sup>303</sup> Blue Delli quanti, *O Human Star: Volume One*, First edition, 3 vols (Minneapolis, 2015), I, p. 127.



Figure 4.1: Single panel that shows Al's anger at Brendan after seeing. *Delliquanti, 1, p. 33.*



Figure 4.2: Two panels showing Al's response to meeting Sulla. *Delliquanti, 1, pp. 35–36.*

Al's pain and unhappiness with being brought back is slowly revealed throughout the series as the story moves between its different timelines. Through these flashbacks (are they flashbacks if they are our—the reader's—present?) we learn that Al was never open about her sexuality and was very opposed to people thinking of her as gay as she did not fully see herself this way. Al forced Brendan to

keep their relationship a secret—a promise Brendan painfully kept as he was forced to grieve the loss of his lover in secret. While often portrayed through comical tones, the speculative past that Sulla represents for Al haunts her throughout the series. Sulla haunts Al from the moment they meet and is repeatedly shown in the background in moments where Al and Brendan discuss their past, literally hovering like a ghost<sup>304</sup> outside the door in many of the moments of tension between Al and Brendan, or repeatedly popping up suddenly and scaring Al.

On Al's first full day after being brought back, Sulla takes Al on a brief tour of the city to explore the way it has changed in the last sixteen years. During their outing, Sulla takes Al to a café where they serve food and drinks for synthetic people and beings. When Al notices that every synthetic being in the café has been staring at them, Sulla explains how Al and Sulla are so far the only synthetic beings created that look indistinguishable from organic humans. Most synthetic beings are visibly synthetic she says, and only other synthetic beings are able to tell that Sulla and Al are also synthetic [Figure 4.3].<sup>305</sup> This conversation is a very thinly veiled discussion of the concept of trans “passing.”<sup>306</sup> Sulla explains that to look “passably human” takes a massive amount of financial support which they are only able to do because of Brendan's money and to look human is not possible for most synthetic beings.

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<sup>304</sup> She flies most of the time except when she is trying to pass as organic in public.

<sup>305</sup> See Figure 4.3.

<sup>306</sup> At one point Al even utters the phrase “you pass really well” to Sulla and she refers to the idea of being “passably human.”

In this conversation, Sulla highlights the freedom and privilege of both being and not being visible. This scene connects to micha cárdenas’s theorizing on the politics and praxis of visibility for trans people of color. cárdenas uses the android as a symbol and metaphor of shifting visibility and *OHS*’s androids reflect back themes around the dangers, risks, and freedoms that complicate being visible. cárdenas points



Figure 4.3: Four panels from Volume One of *OHS* where Sulla is explaining how synthetic people are read by non-synthetic people. Delli quanti, 1, p. 127.

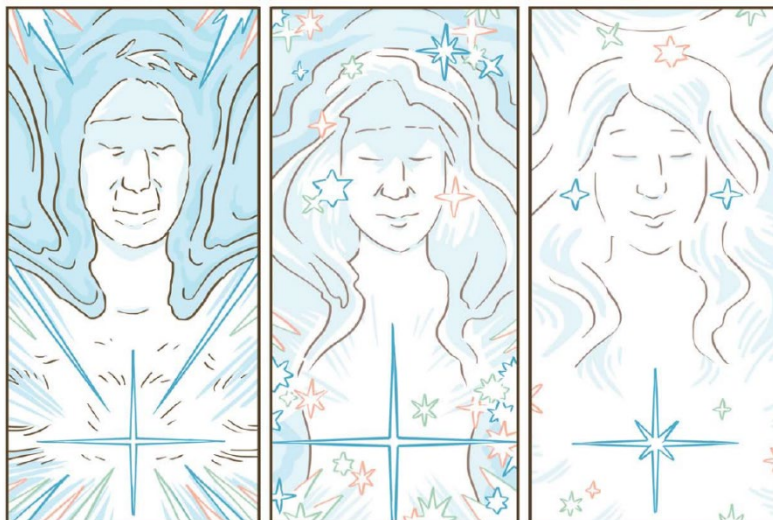
out that “passing requires an observer” and is shaped not solely by the individual’s exterior, but how that exterior is perceived and reflected back by another.<sup>307</sup>

<sup>307</sup> micha cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), p. 78.



*Figure 4.4: The opening image of OHS shows a poster of a beautiful woman surrounded by, or perhaps making stars. There are three panels of the same image next to each other. The first panel is washed in deep blue tones. The second and third panel show the blue shadow slowly disappearing as the blinds in the room are raised. Delliquanti, I, p. 7.*

The series begins and ends with mirrored imagery. The first images of *OHS* are of a poster that hangs above Al's bed featuring a woman with long flowing hair wearing an off the shoulder dress, shining star earrings, and a crown made of stars [Figure 4.4]. Her hands are open in front of her and a large star floats between her hands. She is surrounded by a wave of stars. Throughout the series this poster repeatedly makes appearances as it appears that after Al's death, Brendan took the poster and displayed it in his home. Similar to the way Sulla haunts Al throughout the story, the starlight woman exists in the series as a silent background presence that represents a part of Al that was with her in her various life forms. The image of this magical and beautiful woman surrounded by starlight serves as a spectral signifier of Al's interior trans affect and foretells the series eventual conclusion. The final scene of the series mirrors the opening poster. The series ends with Al deciding to alter her synthetic body to that of the woman she has internally wished to be. The last still of the series



*Figure 4.5: Three comic panels are displayed side by side. The first panel shows Al going to sleep in her masculine, synthetic body. The second and third panels reflect her consciousness being transferred to her new feminine body. In the second and third panels she is surrounded by stars and a large star is centered over her chest in the same position as the large star on the poster of the magical woman. Blue Delliquanti, *O Human Star: Volume Three, First edition* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2020), III, p. 180.*

is that of Al going to sleep and beginning to wake up in her new body with long flowing hair, surrounded by stars [Figure 4.5]. The starlight woman is a persistent presence that betrays Al's self-refusal.

Sulla is more than a reflection of Al; she is a reflection Al had never allowed herself to see before. When Al sees Sulla, she becomes even more disoriented, and her own subjectivity is called into question once more. This face-to-face meeting forces Al to confront her own self-knowledge and identity. The usage of mirrors to reflect trans narratives or characters has been a common recurring trope.<sup>308</sup> As Keegan points out, these scenes are often used to establish a fissure between the

<sup>308</sup> Prosser, pp. 99–134; Keegan, 'Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity'; Keegan, 'Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image'.

subject's perception of self or their own abjection of their body. In his analysis of the film *Under the Skin*, Keegan pushes back against this use of the mirror scene to instead read these scenes for their generative potentiality. He argues that the mirror scene can be an "endless space of becoming" that challenges the singularity of the self and opens instead to the potential of new lifelines or orientations.<sup>309</sup> Sulla and Al's face-to-face leans more toward an optimistic, envy, or longing affective response. In seeing Sulla, a new possibility or "new line"<sup>310</sup> is opened for Al that becomes too hard for her to ignore. While Al does experience dysphoria that is partially triggered by Sulla's existence, it isn't because of Sulla that she struggles with her own body and identity. The internal sense of self that Al had ignored is drawn out into the world through Sulla's reflection.

The way Al's envy or longing is provoked by the reality of Sulla, speaks to a generative use of envy for the trans subject. Malatino challenges the conceptualization of envy as inherently negative or detrimental to the subject, and instead argues for its potential to move a subject toward that which it desires. Al clearly envies Sulla's positionality that grants her the freedom of self-determination, and by experiencing this envy she is propelled toward the actualization and becoming that might bring some form of comfort or pleasure to her own life. Al's envy provides "a fantasy space of what might be"<sup>311</sup> and it is through her envy that she both moves toward her own becoming as well as begins to manifest a care praxis toward Sulla.

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<sup>309</sup> Keegan, 'Revisitation: A Trans Phenomenology of the Media Image', p. 38.

<sup>310</sup> Ahmed, p. 171.

<sup>311</sup> Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*, p. 95.

Sulla's position as a reflection of AI's interiority, brings to mind the video game *Celeste* and its creator's subsequent identification as trans. The platform video game *Celeste* was released in 2018 by the independent studio Matt Makes Games. The premise of the game centers around the main protagonist Madeline, a young woman who must overcome her anxiety and depression, which becomes personified in the character Badeline, in order to climb Celeste Mountain. Along the way she meets different people with whom she builds relationships (including a ghost who is in denial about being a ghost) and they help each other. Madeline works to gain self-esteem, confidence, help her friends, and achieve her goals all while Badeline interferes and repeatedly tries to sabotage her progress and wellbeing.<sup>312</sup>

When the game was first released it received lots of critical praise and attention, but it received a significant amount of attention from queer and trans gamers specifically. Across social media, online forums, and game reviews, there were often questions of whether the game was meant to symbolize the interior struggle of accepting one's sexual or gender identity within a society that continually tries to knock you off the mountain. The creator of the game, Maddy Thorson, was repeatedly asked whether the character of Madeline was trans. Initially Thorson welcomed fan readings of the character as trans, but said it wasn't an intentional decision to make her trans. Two years after the game's release, Thorson wrote in an article on Medium, that yup, Madeline is trans and so is Thorson. Thorson explained that at the time of writing, designing, and creating the game she did not know that

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<sup>312</sup> The game is fun and clever. It is a two-dimensional game (think Mario) and is heavily plot driven. Highly recommend.

she, or the character Madeline, were trans, but after the games release and the repeated trans readings of the character, Maddy began to understand herself as transgender:

“Well, yeah, of course she is. This feels painfully obvious to a lot of (mostly trans) people, and likewise it feels painfully obvious to me too, in retrospect. It has also become painfully obvious to me that I, myself, am trans.”<sup>313</sup>

Thorson explains that she first started to question her identity during the 2019 release of *Farewell*—the additional downloadable content for the original base game.

Thorson’s trans becoming was shaped, at least in part, by the self-reflection she saw in trans fan’s readings of Madeline as trans. The creation of this speculative fiction video game acted as a space for Thorson to explore her own interior self, whether consciously or not, and in the process of bring her interior out she was able to see her reflection in the character as well as the way she was received by trans fans. I am struck by a number of parallels between Thorson’s self-understanding with many of the worldbuilding and imaginative practices discussed across these chapters. It is never entirely clear in *OHS* if Al knew herself to be trans when she was first alive or not, but it is very evident that in seeing Sulla for the first time she saw her reflection and was forced to confront and accept it.

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<sup>313</sup> Maddy Thorson, ‘Is Madeline Canonically Trans?’, *Medium*, 2020  
<<https://maddythorson.medium.com/is-madeline-canonically-trans-4277ece02e40>>.

Whether it is *Celeste*, *OHS*, body horror, or even *Doctor Who*, trans imagination often involves a multiplicity. These different imaginative works that showcase multiple versions of oneself reflect the reality of many trans lives where we are continually reminded, or haunted, by our literal or speculative other selves. Transition is a speculative process; we can only ever guess and imagine what will happen after medical or social transition. In the process of trans speculating it can be easy to see ourselves as split into different versions. The practice of imagining an external duplicate of ourselves can be useful in addressing that which is emotionally difficult (body horror) and in being able to engage in care and love for oneself.



Figure 4.6: Fan art for *Celeste*, featuring Madeline holding and comforting Badeline—the personification of her depression and self-hate. Art by HeartWorks.

HeartWorks, 'For Anyone Else Who Needs This Right Now',  
Twitter, 2020

<<https://twitter.com/DefaultDamsel/status/1323727835043926020?s=20>>.

In the face of a society that does not want trans people to exist, it can be unsurprisingly difficult to love oneself. This can be true for anyone struggling with depression, anxiety, neurodivergence, abuse, and trauma that it can be far easier to love and care for someone other than ourselves—we are our own worst critics

generally. While this may not be unique to trans experience, I do argue that the process of self-doubling is a useful tool for trans people to practice love for themselves through externalizing the part of themselves they struggle with the most. For Celeste, her depression, anxiety, and self-hate are manifested in Badeline [Figure 4.6] who she has to learn to care, accept, and ignore in order to stay alive on the mountain. For Al, Sulla represents what Al has hated, feared, and been ashamed of throughout her human life. While Al was never able to love or care for herself in her first life, Sulla allows another chance of self-love for Al through loving and supporting Sulla.

Sulla is Al's internal speculation manifested and when faced with her reality, Al goes through a series of struggles to accept or even acknowledge who she is. After her initial upset over Sulla, Al begins to come around and relatively quickly starts to care for her in the way that she wishes she had been cared for. The differences between Al and Sulla speak to the various life outcomes for trans people who are supported as trans and nonbinary youth versus those who are pushed into isolation. Sulla represents the life that many trans people either wish they could have had or wish for other trans youth. It is not simply the fact that Sulla is a girl that troubles Al, but the reflection of the life and possibility she was denied.

Malatino points out the ways social shunning, shaming, micro and macro aggressions, and transphobia often result in a social withdrawal for trans people.<sup>314</sup> Malatino additionally describes the experience of social withdrawal as a trans person

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<sup>314</sup> Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*, p. 35.

in his short book *Trans Care*.<sup>315</sup> He describes how he became aware of the way he had subconsciously learned to not listen to the world around him over the course of his life in order to avoid hearing people discussing or questioning his body or identity. While shutting out the auditory transphobia around him had been an important coping strategy, in doing so he denied himself engagement a certain level of engagement in the social world.

Throughout *OHS* there are references to AI being physically harmed by others for being different in some way. This results in AI pushing away anyone that tries to get close to her and routinely struggling with social interaction. Sulla is very similar to AI—she is a brilliant engineer—but she is also quite different from him as she openly desires and seeks out companionship. Where AI isolated himself, Sulla wants to fit in and make friends. This process is particularly difficult for her as she is the first fully humanoid robot and is afraid that human teenagers will not accept her if they knew who or what she really is. Sulla's eagerness and excitement toward making friends and relationships unmasks AI's interior desires and in Sulla's reflection AI is forced to face both what she has longed for and been denied.

While the trans imaginative possibilities present in Delli quanti's series portray the importance of trans care and love practices and the liberatory potentiality of blurring bodily boundaries, they still fall into numerous, common traps of trans narratives. Throughout the series the celebration of body modifications and bodily difference is framed through the neoliberal, individualist, capitalistic lens of "self-made" transness I discussed in chapter one. Sulla literally recreates herself by

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<sup>315</sup> Malatino, *Trans Care*.

bringing AI back to life. While materially they are two separate and different beings, they equally share a self-hood that reflects what Dan Irving describes as a normative, individualist, and neoliberal understanding of self-creation that has significantly dominated transition narratives.<sup>316</sup> Additionally, Delliquanti frames physical transition as some form of ending—the series literally ends on AI’s consciousness being transitioned into a new synthetic body.

In this way, Delliquanti reinscribes the “classic temporalities” of transness that shape themselves through the wrong body narrative.<sup>317</sup> With this ending, *OHS* ends with a cis-normative gaze toward futurity that is imbricated with Whiteness. In his meditation on queer future, José Esteban Muñoz establishes that these types of narratives of futurity that offer a potential safe space to live one’s life as they see fit are mostly only available for white, usually middle-class subjects.<sup>318</sup> By ending the series with a nod toward a future happiness achieved simply by obtaining an embodied normative status, Delliquanti further showcases the failure of their multicultural utopia to account for racial histories of violence.

### Trans Rage and Trauma in *Manhunt*

Unlike *OHS*, Gretchen Felker-Martin’s 2022 dystopian horror novel *Manhunt* does not have a happy ending.<sup>319</sup> It actually does not have any happy moments—

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<sup>316</sup> Dan Irving, ‘The Self-Made Trans Man as Risky Business: A Critical Examination of Gaining Recognition for Trans Rights through Economic Discourse.’, *Temple Law Review*, 18.2 (2009), 375–96.

<sup>317</sup> Israeli-Nevo.

<sup>318</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, ‘Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique’, *PMLA*, 121.3.825–826.

<sup>319</sup> We will get to the ending momentarily.

aside from some good sex scenes. Every time a character does begin to experience a happy thought or moment, Felker-Martin makes sure you know that it is not going to go well.<sup>320</sup> This is more than just foreshadowing, Felker-Martin wants to make the reader uncomfortable, miserable, and even hopeless. There is not a shred of optimism or hope that it will get better. *Manhunt* makes us stay with the harm and the trauma.

*Manhunt* takes place in Massachusetts in a not far into the future post-apocalyptic world. Years before the start of the book, a virus, referred to at times as t.rex, infects every person on the planet with high levels of testosterone. Cis men, trans men on T, and those with PCOS all turn into horrific monsters that are described looking somewhat like a mostly hairless werewolf with only a strip of fur running down their backs. These monsters eat whatever and whoever they can find, rape, and brutally murder anyone they come across. The trans women that remain are all women who were taking estrogen at the time of the virus's spread, and they are at constant risk of becoming monsters themselves if their estrogen levels were to sink. To prevent this, they have found numerous natural herbs and plants that can help increase estrogen, but as these are really only supplemental and not overly powerful, the thing they must do in replace of pharmaceutical estrogen is to eat the testicles of the new men. Trans women are not the only ones who need to utilize this new

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<sup>320</sup> This is perhaps most commonly shown through Fran's internal monologue that routinely tries to be optimistic that very blatantly foretell her future fate. One such example from Fran occurs not long after they are welcomed into the underground bunker of a white, wealthy, young woman named Sophie. The next day when Fran is making breakfast for herself she thinks "I will never be hungry again for as long as I live"...this is true but clearly not in the intended way.

estrogen source, those with PCOS and male children (more on that in a bit) must also consume supplemental estrogen.

The main characters of the novel are two trans women who have known each other since childhood, Beth and Fran, a cis woman doctor named Indi, and a trans man named Robbie, who happened to not be on T at the time of the apocalypse (referred to mostly as “T Day”). Beth and Fran are manhunters, people who hunt down and kill new men and harvest their organs to produce estrogen. They must do this while trying their best not to be killed by the men or by the large and increasingly powerful group of TERFs known as The Matriarchy or the Maryland Womyn’s Legion—a militant, authoritarian organization gaining control of towns across the east coast that is based in Baltimore.

From the beginning to the end of *Manhunt*, the novel is incessantly vicious. The pages of text that do not include overt acts of violence, still are filled with microaggressions and moments to make the reader bristle with discomfort. There is no rest in this world or this novel. Part of what I believe Felker-Martin is doing in her novel is trying to make the cisgender readers of the text experience the relentlessness of anti-trans violence and oppression. There is no comfort, there is no rest.

Returning to the conceptualization of trans rage I began in chapter two, I see the practice and performance of trans rage as the affective center of *Manhunt*. Combining both Stryker’s trans rage that is generated as response to the existential and literal violence of living a trans life <sup>321</sup> and Cowan’s transfeminist/killjoy <sup>322</sup> that

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<sup>321</sup> Stryker, ‘My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix’.

<sup>322</sup> Cowan.

purposely disrupts trans exclusionary radical feminism's universalizing and yet exclusionary ideologies, Felker-Martin takes on the role of the transfeminist/killjoy through her imaginative worldbuilding that is relentless in its critique.

Within the world of *Manhunt*, the Legion began in Maryland and has spread its control over each city up the eastern coast. When the Legion comes to a town, they hunt out any trans person in the area and murder them publicly. Felker-Martin highlights the hypocrisy of the TERF rhetoric that claims violence as an inherent trait of those assigned male at birth. Repeatedly Teach and other TERF characters refer to creating a loving matriarchy that is free from "violence," while simultaneously engaging in public murders of innocent trans people and those that aid and abet their survival. The Legion is a military authority and organization, complete with fatigues, hierarchies, and matching XX tattoos.

Even as a lifelong horror fan, *Manhunt* was a difficult read. It contains one of the most brutal rape scenes I have ever read. In fact, it contains a significant amount of sexual violence. The inclusion of narratives of sexual violence is generally common in the cis-imaginative stories about trans lives and in the stories produced by trans people. Cameron Awkward-Rich addresses this point, explaining that this isn't particularly surprising considering the "structural vulnerability" of trans people.<sup>323</sup> A major part of what Felker-Martin is doing in her novel is highlighting the way TERF rhetoric, behaviors, and politics work to perpetuate sex and gender-based violence rather than work against it. While Felker-Martin's trans imagination is speculative and fantastical with its new men, the scariest or most unnerving part of the text is how

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<sup>323</sup> Awkward-Rich, pp. 95–116.

real it is. Each thing a TERF says in the novel about sex and trans people, I have heard before. She does not have to make up their dialogue to invoke fear, the reality of it is enough.

Throughout *Manhunt*, much of the cissexist and transphobic hatred and violence from the TERF characters and organizations are framed through the need to protect and care for cisgender women. While the term transphobic is vague and potentially useless<sup>324</sup> in its general use I use it here in the most simplistic way of referring to the literal fear of trans and nonbinary existence and bodies. The Legion is able to convince many cis women to follow them through the literal fear of the possibility for trans femmes to suddenly begin to turn into new men if their estrogen levels become too low. Like almost all of the novel, this is merely a reflection of our current reality rather than an act of speculating. The real life weaponization of victimhood and the imagined threat of trans women's existence have been central to modern TERF rhetoric and ideology. Both the novel and real-life rhetoric of anti-trans policies and actions are bolstered largely through the language of care. Either the need to protect cisgender women from imagined trans violence, or the fictitious concern of "protecting" trans children from their supportive parents.<sup>325</sup> Mikey Elster describes this transantagonistic strategy as "insidious concern."<sup>326</sup> Elster argues that this strategy frames itself as benevolent but "simultaneously calls for the destruction

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<sup>324</sup> Talia Mae Bettcher, 'Transphobia', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.1–2 (2014), 249–51 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2400181>>.

<sup>325</sup> Mikey Elster, 'Insidious Concern', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 9.3 (2022), 407–24 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836064>>.

<sup>326</sup> Elster, p. 409.

of the object of concern.”<sup>327</sup> Teach, the authoritarian leader of the TERF Legion, repeatedly describes their new matriarchal world order as “nurturing,” where women can be safe from violence.<sup>328</sup>

Of course, it is repeatedly made clear that who Teach wants to keep safe are white and, mostly, straight women. Contrary to the utopian imaginings of *OHS* that obscure and flatten cissexist, racial and ableist violence, *Manhunt* mostly maintains their reality. In *OHS* while we are told about moments of rejection and harm that Al has experienced, we are not subjected to them as a reader. Aside from a misogynistic military leader,<sup>329</sup> almost every character we meet appears to be generally kind and accepting. *OHS* imagines a multi-cultural future where almost everyone, literally everyone outside of the three main characters and one fat teen girl,<sup>330</sup> are people of color. Racism is never addressed in the series, nor is the way Al and Sulla’s white synthetic bodies inherently provide them an ability to be interpellated into organic human society with far less scrutiny.

Felker-Martin’s transfeminist/killjoy imagination repeatedly highlights the inseparable investment in white supremacy that forms the heart of modern TERF ideology and white feminism as a whole. The TERF leader Teach, personifies this investment as she repeatedly engages the language of a universalized womanhood. In describing the future she is trying to build on the murdered bodies of trans people, she

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<sup>327</sup> Elster, p. 409.

<sup>328</sup> Gretchen Felker-Martin, *Manhunt*, First edition (New York: Nightfire, 2022), p. 191.

<sup>329</sup> Who is still very G-rated in his misogyny.

<sup>330</sup> Who is also the friend with unrequited feelings for the trans teen, Titus, that Sulla has a crush on. For all the pessimism and misery of *Manhunt*, it does at least allow a fat person to be loved and desirable.

articulates a world without race.<sup>331</sup> For Teach, and trans exclusionary radical feminism as a whole, womanhood or femaleness is reduced to a reproductive role of bearing children that inherently excludes many assigned F at birth. This is particularly pointed out repeatedly in the novel by the fact that those assigned F at birth who have Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) are equally at risk of turning into monstrous new men if their estrogen levels are not actively and externally maintained. However, Teach and the Legion never attempt to round up those with PCOS out of fear they too might become monsters, because what is truly terrifying for them isn't actually the threat of the new men.

Near the end of the book, Teach horrifically murders and mutilates a Black cis woman, Karin, who is found to be collaborating with the trans women trying to overthrow the legion. The scene is undoubtedly the most gruesome and horrific moment in the non-stop trauma that is *Manhunt*. *[Content Note: I am about to describe and address a scene from the novel in which a Black woman is horrifically mutilated and murdered in a public forum that is clearly reminiscent of lynchings. I purposely have tried to only give what details are necessary in understanding the brutality and indivisibility of race and gender that Felker-Martin is narrating. This scene made me have to swallow my own vomit and put the book down].*

After Karin's insurgency is discovered, she is held captive before having her head roughly shaven and she is tied to a tree and publicly executed. Her execution is prolonged and carried out by Teach, who brutally opens Karin's abdomen and removes her uterus causing her death. Teach performs this monstrous act in front of

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<sup>331</sup> Felker-Martin, p. 191.

an audience of cheering TERFS who watch as Karin dies. This scene is incredibly explicit in its direct commentary and reflection on the legacy of physical and reproductive exploitation and violence enacted on Black women. Teach has Karin tied to a tree for everyone to see as a very clear reference to public lynching. During the execution, Teach gives a speech to the audience about how Karin is not a real woman, all while mutilating her. In the middle of this scene, Teach compares Karin to a teratoma, which she describes as “cancer, dreaming it was human.”<sup>332</sup> When Karin dies, Teach holds up Karin’s uterus and yells to the crowd “No life without a womb!”<sup>333</sup>

Teach murders Karin by “un-gendering” her.<sup>334</sup> By shaving Karin’s head and removing her uterus, Teach reduces Karin to a nonhuman and her body to flesh. This scene is inextricably tied to Hortense J. Spiller’s theorization of the un-gendering of Black female flesh.<sup>335</sup> Until this point in the story, and it’s very close to the end, the TERF Legion has broken into homes and dragged trans women into the street and shot them. Trans women and nonbinary trans femmes are considered vermin by the TERFs who need to be exterminated and these murders are done quickly. Despite the dehumanization of trans femmes by the Legion, they are still gendered in some way even if it is a violently cissexist gendering that renders and labels them men. Karin’s murder isn’t quick like the horrific trans murders narrated up until this point, Teach

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<sup>332</sup> Felker-Martin, p. 259.

<sup>333</sup> Felker-Martin, p. 259.

<sup>334</sup> Spillers.

<sup>335</sup> Spillers.

instead tortures Karin to death in a literalization of the violent exclusion Black women have faced from the category of “woman.”

*Manhunt*'s critical trans rage isn't directed exclusively at non-trans white women, but also at trans people who participate in the oppression of other trans people. The novel addresses the way trans women <sup>336</sup> can be enticed to participate in the oppression of other trans people in hopes of being assimilated into the category of “woman.” Beth retells the time her and another trans woman, Venus, who had not had gender affirmation surgery were kicked out of their queer group house by the cis roommates and one trans woman who had already had genital surgery. In the upsetting exchange, they are forced out since their roommates see them as dangerous because of t.rex. The one trans roommate left, Lily, stands by silently while the other women are kicked out of the house and Beth's roommate expresses her rage verbally at the women who have for so long feigned friendship and community with them.

The scene culminates with a window unit AC being pushed out of a window onto Venus's head, violently killing her. While Beth states she could not see who pushed it and only saw the glimpse of a white hand, she implies she believes Lily was the one who pushed the AC. No one in the house is concerned with the act of violence and murder that just occurred because later in the book, Fran largely ignores the obvious signs that they are being used and will be violently discarded because she has been promised gender confirmation surgery by the white woman who is exploiting them. I read the way Fran repeatedly fails to be in community with those she loves

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<sup>336</sup> It may, and likely is, making this statement of trans people regardless of gender but only explicitly discusses trans women in the novel.

because she is focused on her own physical transition and her own wants as a villanization of the viewing of trans rights and issues in individual and capitalistic ways. This is one way that Felker-Martin emphasizes the importance of t4t love-politics that I will discuss more in the next section of this chapter.

With these moments, Felker-Martin directs her trans rage at the way we as trans people fail each other. This imagined world refuses to whitewash or soften the intracommunal violence that trans people, more specifically white trans people, engage in. Eric Stanley <sup>337</sup> and Jasbir Puar <sup>338</sup> have both emphasized the way trans and/or queer interpolation into hegemonic society does not bring liberation, but is rather a way for the dominant power structures to maintain their own power. Felker-Martin narrates how attempts to appease oppressors in hopes of maintaining one's own safety never truly keeps the subject safe. I see this as a particularly useful distinction between the trans imaginary worlds of Felker-Martin and Delliquanti.

While Felker-Martin wants her readers to bathe in unpleasurable affective waters, the glimpses of warmth that are found throughout are always in the context of how we can show up and care for one another. Amidst the bleak landscape of *Manhunt*, are subtle moments of care and interdependence that briefly flicker across the pages the possibility of another way of being that might provide for something better than the hopelessness of the present. These moments are always ephemeral, passing quickly by with one sentence. After arriving at Fort Dyke, there is a line that

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<sup>337</sup> Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

<sup>338</sup> Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2012).

describes how almost everyone is sleeping in cots and bunkbeds except for the handful of people whose disabilities made “roughing it in a bunk bed untenable.”<sup>339</sup> This lack of fanfare around their sleeping arrangements represents that this difference in needs between the Fort Dykers wasn’t an issue, source of conflict or resentment. Instead, there is a casualness to the matter of fact way the line is delivered that shines the potential to build communities of care that strive to meet everyone’s needs. There is the moment when in deciding whether to stay and fight (and likely die) or flee from the impending battle with the Legion, that Robbie looks at Beth, who has recently begun a romantic relationship with Indi, and thinks how he would “sit on the wall for a week and shoot every man who came inside half a mile of Fort Dyke if it meant Beth could keep smiling that dumb, dopey smile.”<sup>340</sup> Again, this moment lasts only for one sentence and then the story moves on. The brevity of which Felker-Martin flashes these moments of loving care works to maintain the depressing affect of the novel, all the while providing the smallest glimpse of the deep investment in love politics that undergirds the text.

#### Imaginative Love: t4t Love, Kinship, and Care

While Delliquanti and Felker-Martin take diametrically opposed paths in their trans imaginaries, affects, and strategies, they share a surprising, or perhaps unsurprising, amount of investments. Present and woven through both of these texts is a clear valuation of the importance of trans kinship and relationship labor, the way

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<sup>339</sup> Felker-Martin, p. 224.

<sup>340</sup> Felker-Martin, p. 265.

our transness is impacted and created in the space between one another, and the lifesaving practices of t4t care.

What does it mean to love and care for yourself in a world that encourages you not to? In the terrifying future of Felker-Martin’s imagination, those that are able to survive, do so because of the commitment of other trans people in protecting and supporting each other. In *OHS*, through loving and caring for Sulla, Al begins to care for herself through the manifestation of finally bringing her internal self to the external where she can experience herself reflected back to her by others. In theorizing the role of love and care in *OHS* and *Manhunt* I pull from Malatino’s t4t love praxis and Jennifer Nash’s Black feminist love politics.<sup>341</sup> Nash’s love-politics centers emotional and social connections as a location for fostering community and political change.<sup>342</sup> This type of political praxis requires “expansive conceptions of relationality, encouraging us to view ourselves as deeply embedded in the world, and thus as deeply connected to others.”<sup>343</sup> V. Jo Hsu has articulated a combination of Malatino and Nash’s theories that they have named “t4t love-politics.” T4t love-politics “centers affective connections as a site of community building and political transformation.”<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> V. Jo Hsu also utilizes the combined theorizing of Malatino and Nash in their analysis of *TransGriot* creator Monica Roberts. Hsu addresses the ways Robert’s community engagement and activism worked to practice an intersectional, community accountability that centered the systemically ignored needs of Black trans women. Hsu.

<sup>342</sup> Nash.

<sup>343</sup> Jennifer Nash, p. 117.

<sup>344</sup> Hsu, pp. 102–3.

The café scene on *OHS* highlights the way the series breaks apart notions of elders and conventional familial relationships. After they sit down, Al begins asking Sulla questions about how their bodies function and the role of synthetic beings in the world. Sulla explains how synthetic beings consume specifically engineered food that creates no waste in their bodies and is used as energy to keep them running. Sulla and Al's relationship reflects the way trans people challenge normative chronological temporalities associated with intergenerational relationships. Some trans people who experience "second puberties" as adults and transition later in life may have less lived experience as a trans person than a trans youth who has been identifying and navigating the medical industrial complex for a decade—something that Malatino also mentions as a unique part of trans care relationships and praxis.<sup>345</sup>

Age is not neatly tied to knowledge or experience around transness and this divergence from straight time is reflected in the way Sulla mentors Al about living as a synthetic human in the new world. Prior to their visit to the café, Brendan tells Sulla to watch and take care of Al as they go to explore how the city has changed in the last sixteen years. While the youngest person in the family and story, Sulla is the one that has the lived experience of changing bodies, of moving through the world and trying to "blend in," and of the banality of living in a synthetic body.

*OHS* and *Manhunt* emphasize the life saving and giving role of vulnerability and generosity in trans love and kinship praxis. In *OHS*, Al begins to provide the support and guidance she wished she had received to Sulla. The first instance of this happens in the form of Al being supportive of Sulla trying to make friends with a group of

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<sup>345</sup> Malatino, *Trans Care*, p. 68.

organic teens. During this moment of guidance, Al is shown as both uncomfortable and happy by the process of supporting Sulla. In supporting Sulla, Al makes herself vulnerable to the feeling of loss. As Sulla turns away from Al to attempt to build her first non-familial friendships, Al's face betrays her own pain. Al and Sulla engage in what Malatino refers to as a "t4t praxis of love." Both characters work to support and care for one another in ways that "account for the creative and caring acts of trans intimacy that render...not only livable but also, sometimes, joyous."<sup>346</sup> While Al feels the loss of the life that was not, in watching and supporting Sulla she is provided a space in which she can return to and perhaps reshape her own experiences.

Al's care for Sulla is additionally a reflection of what could be considered a tradition of intergenerational care within many trans communities. Amira Lundy-Harris engages the history of STAR House, Sylvia Rivera, and Marsha P. Johnson to illustrate the role of intergenerational kinship networks for Black trans people specifically. Lundy-Harris describes the way Rivera and Johnson cared for their trans and queer "children" through STAR House as a form of kinship building outside of the parameters of biological familial relationship.<sup>347</sup> As he highlights, it is not through simply the naming or linguistic reference to the youth they cared for that they take on the parental role, but through the literal praxis of providing quotidian care.

Familiar love, care, and composition in *OHS* and *Manhunt* stand in contrast to dominant narratives around family constructs and kinship. The family that exists at

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<sup>346</sup> Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*, p. 20.

<sup>347</sup> Amira Lundy-Harris, "'Like I'm Kin to Him': Black Trans Publics, Relational Bonds, and Collective Creation' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2023).

the end of *OHS* is certainly nonnormative: consisting of an organic human father, his trans synthetic partner, and a synthetic teenage girl originally made from an incomplete copy of the brain of what was at the time the organically human partner of her fathers. It's a messy chosen kinship and purposeful investment in caring for one another that unites these characters in building a life together. This strange mixture of beings provide varying levels and care roles for one another throughout the narrative.

In *Manhunt* Beth, Fran, Robbie, and Indi make up their own chosen family that eventually expands to include the trans women and cis comrades they find along the way. With these non-familial kinships, these characters build a home together (multiple times). These relationships are clearly the reason any of them are able to survive—of course not all of them do. Malatino argues for a trans care ethos that imagines care outside of the domestic and Felker-Martin delivers this. Near the end of the novel, the trans women, along with some allies in the underground bunker organize a rebellion and burn down the bunker when they are about to be sold into enslavement by the TERFs. Afterwards, they settle together at an old, abandoned fort they name Fort Dyke. In this new home they care for one another and work together to develop strategies for attacking the TERFs and how to keep each other safe. When one of the women is killed and hung by a group of TERFs, the women hold a funeral at which many of the women describe how their murdered friend had supported their own survival through quotidian acts of care.

There is a reciprocal praxis of care engaged between these characters that displays a mutual vulnerability. This type of mutual vulnerability is central to Nash's

love politics that involves “commitment to be intimately bound to the other.”<sup>348</sup> In the last volume of *OHS*, Al falls or jumps—it is somewhat unclear, but she does describe being “propelled” downward—off of a cliff and into frozen water below. Risking the safety of her own synthetic body, Sulla follows Al and saves her. This scene symbolizes both the act of saving oneself, and the intimate bond shared between these characters.

Felker-Martin’s contemptuous portrayal of trans horizontal hostility and cissexist assimilation by trans people is a manifestation of her trans rage toward trans people who do not invest in the survival and flourishing of other trans people. She makes this particularly explicit near the end of the novel where she directly comments on the meaningless use of the term “community” in pre-apocalypse times through the voice of Indi, who during a funeral for a murdered trans comrade, Indi experiences a “pang of regret that every time she’d heard the words ‘queer community’ used like a cudgel or posited as some benevolent given...no one ever had any idea what that meant.”<sup>349</sup> She continues this thought through her internal dialogue: “Community is when you never let go of each other. Not even after you’re gone.”<sup>350</sup>

I read these moments as more than simply calling out the meaningless and hollow usage of “community” to project some assumed investment or shared interest amongst trans people. Felker-Martin’s biting critique of “community” is shaped through the argument that community must be an actual care praxis, an action of kinship and relationship building beyond simply sharing an identity. She makes the

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<sup>348</sup> Jennifer Nash, p. 116.

<sup>349</sup> Felker-Martin, p. 256.

<sup>350</sup> Felker-Martin, p. 256.

same critique in the way she targets the white feminism of the TERF activists who universalize their cisterhood and assume that all those left with vaginas have the same desires and experiences. Condemnation of white feminism and white cis women generally appears as an undertone throughout the novel. All of the cisgender women in the story who hold positions of power that they use in abusive and violent ways are white women. The only other white non-trans women in the book are silent, complicit, and/or apathetic to the violence of the Legion. When our main characters end up at Fort Dyke, the community of ciswomen that work to defeat the Legion alongside the trans women are all (at least the ones given names) described to be women of color.

I see Felker-Martin's use of race in *Manhunt* as representative of the black feminist love-politics described by Nash. Nash describes black feminist love-politics as developing from the black feminist understanding that "our survivals are mutually dependent."<sup>351</sup> Felker-Martin's vilification of white women and feminism is made explicit through the voice of Marina, a middle-aged Latina cis woman, who says "there may be a lot of them, but they're the same stupid white women who thought pussy hats could overthrow the government. They are complacent narcissists used to publishing unreadable papers and letting men do their dirty work" during the Fort Dyker's planning of their attack on the TERFs.<sup>352</sup>

Behind the razor-sharp rage and violence of *Manhunt*, lies an investment in trans love praxis. Indeed, the depressing end of the book is told through Beth's love

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<sup>351</sup> Jennifer Nash, p. 116.

<sup>352</sup> Felker-Martin, p. 234.

for her dead friend and sometimes lover, Fran. After placing Fran in her grave, Beth crawls in to hold her and say goodbye. Beth remembers Fran through the decades of their relationship, lovingly holding her both emotionally and physically. This scene directly calls back to Indi's earlier line about community being when you never let go of one another, even after death. This heartbreaking moment is where Felker-Martin ends her novel; not by someone finding love (although Beth does), or winning a dystopian war (they win a battle but it is clearly not over), not with a loved one's walking off happily into the sunset (Robbie leaves Beth and the fort, implying they will not meet again), not by achieving some medicalized cure (they are still left having to eat the testicles of new men), and not through some physical transformation that brings the main character(s) some type of euphoria (everyone left maintains feelings of bodily dysphoria and trauma). Instead, Felker-Martin leaves us with the importance of holding each other. Even Fran's last moments before death are used to continue to drive this point home. As she lay dying of multiple gunshot wounds, Fran looks out at the TERFs who are left and running away. She watches as the ones who reach the remaining lifeboats leave behind their wounded and screaming sisters and thinks: "They don't even love each other."<sup>353</sup>

*Manhunt's* ending isn't a closure or resolution. The reader is left with the sorrow and loss of these characters, and the knowledge that the next day it will all start again. When news of Teach's defeat reach "The Matriarchy" of the Legion back in Maryland, they will surely send more of their TERF army up the coast. Robbie leaving at the end of the novel adds to the heartbreaking ending, but also continues

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<sup>353</sup> Felker-Martin, p. 284.

the foundation of love politics that undergirds the novel. When we first meet Robbie he is alone and has chosen to be alone for a few years after having to kill his best friend when she began to turn into a new man. Robbie does not want to feel dependent upon anyone or make himself vulnerable enough to feel such pain again.

Throughout his time with Beth, Fran, and Indi, he becomes “undone” by them. Nash’s love-politics centers vulnerability and the ability to be “undone” by another. She emphasizes that this undone-ness isn’t simply about being wounded but additionally about the ability to be transformed or changed by others.<sup>354</sup> Robbie is clearly in pain and intense grief over Fran’s death, they had become lovers, but it isn’t simply the anguish that drives him to leave the people he has now risked his life multiple times to protect when he could have walked away at any point since meeting them. In becoming undone, Robbie becomes open to the possibility of needing and being in relation to others again. When he leaves, he tells Beth that he has decided to head out to the southwestern states to see if any of his family remains on a reservation in Taos Pueblo, New Mexico. Throughout the time frame of the novel, Robbie’s vulnerability to Beth, Fran, and Indi causes him heart break but also opens him back up to intimacy and relatedness. While I personally wanted Robbie to stay with his new family, I understand Felker-Martin’s choice to have him leave because again, she does not want us to view this as a happy ending. She could have broken our hearts by having Robbie simply walk off and return to his solitary life, but that wouldn’t have shown his renewed capacity of love.

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<sup>354</sup> Jennifer Nash, p. 117.

I chose Delliquanti and Felker-Martin's stories because of how diametrically opposed they are in terms of tone, affect, and content. In examining the space they share, I have attempted to begin to describe the shape of what constitutes a trans imaginary, or at least what its potentiality may be. The optimistic, sweet flavor of *OHS* works to make the reader feel good and perhaps find a relief or escape from the harshness of reality. The brutal and bitter world presented in *Manhunt* wants us to sit with and face the ugliness and violence of our present world. Perhaps it is my Libra sun speaking, but I see both of these flavors of trans imagination as useful in different ways.

The version of myself who started this project would have likely had a different reading of the utility of these two texts. I can easily imagine myself diminishing the importance of the feel-good affect of *OHS*, while celebrating the brash reality of *Manhunt*. A lifelong fan of horror and dystopian narratives, I wasn't interested in *OHS* when it was originally published. In fact, a friend recommended the comic series many years ago as something to possibly address in my dissertation and I ignored the suggestion for years. However, after a PhD program, numerous mental and physical health crises, financial instability, an autism diagnosis, maternal harassment, familial loss, falling in romantic and platonic love, getting married, increased attacks on trans quotidian life, and a worldwide pandemic later, my perspective on the usefulness of utopian dreamings has shifted.

There's absolutely no way to deny that *Manhunt* provides the more useful critique and warning in its worldbuilding, but the relentless trauma of the book is difficult to read as a trans person who can put the book down but never fully leave the

world she describes. I'm not sure the critique is enough for imagining trans survival. Delliquanti's somewhat neoliberal, multicultural loving, and self-making dreaming reflects most of the dominant trans narratives we have seen in the recent decade. As Malatino discusses, so much of trans hope is handed over to the medical industrial complex, the idea that with medical intervention happiness is possible<sup>355</sup> and this concept clearly comes through in *OHS*. It is certainly not a radical or liberatory imaginings of a utopian future. At the same time, I don't want to dismiss the usefulness of the sweet, loving vibe of Delliquanti's series. This project has always been on exploring a way that trans people have found to survive, and I see the utility of Delliquanti's affect in providing a balm to the abuse that occurs when living as a trans person in a trans antagonistic world.

Delliquanti's trans optimism does not provide for a path to liberation or strategies of how we may begin to build in the present a more just future for ourselves and others. I do think however that the longing for something soft and finding comfort in the fluff is perhaps its own form of disassociation and I agree with Awkward-Rich's argument that disassociation has been useful for many trans people's survival. Felker-Martin's bitter warning and analysis provides a way to imagine and build a better future, but to do so will always be hard and surviving is a challenge. Maybe what Delliquanti's trans imaginary provides is a blast of cool air to help us continue our work in the sweltering heat of despair. It does not provide any real long-term change, but it might make the ability to return to that work easier or make one a little more energized.

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<sup>355</sup> Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*, p. 27.

## Coda: Bitter/Sweet or Be Brave. Live”

It is probably safe to say that everyone who will read this has had a feeling of doom and hopelessness in recent years, if not our entire lives. The Covid-19 pandemic transformed all of our lives in some way. I am left wondering if the responses and topics that came up within the collective geeking out sessions were shaped through the experience of living through the last few years. I imagine they must have been. Did the isolation and anxieties of the pandemic increase the use or engagement with fandom and speculative fiction by those I spoke with? I am frustrated with my failure to ask this question. I think it might have led to further conversations about the way fandom and dreaming itself can bring us in relation to each other.

A trans imaginary, like transness, is relational. To move from one point to another means there is a connection being built. I understand trans imagination to be a gesture toward connection, a reaching out for something, someone, some life, some way of being that we have yet to build. To imagine transly is to be dreaming of connections that might better serve us. It's finding the bridge, ladder, or exit strategy toward something else. Like Steinbock's idea of the shimmer, the moment that hints that something else is possible. We need trans dreaming.

I have made the argument repeatedly for the transness of fandom. Whether through the viewing of fans as pathological, or unaware of what is “real,” to the process of transforming, and the relationality of both. I return here to my initial story about going to a fan convention. The question of why trans people are attracted to

speculative fiction, might additionally be that fandom itself is something that aligns or connects to many of our own trans experiences.

I began this project both theoretically and literally with a self-examination of the role of speculative fiction in my own trans becoming and survival. It feels only fitting to end with one more story about how and why speculative fiction has called me to continually try to build and make manifest something that has yet to exist. The summer before my senior year of high school I was in an incredibly dangerous period of suicidal ideation after experiences of sexual and cissexist/heterosexist violence that culminated in drug addiction. Without the financial possibility of acquiring treatment for all that I was experiencing, my father and I had to attempt to find a way for me to heal on our own. While he did not know what exactly was happening in my life at the time, my older brother by blood who lived across the country mailed me a set of VHS for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

I spent almost every day that summer watching hours upon hours of *BVS*, over and over again. It provided an escape from my life to a world that also felt horrific, overwhelming, and frightening, but it also was one where I saw a chosen family working together to save each other—and every other usually ungrateful person in town. Immersing myself in the series allowed me to dream about the possibility of one day having family and community, what I longed for more than anything. It didn't leave me with a useless optimism that simply hoped things might get better but inspired me to continually reach out and try what I could to build the world I believed would have protected or celebrated all the things that made me a target in my small Appalachian town. Buffy inspired me to “be brave, live.” For all the delightful and

funny aspects of the series, *BVS*, like many of the objects I have discussed in this project, isn't visionary, radical, or subversive. However, it did offer me a place to imagine my own and others survival, and finding ways to survive a world that makes trans death feel like the only possibility is itself speculative. Finding ways to survive a world that makes trans death feel like the only possibility is itself speculative.

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