

## Out online

trans self-representation and community building on YouTube

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*Publication date:*  
2012

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Raun, T. (2012). *Out online: trans self-representation and community building on YouTube*. Roskilde Universitet.

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# Out Online: Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on YouTube

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PhD Dissertation  
Cultural Encounters, Department of Culture and Identity,  
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*Dedicated to the three strong and loving women in my life; my grandmother, my mother, and my partner, all of whom have helped me become the man that I am today.*

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## **Acknowledgments**

This PhD research is the product of and involves a personal and professional journey that has been as inspiring as it has been turbulent. I basically started my medical transition the day that I started my research, which means that my new (at the time) colleagues at Cultural Encounters at the Department of Culture and Identity (Roskilde University) followed my physical transformations firsthand. They were back then, and have been ever since, extremely welcoming and have offered me a forum for daily encouragement and inspiration. I could not have dreamed of a better and more supportive environment from which to conduct my studies. Being part of the Center for Gender, Power and Diversity (Roskilde University) has also stimulated my research, and I want to thank all of you for great conversations during our gender lunches, while teaching together, or during our discussions in the reading group. A very warm thanks also goes to my two supervisors, Birgitta Frello at Cultural Encounters (Roskilde University) and Kate O’Riordan at the Department of Media and Film (Sussex University, UK), who have helped me keep focus, remember to take breaks, and have encouraged me to refine my readings.

This research has enabled me to travel abroad, and I have embraced that opportunity by participating in numerous conferences where I have met great scholars from all over the world. Most memorable and inspirational has been my stay as a visiting scholar at Berkeley Center for New Media, University of California at Berkeley, USA, where Abigail De Kosnik was a great encouragement. I feel very grateful for being able to experience the very special vibe of San Francisco and meeting so many interesting people, and I carry all of you within me as warm memories for rainy days. The research has also enabled me to get in contact with a lot of trans people, not least the vloggers I am writing about, and I cannot express how grateful I am for the valuable insights this has given me.



I am blessed with a lot of very dear friends. I want to thank my affect theoretical reading group for offering me constant intellectual stimulation and keeping me on my toes, and in particular Mons Bissenbakker Frederiksen and Mathias Danbolt for giving me valuable feedback on parts of my PhD. I also want to thank all the friends who help me unwind and remind me of all the other things that life has to offer, in particular Yoo Falk Jensen for being a real buddy.

The period of my PhD has also included other major events; among the positive was that I met my father for the first time ever. I would like to thank him for helping me to connect with other parts of my history and creating new stories of belonging. Unfortunately, the last part of my PhD was heavily marked by the serious illness of my mother, which we all thought and hoped would turn out differently. I would like to thank her for always encouraging me to seek knowledge and teaching me what it really means to meet people with respect and an open mind. I know that your love for me and your pride in me is insuperable, and you need not to worry; I will take good care of myself.

But first and foremost my thanks goes to my partner, Benedicte Ohrt Fehler, who taught me to aim for the stars in personal and professional life and who is a constant inspiration and support. Without you none of this would have been possible—you give me a kick in the ass when I need it and you lift me up when I have fallen to the ground. For this I am eternally grateful and feel blessed.

*Tobias Raun, November 2012.*

## Introduction: Trans in/as Screen Media

This dissertation is about trans video blogging (vlogging) on the multimedia platform YouTube produced, populated, and distributed by Anglo-American medically transitioning trans people. The vlogs figure as shorter video clips (usually between two and fifteen minutes long) with the trans vlogger speaking straight-to-camera in a homely setting.

This study encompasses eight case-study vloggers—four trans men and four trans women, who all use the vlog as a way to discuss their encounter with and experience of transition technologies and processes.

I came across the trans vlogs when I was searching the Internet for information and visualizations of bodily transformations with the use of hormones in order to prepare myself for my own medical transition. I found the vlogs by using simple search words such as “transgender,” “transsexual,” “trans man,” “trans woman,” “FTM,” and “MTF.”<sup>1</sup> My assumption was that I would find very few examples of people uploading vlogs about their gender transitions, but to my surprise there were thousands.<sup>2</sup> I discovered that some YouTubers had started to vlog about their transition around 2006 and by February 2009 (when I started searching for information), trans vlogging was a genre in itself, with certain characteristics. Some of the most prominent characteristics of this genre will be addressed in chapter 5.

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<sup>1</sup> A trans man or FTM (female-to-male) is a person who was assigned female at birth but who identifies and presents as male (or somewhere on the masculine spectrum). I preferably use the term “trans man” throughout the dissertation. A trans woman or a MTF (male to female) is a person who was assigned male at birth but who identifies and presents as female (or somewhere on the feminine spectrum). I preferably use the term “trans woman” throughout the dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> By October 2012 a simple search for “transgender” lists 134,000 hits. Around one-half of these are from traditional media sources (talk shows, documentaries, news reports), some are from NGOs or from non-trans people discussing trans issues, but around one-third of the vlogs are personal stories from trans people. Some of these trans vloggers appear more than once in the search, making it difficult to determine exactly how many trans people vlog about their life on YouTube. As my study is not focused on quantitative research, I have not pursued developing a statistics around trans vlogging any further.

Besides from having a personal interest in these vlogs, they also sparked an immediate academic interest. As a visual culture theorist, I found the vlogs significant, condensing, and radicalizing—a range of characteristics that is typical for social network sites (SNSs) (for a definition of these sites see Boyd and Ellison 2008). I therefore became interested in how the vlog as a (new) medium enabled this particular minority group to represent themselves, and to be connected with like-minded others. However, I was equally interested in investigating and connecting these trans vlogs to broader psycho-medical, theoretical, and representational discourses of trans that they can be said to tie into and renegotiate.

### **YouTube It!**

YouTube as a platform was officially launched “with little public fanfare in June 2005” (Burgess and Green 2009a: 1), as it started off as a video-sharing site run by three students (van Dijck 2009: 42). In October 2006, Google acquired YouTube and by 2012 it was among the top seventeen most popular websites globally (a statistic determined by global reach and page views, and how many sites link in to it) (Fitzgerald 2012). The popularity of YouTube is massive, and it has even entered the lexicon not just as a noun but also a verb; one can be asked to “YouTube it” (Strangelove 2010: 5). In the early days YouTube carried the byline “Your Digital Video Repository,” but today it has been changed to “Broadcast Yourself”—a shift from the website as a personal storage facility to a platform for self-expression (Burgess and Green 2009a: 4). YouTube is both industry- and user-driven, containing a wide variety of movie clips, TV clips, and music videos from traditional media sources, as well as user-created content such as vlogs. However, YouTube has maybe first and foremost become “the logical destination for amateur home videos” (Strangelove 2010: 17). According to social media analysts Jean Burgess

and Joshua Green, YouTube is “a site of participatory culture” (Burgess and Green 2009a: vii); a term introduced by media scholar Henry Jenkins to describe, what he calls the paradigmatic shift in media culture towards increased participation and democratization (Jenkins 2006). As Jenkins states: “Audiences [...] are demanding the right to participate within culture” (Ibid.: 24). More accessible digital technologies and YouTube as a platform for sharing the user-created content enable potentially everybody to express themselves and “talk back.” Vlogs are fairly cheap and technically easy to use and produce, generally requiring nothing more than a webcam and basic editing skills.

Vlogging is a dominant form of user-created content on YouTube, being the “most discussed” and “most responded” clips, and in that sense it is “an emblematic form of YouTube participation” (Burgess and Green 2009b: 94). Or in the words of analysts of Internet entrepreneurs Michael Strangelove, vlogs are “the epitome of YouTube as a social phenomenon” (Strangelove 2010: 4). The advent of increased participatory media culture is part of what has been labeled a “post-television era” (Ibid.). As Research Professor of Interactive Media Geert Lovink states in the introduction to *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, “We no longer watch films or TV; we watch databases” (Lovink 2008: 9). Many people not only watch user-created material but also watch material from traditional media sources on computers.

The trans vlogs are rapidly increasing on YouTube, and the phenomenon has come to the attention of some media researchers, who have referred to them as “the hundreds of otherwise unremarkable and narrowly biographical video blog entries returned for the keyword search ‘transgender’” (Burgess and Green 2009a: 80). But trans vlogs still remain unexplored in depth, which points to a general lack of research on the significance of trans self-representation and community building in a time where the Internet is transitioning to a predominantly image- and video-

based medium.

Within various offline (primarily US) trans communities, I have encountered mixed feelings toward trans vlogs. On the one hand they are celebrated as giving voice to trans people, but on the other hand there is skepticism toward how they reflect trans people's lives. I attended a screening of the documentary *Trans Francisco* (Davis, 2010) in San Francisco in spring 2011, where the director, Glenn Davis, and participants took part in a Q & A. Tiffany Woods (associate producer of the documentary and one of the trans women appearing in the film) stated, "We need to go beyond the 'YouTube eighteen weeks on hormones.'" She highlighted the importance that "you all get your stories out there" but at the same time she seemed to suggest that the documentary *Trans Francisco* dealt with issues that were of far more serious character than what vlogging on YouTube was about.<sup>3</sup> Although I agree with Tiffany that the documentary focuses on important issues, I also found it interesting that the trans vlogs were slightly banalized. As an acquaintance of mine—a trans woman whom I met in San Francisco—remarked, the video blogs are often not valued as important socio-historical sources within the trans community itself. I think that she is right in her observation, but it makes me wonder why this is the case. Is it because many trans people feel that these vlogs are too personal, too ephemeral? Or is it because many of us still have a hard time imagining that a social movement can mobilize online, comprised of individuals sitting alone at home in front of their computers? Or is it simply because many trans people are reluctant to see their own contribution to participatory media culture as something extraordinary? Regardless of the status appointed to the trans vlogs, they have become a visual culture of trans self-representation and experiences

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<sup>3</sup> *Trans Francisco* is shedding light on the racialized aspect of the pervasive discrimination of trans people through personal stories told by trans women of color. The film deals with discrimination and personal problems encountered by trans women in connection with family issues, lack of proper medical care, unemployment, sex work, homelessness, extreme poverty, and so on.

that many trans people turn to for information. The vlogs also seem to have become a well-known and established visual format, integrated into trans documentaries and films such as *Against a Trans Narrative* (Roskam, 2008) and *Romeos* (Bernardi, 2011). Here the vlog appears as a site of self-disclosure where the protagonists Jules and Lukas can speak their mind and connect with other trans people. The Canadian teen television series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (Moore and Schuyler, 2001-) introduced the trans character Adam (in 2010), and the trans vlogs on YouTube are highlighted as an important part of the research process, developing the character of Adam and the problems he faces.<sup>4</sup> What these three examples illustrate is that the vlogs are becoming a recognizable visual format and a database for trans knowledge.

### **The Power of Representation**

Like many others, my knowledge of trans people is highly informed by mainstream visual representations created by non-trans people and in that sense these vlogs offer a rare chance to encounter trans representations made by, with, and primarily for trans people. Before the vlogs one of the first representations of a trans man that I (and many others) came across was Brandon Teena in the movie *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999). It was immensely liberating to see a portrayal of a trans man but it was so much worse to see his identity and love project destroyed. For me the movie both nurtured and shattered future dreams of becoming a recognizable man. What I took special notice of back then was the representation of how dangerous it is to pass as male when you are female-bodied, as it can expose transphobia in its most extreme and violent rendering—but the film also offered yet another portrayal of trans as a tragic figure. What my experience with *Boys Don't Cry* highlights is

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<sup>4</sup> See interview with the writer Michael Grassi:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSSdUv\\_R0xI&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSSdUv_R0xI&feature=player_embedded)

how representations can encourage as well as discourage certain identity formations.

Representation carries a special political weight for minority groups and plays a significant role in the formation and visibility of social movements and identities. This has been widely discussed in connection with gay and lesbian representation in popular culture (see, for example, Russo 1981; Dyer 1984, 1993, 2002). As the lecturer in Film, Media and Cultural Studies Niall Richardson states:

[I]t is important to remember that for many incipient gays and lesbians, growing up in isolation and having never met another gay person, often the only image of another lesbian or gay is the representation on the film or television screen [...] and so their sense of identification, what it means to be lesbian or gay, is often forged through a representation on the screen (Richardson 2010: 2).

The same goes for trans people, as Associate professor of Psychology Darryl Hill shows in his study. For an older generation of trans people, coming of age before the 1980s, print media, especially trans autobiographies, played an important role in self-identification (Hill 2005: 37). The coverage of Christine Jorgensen and her sex reassignment surgeries in Denmark in the 1950s also helped create an image of trans (at least for trans women) as a possible subject position.<sup>5</sup> As the older respondents in Director of a LGBTQ Educational Resource Center Genny Beemyn and Associate Professor of Education Susan Rankin's research explain, they learned about transsexuality through the media via the coverage of Christine Jorgensen or Renée Richards but they did not know how to meet other trans people (Beemyn and Rankin 2011: 55).<sup>6</sup> What

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<sup>5</sup> Christine Jorgensen was one of the first widely known trans women, who became a media sensation when she appeared in 1952 on the front page of the *New York Daily News* under the headline "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty." In 1967 she published her autobiography (*Christine Jorgensen. A Personal Autobiography*), which was turned into a film in 1970 (*The Christine Jorgensen Story*).

<sup>6</sup> Renée Richards is an American trans woman, a ophthalmologist, professional tennis player, and author of the autobiography *Second Serve* (1986).

these respondents also highlight is the importance of having a name for how they felt (Ibid.: 23). After Jorgensen's public broadcast appearance she received hundreds of letters from other trans people who not only asked for advice and help but also recognized themselves in her. As Hill notes, many of the respondents in his study first saw and discovered trans as an identity through television—for example, on talk shows and situation comedies (Hill 2005: 38). Hill also argues that it was not until the 1970s, when mainstream television started reporting on sex changes, that trans communities and movements really took hold, and this awareness accelerates with the Internet (Ibid.: 29).

For any minority group whose representation is often sparse and limited it is important to note what notions and subject positions appear. Not only the general public but also many trans people primarily have access to and knowledge of trans people through the screen (Beemyn and Rankin 2011: 44–45). A relevant question is, therefore, how are trans people portrayed in mainstream film and visual media? Addressing this question is important in order to understand the broader discourses on trans that the trans vlogs take their point of departure in—and that they challenge in various ways. I will therefore in the following offer a short history and mapping of the representation of trans people in popular Western media culture.

### **The Representation of Trans in Mainstream Media**

The representation of trans people and trans issues has been sparse and selective in mainstream media until the 1990s, although there have been surges of exposure with Zdenek Kubkov in the 1930s, Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s, and Renée Richards in the 1970s (Stryker, quoted in Romano 2012: 3).<sup>7</sup> Research on transgender visual representation in Anglo-

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<sup>7</sup> Zdenek Kubkov (or also referred to as Zdenka Koubkova) is today almost unknown but is a Czechoslovak runner and jumper who won and set a new world record for the 800-meter dash at the Women's World Games in 1934. She/he was stripped of her awards



American mainstream media has likewise been limited. John Phillips's book *Transgender on Screen* (2006) is the most extensive and substantial attempt so far. Niall Richardson's *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture* (2010) is a broader attempt to outline the representation of marginalized bodies, including trans bodies. Julia Serano's *A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007) includes, among other things, extended reflections on the representation of trans women in popular media. John Phillips and Niall Richardson argue that the representation of trans in mainstream media becomes the successor to the early stereotypes of gays and lesbians in the media. As portrayed in the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (Epstein and Friedman, 1995), homosexuality could not speak its name and was therefore implied in different ways.<sup>8</sup> One of the (comedic) codes for homosexuality was the portrayal of masculine women and feminine men, premised on the assumption that homosexuals were gender dissidents and failed to perform either gender very well (Richardson 2010: 128). Homosexuality was coded as doing gender "wrong," condensed in the types of the effeminate queen and the butch dyke or illustrated via regular cross-dressing. This echoes some of the assumptions of late nineteenth-century sexologists who subsumed cross-gender identification under the broader rubric of "inversion" and associated it primarily with homosexuality (Meyerowitz 2002: 14–15). Thus, in sexology as well as in Hollywood motion picture films, homosexuality and transgenderism are intertwined and become stand-ins for each other in various ways, as gender dissidence was considered an expression or effect of homosexuality. As argued by Richardson, the trans body becomes the successor of early stereotypes of lesbians and gays, either as "wretched creatures who inspire humour and pity because they fail miserably to

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and banned after a genital examination that was characterized as ambiguous. She/he later transitioned to male.

<sup>8</sup> *The Celluloid Closet* is based on the book by Vito Russo (1981).

perform either gender with any degree of competency” or as “the deceiving transsexual who passes and is therefore ‘read’ as merely a gay man in disguise—the successor to the predatory, straight-acting homosexual who infiltrates heterosexual company in order to seduce some unsuspecting man” (Richardson 2010: 131). Trans representation is also a successor to and at times convergent with the cross-dressing man. Films such as *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder, 1959), *Tootsie* (Pollack, 1982) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Columbus, 1993) refer back to a whole tradition of cross-dressing in comedy, where the masquerade and the reveal both evoke a stock set of responses from others within the diegesis (amazement, humor, anger, relief, and so on) (Phillips 2006: 26). Cross-dressing is portrayed in these films as deception, a way to achieve some other goal, like getting a job (*Some Like It Hot* and *Tootsie*) or being able to spend time with one’s children (*Mrs. Doubtfire*), thus the act of cross-dressing is never in itself the purpose but something the character does out of necessity. Being in female character is a disguise and a way to trick other characters in the movie to believe that the cross-dresser is something that they are not. Cross-dressing serves the purpose of comic relief as the audience is let in on the joke (but other characters in the story are not). The audience’s pleasure derives, in part, from watching the deception process unfold and the comic misunderstandings evolving from it before the act of unveiling in a final revelatory scene (Ibid.: 54–55). What is usually cast as particularly comedic elements are scenes showing the character’s inability to “do womanhood” properly as well as scenes containing unwelcome sexual advances or attention from men unknowing of the scam, reconfirming a perception of gender as inevitably a biological fact.

### **Democratization of Trans; or, Still Something to Fight For?**

From the 1990s there has been an increase in trans visibility within a broad range of screen media, from film and talk and reality shows to the

Internet, where so-called tranny porn is said to be the fastest growing type of pornography (Ibid.: 2). Trans people have, until recently, typically been depicted as and associated with trans women and at times mixed up with transvestites or drag queens. As Julia Serano critically remarks, the media tends to not notice or ignore trans men “because they are unable to sensationalize them the way they do trans women without bringing masculinity itself into question” (Serano 2007: 46). Serano seems here to be hinting at what educator, advocate and policy consultant on trans issues Jamison Green calls the “visibility dilemma for transsexual men,” whereby many medically transitioning trans men are, contrary to many trans women, able to be recognized as the desired gender after just a year or even less on hormones. This makes it easier for trans men to slide rather undetectably into mainstream society.

The increase in screen representations of trans has recently allowed journalist and writer Tricia Romano to identify the spreading of a contemporary fascination with trans, calling it a “transgender revolution” (Romano 2012). Likewise, queer studies scholar Judith Jack Halberstam talks about a “recent explosion of transgender films” where the spectacle of the trans body represents different things for different audiences (Halberstam 2005: 96). The trans body can confirm a fantasy of fluidity in line with notions of transformation within the postmodern idiom or pose a utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities (Ibid.). Romano draws a parallel between trans and gay representation when she states, “It seems like trans might be the new gay in pop culture” (Romano 2012: 3). What Romano implies is that trans is slowly becoming “chic” and “de rigueur” in much the same way the gay man in mainstream film and television did (Shugart 2003: 69). Lacanian scholar and analyst Patricia Gherovici also notes that trans “has acquired an extraordinary mediatic visibility” and has become “quite fashionable” (Gherovici 2010: 34–35). She points to the overall increase in trans visibility, not least in American talk shows since

2005, which according to her “tend to be supportive,” although trans “has also not lost its shock value” (Ibid.: xiii). Gherovici optimistically argues that trans “has lost most of its stigma and has become an identity” in the United States (Ibid.: 34). Gherovici’s overall conclusion is what she calls “the democratisation of transgenderism.” As she argues: “What was categorized as either pathological or exceptional is now an everyday reality” (Ibid.: 2). Even though I agree with Gherovici that trans people are much more present in mainstream media today than they were twenty years ago, I will argue that we are far from seeing a democratization, which would entail access to a non-sensationalized/pathologized screen representation and equal rights. In chapter 2, I address at length what the psycho-medical, social, and legal barriers are for trans people, and how they operate as vectors of vulnerability and discrimination. Regarding trans representation, Niall Richardson, John Phillips, and Julia Serano are less positive in their readings. Phillips mentions “the failure of even well-intentioned popular entertainment to produce wholly positive representations” (Phillips 2006:15). In a similar vein, Richardson states, “The problem remains that there are, to date, very few mainstream representations which *do* address trans identity with any other agenda other than evoking humour” (Richardson 2010: 131). Julia Serano argues that media depictions of trans women usually fall under one of two main archetypes: the “deceptive transsexual” and the “pathetic transsexual” (Serano 2007: 36). In what follows I will outline five tropes for the representation of trans people in mainstream Western screen media, including “the deceptive transsexual,” “the pathetic transsexual,” “trans as a metaphor for or an expression of psychopathy,” “the autobiographical imperative,” and “trans as monstrous porn spectacle.” More tropes could be added, and a more in-depth analysis can be conducted, but these are the five representational discourses of trans that I see as predominant.

## **The Deceptive Transsexual**

Movies such as *The Crying Game* (Jordan, 1992), *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999), *Normal* (Anderson, 2003) and *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005) have reached a broad international audience and attracted a lot of media attention. These movies all have a trans person as their lead character and offer insight into some of the challenges of being trans and some of the negative affective responses this can give rise to from people around you. One can think of the scenes in *Boys Don't Cry*, where Brandon Teena is subjected to rape and a mortal physical attack by his supposed friends after they discover that he is a trans man. Or one can think of the scene in the *The Crying Game* where Fergus rushes to the bathroom to throw up after discovering that Dil, with whom he has fallen in love, is a trans woman who has not had genital surgery. Fergus's reaction highlights the film's portrayal of what Julia Serano labels "the deceptive transsexual": trans women who pass as women and act as unexpected plot twists, often seducing (innocent and/or unknowing) heterosexual men. These women are positioned as "fake" women, whose "secret" trans status is revealed in a dramatic moment of "truth" (Serano 2007: 36-37). The trope of the "the deceptive transsexual" is also present in the dating reality show *There's Something About Miriam* (Sky1, 2004), where the Mexican model Miriam was the star of the show. An important part of the show's "gimmick" was the fact that Miriam was a pre-op transsexual woman, something that was not "revealed" to the six wooing men until the final episode. Miriam's status as the deceptive transsexual is, according to scholar in ethnic minorities Vek Lewis, spiced up with "Hollywood clichés of the vampish latina" (Lewis 2009: 240), which reinforces a coding of her as a dangerous seductress whose "secret" becomes *the* plot that the show revolves around.

## **The Pathetic Transsexual**

The trope of the “pathetic transsexual” bears some similarities to using men in women’s clothes as comic relief. As argued by Serano, most pop-cultural portrayals of trans women fall into the “pathetic” category, best exemplified by the character of football player Roberta Muldoon in *The World According to Garp* (Hill, 1982); the aging showgirl Bernadette in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott, 1994); the stepdad Hank, who is about to become Henrietta, in *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole* (Williams, 1998); the Midwestern husband and father Roy who decides to transition in *Normal* (Anderson, 2003); and the transitioning bearded baritone Mark Shubb at the conclusion of *A Mighty Wind* (Guest, 2003). These figures are designed to validate the popular assumption that trans women are truly men and although they identify as/want to be female, their masculine appearance and mannerism always gives them away. The contradiction between the pathetic character’s gender identity and her physical appearance is usually played for laughs (Serano 2007: 38–40). As Serano concludes, the viewer is at best supposed to admire her courage but not meant to identify with her or to be sexually attracted to her (Ibid.: 39).

*Transamerica* (2005) has been celebrated for offering a rare sympathetic representation of trans, but nevertheless establishes this sympathy by domesticating the lead character, Bree, making her a harmless and asexualized “spinster,” to use the word suggested by Niall Richardson (Richardson 2010: 145). The film can be seen as a reinvention of the matrix of the pathetic transsexual, highlighting Bree’s artificial femaleness. Not only does the entire movie dwell on her dressing and undressing but also on her thick layer of makeup and the lack of it when stuck in the outskirts. As Serano observes:

Indeed, the fact that her foundation begins to develop a sheen from perspiration at several points in the movie, and that she stumbles in her high heels on more

than one occasion—faux pas that never seem to afflict cissexual women in Hollywood—makes it clear that the filmmakers purposely used these accessories as props to portray Bree as “doing female” rather badly (Serano 2007: 42).<sup>9</sup>

I would argue that the film is, on the one hand, in line with the classic essay of psychoanalyst Joan Riviere, suggesting that womanliness itself is artificial and a masquerade “assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to advert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (Riviere 1929: 306). Thus, womanliness is an act that almost every woman (trans or not) is in risk of failing at. On the other hand, I agree with Serano that trans femininity tends to be framed as a particularly artificial construct, hiding an inherent masculinity. The code of conduct still seems to be that in order for the audience to recognize a character as a trans character there must be these ever-present gaps of “masculinity” hiding under the appearance and performance of womanhood.

### **Trans as a Metaphor for or an Expression of Psychopathy**

A number of thriller movies have included a trans character or theme as an important part of the plot—for example, *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960); *Dressed to Kill* (De Palma, 1980); *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991); and most recently *The Skin I Live In* (Almodóvar, 2011). The so-called transsexual condition is represented as a mental disturbance and the cause of or an element in the killer’s deranged mind. As Niall Richardson states: “desire for sex reassignment [...] functions as a metaphor for the character’s overall derangement or psychosis” (Richardson 2010: 132). It contributes extensively to the monstrosity, perverseness, or bizarreness of

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<sup>9</sup> “Cissexual” defines a person who identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth. Within trans studies and communities, marking and labeling the norm is part of making visible what is already there as a compulsory ideal. However, I choose throughout this dissertation to use the word “non-trans” instead as a way to decenter what becomes the privileged signifier that all significations must be determined according to.

the murder and/or the plot and becomes an expression of evil or madness. The viewer is often misled about the trans identity of the murderer/plot as part of “the broader objective of maintaining mystery and suspense” (Phillips 2006: 19). The gender-identity issues are therefore often not revealed to the viewer until later on as an essential part of solving the mystery or unfolding the motivations that led to the crime, as is the case in all of the films mentioned above. In *Dressed to Kill*, psychiatrist Dr. Robert Elliot also acts as the female killer Bobbi, portraying transsexuality as a schizophrenic condition with internal conflicts between a male and a female personality, which leads to murder. As explained by the psychiatrist character, Dr. Levy, after the discovery that Robert and Bobbi are one and the same person:

He was a transsexual about to make the final step, but his male side couldn't let him do it. There was Dr. Elliott and there was Bobbi [...] opposite sexes inhabiting the same body. The sex-change operation was to resolve the conflict. But as much as Bobbi tried to get it, Elliott blocked it so Bobbi got even (De Palma 1980).

Both *Dressed to Kill* and *Psycho* connect gender transition/cross-dressing to mental disorder and to a twisted and retained male sexuality, where the female alter ego holds Elliott and Bates back and punishes them for their sexual desire toward women. As very explicitly explained by Dr. Levy: “Elliott's penis became erect and Bobbi took control, trying to kill anyone that made Elliott masculinely sexual” (De Palma 1980). Having a sexual desire toward women as a trans woman is portrayed as problematic and partly impossible—something that can only be ascribed to the male side of the personality. The trans female identity is portrayed as an evil spirit taking residence in Bates's and Elliott's body, punishing the women that arouse their sexual desire.



## **The Autobiographical Imperative**

American talk-show hosts from Oprah and Barbara Walters to David Letterman have increasingly engaged with trans people, for example encouraging Thomas Beatie to tell the story of his life on-air after being portrayed in tabloid headlines as “The Pregnant Man.” Most extensive has been the exposure of Chaz Bono, the son of Sonny and Cher, after he decided to transition in 2008. As Chaz states, “When I came out and said I was transitioning, it went out, that morning. And by that night I was on CNN and it was crazy. Everything happens instantly now” (Romano 2012: 5). He has appeared on several talk shows, and his transition has been represented in the documentary *Becoming Chaz* (Bailey and Barbato, 2011), which aired on Oprah’s cable channel in the United States and has been shown at several LGBTQ film festivals around the world. He also sparked a lot of attention and debate when he participated in *Dancing with the Stars* (ABC, 2011). What characterizes these appearances of trans people on talk shows is, as Associate Professor and expert on transsexual health Vivianne Namaste has argued, that trans people are bound by the “auto-biographical imperative” and are only allowed access as long as “they offer their personal autobiographies, and only as long as they respond to the questions posed by a non-transsexual interviewer” (Namaste 2005: 46). The exclusive focus is on the “what” and the “why” of transsexuality, which forecloses a (critical) dissemination and discussion of the institutional, economic, and political context in which sex change occurs (Ibid.: 49). The representation serves primarily “to satisfy the curiosity of the non-transsexual viewer” (Ibid.: 46). The coverage still tends to be focused on “the shock value,” which the appearance of fashion’s rising star Lea T on the Oprah show exemplifies. Lea T attracted headlines when appearing nude (one hand covering parts of her genitals) in French *Vogue*. The interview on Oprah was, as so many before, centered on genitalia. At a point during the interview, Oprah asks, “How do you, if I

may ask, how do you hide your penis? You must have to strap that thing down in there? Really . . . what . . . where is it? Really, how do you hide it?" (*Oprah* February 17, 2011). Whereas the show was to a certain extent "supportive," as argued by Gherovici, the well-known script that requires that the trans person constantly "confess" the origin and ongoing sense of gender, as well as verbally "undress" and elucidate the appearance of their body remained. As Namaste summarizes, it is required that trans people tell intimate stories about their body, sexuality, desires, genitals, and deep pain "at the whim of a curious non-transsexual person" and on command (Namaste 2005: 49). But there is no time, space, or authorization "to address the underlying political and institutional issues that make our lives so difficult" (Ibid.).

### **Trans as Monstrous Porn Spectacles**

An industry of trans porn is also growing online, marketing especially a trans female body that has not undergone genital surgery as sexualized visual spectacles under labels like "shemales" and "chicks with dicks," primarily targeting (non-trans) heterosexual men (Phillips 2006: 153–154). As John Phillips argues:

The visual focus in these images frequently switches from female clothing to male genitals, from breast to penis, from stereotypical female physical qualities such as pretty features, smooth and hairless skin, girlishly long hair and hourglass curves to the aggressive masculinity of large testicles and rampant erection. Indeed, it is largely from these contrastive juxtapositions that the shemale's erotic power stems (Ibid.: 155).

The pre-op trans woman is more popular than the post-op in online pornography because, as Phillips argues, an essential part of the sexual fantasy centers on the "shocking and simultaneously exiting" juxtaposition (Ibid.: 158, 160). It is a "phallus-centred pornography" (Ibid.: 158), where the trans woman is "penetrative but also polymorphously penetrable"

(Richardson 2010: 158). It therefore allows the implicit (non-trans) heterosexual male viewer the “best of both worlds,” combining “the attractions of femininity with the promiscuity and sexual availability of the masculine,” implying that pre-op trans woman has a unique understanding of the male body and what a man wants (Phillips 2006: 157). Trans men have not been subjected to the same kind of erotic marketing as trans women, however Buck Angel has attracted a large audience, branded as “The Man with a Pussy.”<sup>10</sup> On his website, Buck Angel labels himself the world’s first FTM porn star and he claims to have created a new genre of pornography. With a bulky, muscular physique that is heavily tattooed, shaved head, and handlebar mustache, Buck Angel evokes and performs a white working-class “roughneck masculinity” (Richardson 2010: 160). Although engaging in sexual interaction with both men and women (trans men included) Buck Angel seems primarily marketed toward (non-trans) gay men. I would argue that this kind of pornography is also focused on the phallus (albeit at times a plastic one) and rough, straightforward penetration by means of all sorts of body parts and dildos. Again, the representation seems to evoke the best of all worlds, a sexually aggressive and available man with the body of a Tom of Finland drawing and yet polymorphously penetrable.

### **Trans? An Overview of the Dissertation**

These available and circulating tropes of representation are in various ways negotiated and contested in trans vlogs, as I will show.

“Trans” in its many meanings and configurations seem to be a suitable term for these vlogs. Throughout the dissertation I engage with “trans” as an identity category (trans/transsexual), as a movement of becoming (transitioning), and as a characterization of the vlog medium (transmedia in the sense of drawing on and expanding existing storytelling

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<sup>10</sup> See Buck Angel’s website: <http://buckangel.com/tour1/tour.html>

formats). The term “transsexual” refers to medically transitioning trans people, whereas the term “transgender” is more inclusive, encompassing a range of gender variant identities or “*the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place*” (Stryker 2008a: 1, emphasis in original). Although I am aware that the word “transsexual” has become problematized as signifying a pathologized notion of trans, I nevertheless use the term occasionally because it has a specificity that “transgender” lacks, focusing on the experiences and institutional challenges for medically transitioning trans people. However, I primarily use “transsexual” when referring to the labeling of other researchers/vloggers, and prefer the short version, “trans,” because it does not have these pathologizing associations. Looking at medically transitioning vloggers I find the term “transgender” slightly misleading in its profiling of “gender” as the boundary which is crossed, and I therefore decline from using it as a identity category.

The dissertation is comprised of seven chapters, starting with an unfolding of my methodological premise and ethical considerations, conducting what I label “transgender studies 2.0.” Chapter 2 is divided into two parts, situating and contextualizing the vlogs. The first section outlines and analyzes the pathologization of trans as an identity category by looking at the psycho-medical diagnostic procedures and barriers of access, as well as some of the socioeconomic issues pertaining to (medical) transition. The second section offers an overview and analysis of what I call the contestation of trans identities/narratives within gender studies, discussing how to move beyond a conceptualization of trans as gender traitors and/or gender revolutionaries. Chapters 3 and 4 present and analyze the trans male and trans female vloggers, focusing on a close reading of the ways they present themselves and interact with the camera and their peers, as well as the labels, concepts, and language they use to express themselves. Chapter 5 takes the notion of “screen-birth” as a

starting point for outlining and analyzing the various ways that trans vloggers emerge and develop online through the vlog as a medium, cultivating the vlog as a mirror, a diary, and an autobiography. Chapter 6 offers an exploration of how a sense of community is created and expressed among the trans vloggers and what the potentials of web 2.0 can enable in connection with connecting and mobilizing trans people online. Chapter 7 looks at the vloggers as what I call an “affective counterpublic,” using the vlog and the interaction with peers as a kind of DIY therapy. This chapter takes as its point of departure the widespread claim that contemporary Western media culture is oriented toward confession. I interpret the trans vloggers as rejecting the confessional mode by using interconnected practices such as (self-)disclosure, coming out, and testimony as part of an ongoing self-representation and community building.

The dissertation as a whole tries to describe and analyze a field of study that has not yet been subjected to in-depth study. It offers cross-disciplinary analysis, investigating contemporary claims of trans identity and politics in/through social media.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Transgender Studies 2.0: Internet Methodology and Research Ethics**

Within transgender studies there is, as gender and sexuality scholar Bobby Noble has pointed out, a dominance of social-science approaches to the field and a less developed interest in or analysis of cultural production, although the field promotes itself as interdisciplinary (Noble 2011: 268). Various transgender researchers touch upon the importance of the growth of home computer use in the 1990s, claiming that the increase in trans visibility and the forming of trans communities are made possible especially by the Internet (see Whittle 2006: xii, Cromwell 1999: 15, Stryker 2006a: 6). But very few are actually researching trans people's use of online media or *how* the Internet is used as a platform for trans self-representation and virtual community building. In what follows I will outline and reflect on some of the methodological approaches I draw on, and some of the ethical concerns that have directed and formed this study.

#### **A Multi-Methodological Project**

Let me begin by saying that this dissertation is a methodological collage, as I work in between and across fields of study. In some contexts I become positioned as the "media scholar" whereas I in others become "the gender studies scholar." Admittedly, some chapters point more in one direction than others, and yet it also illustrates my deliberate intention to work between fields of study and to employ different kinds of theory where it seems asked for by the material and/or the themes analyzed. However, I would first and foremost describe my own position as a visual culture theorist who primarily works within media studies and gender studies. Visual culture is a field of study in and of itself that is broadly defined as a

field “for the study of the cultural construction of the visual in the arts, media, and everyday life” (Dikovitskaya 2001: 1) or “the social practices of human visuality” (Mitchell 2002: 174). As Professor of Media, Culture and Communication Nicholas Mirzoeff observes, “Visual culture seeks to blend the historical perspective of art history and film studies with the case-specific, intellectually engaged approach characteristic of cultural studies” (Mirzoeff 1999: 13).

The “visual” in visual culture studies tentatively signals the study of all kinds of visual images as well as visuality itself, thus framing what we see and how we see as historically, culturally, and ideologically informed. Meanwhile, the study of “culture” highlights not only high culture or mainstream cultural products but also everyday practices whereby people create and negotiate meaning around or through visual products/technologies.

An important part of the emergence of visual culture as a discipline in the beginning of the 1990s is, it can be argued, a radical increase in visual media, visually mediated identity constructions, and visually communicated epistemology (especially within medical science). As Mirzoeff states, “Human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before from the satellite picture to medical images of the interior of the human body” (Ibid.: 1). With a significant increase in the use of the Internet, and the emergence of the so-called web 2.0, Mirzoeff seems to be more right than ever in labeling his time “the era of the visual screen” (Ibid.). One could argue that this not only makes visual culture possible as a field of study but also necessary. The task for visual studies, as described by Mirzoeff, is to interpret “the postmodern globalization of the visual as everyday life” (Ibid.: 3).

Drawing on visual culture studies, my field of interest is likewise the everyday consumption, experience, and use of the visual, thus I am interested in visually communicated, constructed, and mediated identity

formations as well as social interactions in/through visual media. In line with visual culture studies I pay special attention to representation, mediated interaction, and visibility as being culturally, philosophically, and ideologically informed. I also relate my study to the field of “virtual ethnography” (especially in relation to Christine Hine, Patricia Lange, dana boyd) by approaching my presence on YouTube as a field study, analyzing the communities and cultures created online, as well as shedding light on how trans people experience mediated life on YouTube by conducting interviews. Developing a virtual ethnography ended up involving online observations, content analysis, visual analysis, and interviews. Supplementary data include engaging in transgender support group meetings in New York (July 2009), San Francisco (January–June 2011), and trans communities in the United States, England, and Scandinavia, as well as being part of several online trans forums.

A virtual ethnographic approach is preoccupied with studying what people actually do with the technology and aspires to give “a distinctive understanding of the significance and implications of the Internet” (Hine 2000: 21, 34). Virtual ethnography is, according to scholar in the ethnography of information technology and the Internet Christine Hine, an approach that understands the Internet as both “a culture” and as “a cultural artifact” and explores the connection between them (Ibid.: 39). Attention is paid to the Internet as culture in its own right but also to how the meanings and perceptions that participants bring to this culture is shaped by the setting from which they access the Internet and the expectations they have of it (Ibid.). As Hine argues: “The space in which online interactions occur is simultaneously socially produced through a technology that is itself socially produced” (Ibid.). The study of the Internet as a way of communicating, and as an object within people’s lives is not detached from any connections to off-screen interaction, thus in that sense virtual ethnography works between spaces as the research of



mediated contexts intersperses with interactions in other spheres and other media. Virtual ethnography also involves engagement with mediated interaction, including taking notice of the researcher's own engagement with the ethnographic object in, of, and through the virtual (Ibid.: 64–65).

I conduct what could be labeled Transgender Studies 2.0, highlighting an affiliation with and interest in issues widely debated within transgender studies regarding trans subjectivity and embodiment while equally investigating how these are enabled by and expressed through the practice of video blogging, connecting my research to (new) media studies and broader considerations regarding the implications and possibilities of web 2.0.

### **YouTube as Place or Space? Human Interaction or Representation?**

Doing Internet research like mine raises important and interlinked questions regarding methodology and ethics. As scholar in the ethics of information technology May Thorseth states, “The two aspects are often different sides of the same coin” (Thorseth 2003: x). Internet research ethics is an evolving and much-debated academic field in itself, a field that outlines the ethical complexities and implications of conducting research online.<sup>1</sup>

As scholars in interactive media studies Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter point out, one of “the first and most complex issues for Internet researchers is determining what type of research they are conducting—text-based or person-based—and what ethic should apply” (McKee and Porter 2009: 5). The challenge is to define and establish a definition of the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance AoIR 2002, Buchanan 2004, Bromseth 2003, White 2002, O’Riordan & Bassett 2002, Svenningson Elm 2009, Ess 2009, McKee and Porter 2009. I especially found McKee and Porter useful, as it is based on an overview of various Internet researchers’ previous work and in-depth interviews with Internet researchers about concrete cases and the ethical issues they faced and how they thought through these issues. The complexity of these ethical considerations is illuminated, as well as the different stances that Internet researchers have taken on confronting these issues and why.

Internet as a medium and as a context for the activities being studied. Perceiving YouTube as a “place” implies that it is a community, a culture, and that the object of your study is people. A researcher must therefore respect personal rights and community norms. However, perceiving YouTube as a “space” implies that it is a medium and that you as a researcher are studying published material (text-based), which you have the right to bring forth to a broader public (Ibid.: 82). Thus, it is the difference between seeing YouTube as a conversational venue or a publishing platform (Ibid.: 110). There are different metaphorical views of the “Internet-as-a-place” or “Internet-as-a-space” and such metaphors have methodological and ethical consequences (Ibid.). In other words, the question of the Internet as a place or as a space is interlinked with questions of what kind of activity/material that one is studying as a researcher: is it “communication among *persons*” or “work by *authors*” (Ibid.: 5)? And if it is a study of persons, the question is whether the interaction takes place in a public space where informed consent is not needed or if it is taking place in a more private space where it is needed. And who determines the public/private classification of the online site? For researchers studying blogs, for example, the guidelines are not clear, and the distinction between private and public blurs (Ibid.: 6).

A prevalent perception and marketing of the Internet is as a “place,” a meeting place not unlike physical off-screen forums, which is inhabited and where the researcher is studying and observing human actors. This has led to the widespread application of the human subject research model, which regards the rights of the human subject as primary and the aims of the researcher as secondary (Bassett and O’Riordan 2002, White 2002). However, the Internet is also a “space,” a form of cultural production and publication, a site for branding oneself and one’s work not unlike a journal or a physical off-screen gallery space, which makes it important to acknowledge the highly mediated and the constructed

aspects of these representations. The representation/text cannot unproblematically be conflated with the human subject appearing in and producing it (Ibid.). A very strong example of this is the case of the vlogger Bree, better known as lonelygirl15, who became famous for her apparently very emotional and impassioned posts about her parents and friends, but it turned out that the vlogs were a filmmaking experiment by independent producers Mesh Flinders and Miles Beckett (Burgess and Green 2009a: 27–30). I am not suggesting that the trans vloggers are not “real,” but I am implying that any appearance on the Internet is mediated and must be studied as such.

In my own research I have moved more and more toward regarding YouTube as both a place (for interaction among people) and a space (for the cultural productions by authors/artists). I therefore insist on not choosing whether I am studying a culture or a cultural artifact, as I believe that I am studying both. I perceive the platform itself and the actions taking place on this platform as an interrelated continuum rather than a binary with two clear meanings, containing both persons and authors engaging in both human interaction and producing/sharing representations. However, coming to this conclusion was an ongoing process that included asking the vloggers what they thought about YouTube as a site. As McKee and Porter also state:

Pursuing ethical research practices involves a continuous process of inquiry, interaction, and revision throughout an entire research study, one involving and inviting critique; interaction and communication with various communities; and heuristic, self-introspective challenging of one’s assumptions, theories, designs, and practices (McKee and Porter 2009: 28).

I have decided not to obtain informed consent to research the vlogs, but I have informed the vloggers about my research, giving them the opportunity to state their concerns, not least in the interview. I have reasoned that uploading a video on YouTube is itself a form of consent; it

may not be informed, but it is nevertheless a form of consent where you agree that millions of people are allowed to watch and discuss your vlog, including researchers. When you sign up for a YouTube account you agree to be “solely responsible for your own Content and the consequences of submitting and publishing your Content on the Service” (see terms of service on YouTube).<sup>2</sup> However, taking into account that some of the vloggers may feel personally and emotionally exposed (though YouTube is a public forum), I have chosen to anonymize them by not stating their current city of residence, name of significant others, or name of their YouTube channel, and to use pseudonyms unless they specifically have asked me not to. I am hereby taking into consideration that some of the vloggers might experience the platform as a semiprivate forum. Although their vlogs are publicly available, neither they nor I can foresee what publicizing information of the field and their names will entail.

Researchers therefore need to consider “the effects of ‘bringing the public’ to a particular online [...] community [...] which, because of the sheer size of the Internet, might otherwise have remained unnoticed” (Ibid.: 89).

However, publicizing may not just put the field of study at risk but may also be raising positive awareness about it and contribute to a branding of it, which is often one of the stated intentions of the vlogs that I will explore in chapter 7. Anonymization is not without potential “risks,” as it can contribute to the transphobic myth that being trans is something you should hide or of which you should be ashamed. As media scholars Kate O’Riordan and E. H. Bassett state: “The decision to disguise online activity, justified through a rhetoric of ‘protection’ may result in furthering the unequal power relations of media production by blocking full representation of alternative media” (O’Riordan and Bassett 2002: 12). It may also fail to credit the trans vloggers with the technological and social expertise that can operate in the field (see O’Riordan 2010). Taking all this

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<sup>2</sup> See YouTube’s “Terms of service”:  
<http://www.youtube.com/static?gl=US&template=terms>

into consideration, I therefore decided to accommodate the wishes of one of the vloggers, Diamond, as she specifically asked me to state the name she goes by in her vlogs. When I initially sent her a message on YouTube, explaining the project and my thoughts on anonymizing all the vloggers' usernames, she wrote me back: "I actually want the public exposure....that's how I get out there...and people know that I am apart of venture such as this for resumes and references....I prefer that exposure" (e-mail message from April 4, 2011). When I conducted an interview with her she confirmed that she wanted her name to be listed (at the very end of interview tape 2). Although I had my doubts about listing one vlogger and anonymizing the others, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to respect her request, especially taking into consideration that this is a platform for branding herself as an artist (see chapter 5 for more reflections on her style of vlogging).

These methodological and ethical reflections are interlinked with my analysis. Person/author, human interaction/representation, place/space and sensitive/nonsensitive are not just a continuum on a methodological/ethical scale but are also the subjects of my analysis of the field itself. Characterizing the trans vlogs as a medium is an important part of my analysis, and in chapters 5, 6, and 7 I analyze how and when the vlogs become sites for human interaction and representation, as well as how and when notions and experiences of private and public play into this. Going back to the methodological and ethical challenges of studying life online I want to pose the question: What do we perceive as extra sensitive and who do we assume to be vulnerable, and how does that tie into normative notions of public relevance and legitimacy? I do not have a clear answer to that (although chapter 7 explores this question in greater depth), but I think it is important to take into consideration as researchers.

## **Botanizing the Asphalt of YouTube**

My research is based on years and months spent searching YouTube and watching videos. I undertook six months of intensive “field research” of which one-third was in the beginning of my study (fall 2009), the other third in the middle (spring/summer 2011) and the last third toward the end (spring 2012), when I conducted more thorough visual and narrative readings of the vlogs. The empirical material is enormous, ranging from 64 to 346 vlogs of two to fifteen minutes’ length per vlogger. On average, I have watched around 34 hours of video footage of each vlogger, which in total is 267 hours spent watching vloggers’ videos. In addition, I have watched many vlogs more than once, which increases the total time. I have also spent an extensive and unaccountable amount of time just “strolling,” searching for vlogs within the category “transgender”/“transsexual.” From there I clicked my way into numerous vloggers’ “personal channel pages.” The channel page serves as a personal profile designed to display a short personal description, thumbnails of videos the YouTuber has uploaded, members to whom they subscribe, videos from other members chosen as favorites, friends lists, and subscribers, along with a section where visitors can leave comments. This personal channel page often connects with a MySpace profile, a Facebook profile, a website/homepage, and a regular blog elsewhere. This means that the vloggers’ experiences and resources are spread across a variety of media platforms, offering different points of entry for different audience segments.

I have several times during the research process allowed myself to “get lost” in cyberspace, going randomly from one vlog to another, being directed by the videos that popped up when typing the search words or by going through a vlogger’s uploaded “favorites,” “friends lists,” or list of “subscribers.” I figured that this was a good way to get to know the field and to imitate how other (trans) people, vloggers or not, would behave on YouTube. I was “botanizing the asphalt” of YouTube, to borrow a phrase

from Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1973: 36). Botanizing the asphalt of YouTube entails that one lapse into a rapidly expanding and ever-changing field, as sixty hours of video is uploaded to YouTube every minute.<sup>3</sup> The number and the types of videos that pop up with a simple search for “transgender,” therefore, varies from hour to hour. Then add that trans vloggers take down their channel or take down some of the vlogs, resulting in video responses circulating without the video that initially sparked the response being present. Like the “*flâneur*” described by Charles Baudelaire, I consider myself to be a “passionate spectator,” simultaneously part of and apart from the life online and “ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert” (Baudelaire 1964: 9, 12). One might say that “strolling,” “*flâneurie*,” or “getting lost” is what the platform itself encourages with its continuous suggestions of related videos. You are encouraged to spend hours following the rhizomatic threads that are laid out; thus you are directed to “ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 8). You quickly lose track of your starting point and how you got to the videos that you ended up watching. In the beginning of my research process I often found myself trying to revisit a video that I had watched before but just did not know how to find it again. This taught me to make field notes and keep records of the videos and vloggers. In this sense my field of study, trans vlogging on YouTube, is indeed a moving target. This compelled me to a pleasurable infinite strolling and yet as a virtual ethnographic researcher it also frustrated me, because I felt I needed to grasp, comprehend, and get a sense of the field in its totality. Eventually I gave up trying and decided to focus on the vloggers whose videos were of most common occurrence (see selection criteria below).

After one and a half years of strolling I had a solid (but not complete) overview of the variety of people vlogging and the basic

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.youtube.com/t/press\\_statistics](http://www.youtube.com/t/press_statistics)

characteristics of the vlogs. It had become clear to me that the vlogs are amazingly diverse and remarkably similar. But I still had not finally decided upon which vloggers to include in my core corpus of material. My main concern was to make sure that both the overall features and a certain degree of variation and diversity were represented. Acknowledging that to research a community is also to represent a community, I went through a long process of reflecting upon how to make a fair representation and what criteria I should let myself be guided by. What kinds of (trans) identity claims and performances should I give voice to—and what imagery and style of vlogging should I highlight? And in what way would these choices be determined by my own interpretive desire? I acknowledged that “interpretive desire” (meaning “social investments, particular identifications, and personal biases”) does not necessarily equal being a bad researcher. But it certainly was something that I wanted to be aware of and something that, during my education as an art historian, I had been encouraged to suppress “under the imperatives of critical rigor” (Jones and Stephenson 2005: 3). With this study I wanted to embrace my own situatedness while also trying to maintain a certain degree of critical distance.

### **Choosing the Vloggers**

I eventually, by March 2011, formulated the following criteria that should apply to all vloggers from that date:

- The vlogs should pop up when one performs a simple search for “transgender.” Transgender is the category that most of the vloggers chose to use as a way to categorize both their own identity and the content of the vlogs. To select vloggers that pop up fairly quickly by a simple search assures me (1) that the vloggers themselves have deliberately tagged their vlogs within this category and do not mind being associated with the term, (2) that the vlogger has established a



certain position within the community, as they are being “promoted” by the viewers/other vloggers through ratings or tagging, (3) that this is the kind of vlogger that people outside of the community would come across.

- The vlogger should have a personal channel page with at least thirty vlogs uploaded (in order to choose people who are dedicated vloggers).
- The YouTuber should vlog regularly and still be active (should have made an upload within the last two months, thus acknowledging that long-term vloggers may not vlog as often as newcomers).
- They should be at least eighteen years old (by March 2011) in order to make sure that they are a legal adult and not a minor.
- They should self-identify within the spectrum of trans, transgender, transsexual, FTM/trans man, MTF/trans woman. This should be evident in the vlogs, be included in the titles of the vlogs, and be stated in their biography on their channel page.
- They should make use of transitioning technologies such as hormones and/or surgery, as I wanted to focus on the trans identities that in medical terms are labeled transsexuals—a group of people whose claims of identity is overtly dominated by a pathologizing discourse, developed and guarded by a medical/psychological establishment (as highlighted in chapter 2, part 1). By focusing on this particular group of people I wanted to shift focus away from an outsider’s perspective on trans people to contemporary notions of trans(sexuality) among trans people themselves.
- The vlogs should take their point of departure in the vloggers’ encounter with and experience of transitioning processes and technologies. I was interested in characterizing and analyzing what I perceived to be a new genre of vlogs where camera, trans identity, and

transition intersect and co-construct one another in interesting ways (see chapter 5).

These criteria eliminated a huge number of uploaded videos, but there were still a lot of vloggers left to choose from. I therefore decided upon the following additional criteria:

- A selection of what I perceived to be “typical” vloggers, combined with a certain degree of diversity (in particular regarding the style of vlogging, gender expression, sexual orientations, and age). I have paid special attention to the differences in the manner of presenting oneself and connecting with peers, different ways of claiming and addressing gender and sexuality, and different ways of cultivating the vlog as an audiovisual media. Focusing on typical vloggers I have chosen to let my material reflect the overrepresentation of white American people vlogging about their lives (although spread all over USA), as this is the kind of vlogger whom you would most likely “meet” by a simple search on YouTube for “transgender.” I have predominantly selected “established” vloggers (who have been vlogging for years and have many uploads) but added some “newcomers” in order to map how trans vlogging has evolved, both within the individual YouTuber’s vlogs and within the trans vlogging community on YouTube. I have therefore chosen to include a less-known vlogger, Mason, because I wanted to highlight a new and more experimental use of the vlogs as a medium, which also includes a more alternative gender expression.
- I decided upon eight case-study vloggers because this was the number I felt I needed in order to offer a representation of the differences in styles of vlogging while also being able to engage with and unfold in depth each vlogger’s life-story narratives and self-representation.

I have chosen the following vloggers as my case studies: James (East Coast USA), Wheeler (West Coast USA), Mason (Southern USA), Tony (northeast England), Erica (East Coast USA), Elisabeth (New England USA), Diamond (Southern USA), Carolyn (Midwest USA).

### **The Invisible/Visible Researcher**

I spent more than a year of my PhD lurking and browsing YouTube, while being visually anonymous to the vloggers. During this time I was observing, mapping, and interpreting the use of the vlog as a medium. I had initially decided to stay invisible partly because I thought that was the best way to be unobtrusive and because I was convinced that my research was entirely focused on representation. I also reasoned that it was unnecessary for me to disclose myself because the material was publicly available. I consulted different ethical guidelines (AoIR 2002; Buchanan 2004; Bromseth 2003; White 2002; O’Riordan and Bassett 2002; Svenningsson Elm 2009; Ess 2009), and most of them agree that it is consistent with ethical responsibility not to disclose oneself and not to pursue informed consent if the material “is open and available for everyone, that everyone with an Internet connection can access, and that does not require any form of membership or registration” (Svenningsson Elm 2009: 75). I also consulted the review board in Denmark, the Danish Data Protection Agency, and according to their guidelines I did not have to obtain informed consent, but I needed to anonymize the vloggers when publishing my material (unless I had been given permission from them).<sup>4</sup>

My initial thoughts slightly changed when I came to Berkeley Center for New Media as a visiting scholar in Spring 2011, as I decided to add interviews to my study. I had thought about doing interviews with the vloggers for quite some time, but it was not until I was in the United States,

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<sup>4</sup> The Danish Data Protection Agency is a state institution providing juridical permission, protecting individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data.

where most of the vloggers were geographically situated, that I contacted them. Experiencing and getting insights into the offline American trans community and political climate around trans issues was one of purposes of going to the States. When I eventually frequented a physical space and a community where I could potentially meet the vloggers in person, it made me feel slightly uneasy about my own invisible presence online. I did not feel that it was unethical as such not to announce my presence as a researcher online, but I increasingly felt that it would be the most right thing to do to let them know that I was analyzing their life/representation online, enabling them to express concerns and reservations. I also became more and more curious about the YouTubers' motivations for, experiences with, and thoughts about vlogging. Even though my research was focused on self-representation and life online, I increasingly felt it would strengthen the research to engage with, include, and address the vloggers' motivations and experiences. Deciding to conduct interviews also reflected that I felt drawn toward a virtual ethnographic approach, which I had deliberately rejected when I started my research, thinking that I would be focusing exclusively on representation. But I became more and more interested in how these mediations and representations affect and were affected by offline experiences and politics, thus how offline and online trans lives intersect.

I conducted five interviews in spring 2011 while I was in the United States (one in person and four through Skype) and one in fall 2011 after I came back to Denmark (also conducted through Skype, but I had previously met up with this person while I was in the States to discuss my research and prepare for an interview). Choosing to conduct interviews was also part of the reason why I decided upon eight case study vloggers. I already had several hours of empirical material in the vlogs themselves, but adding interviews would increase my material even further, and I therefore decided that eight was more than enough. However, I decided

upon the case vloggers before asking them to participate in an interview, which explains why I conducted six interviews (two of them never replied my message). I recorded all of the interviews but I only transcribed the parts that I found specifically relevant. The interviews were semi-structured (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), based on an interview guide that focused on three main topics that I wanted covered: (1) their motivations for vlogging, (2) their perception of YouTube as a site, (3) how notions and experiences of private/public played into the above. The questions were open-ended, trying to cover the listed topics but also encouraging “conversation” by asking supplementary questions in connection with the things brought up by the interviewee and at times conveying my own understanding when it seemed relevant and asked for. The interview typically lasted one to two hours, depending on how “talkative” they were and how interested they were in my research. I perceived their role during the interview as research subjects but also as “experts” or “folk theorists” (Hine 2000: 76), reflecting on the act of vlogging while doing it—or “studying” vlogging through practice. I also consider the interviews as a kind of “expert interviews,” offering me insights into the vlogging community as it is experienced from an insider’s/expert’s point of view. By conducting interviews I wanted to include the vlogger’s own observations, giving them the opportunity to comment on their experiences and motivations while also possibly testing and challenging my preliminary readings, thus I wanted to explore if and how these readings were consistent with or departures from the vloggers’ own self-perception and understanding of the field. As Christine Hine states, engaging with participants “allows for a deeper sense of understanding of meaning creation [...] Questions can be asked and emerging analytic concepts tested and refined, with the cooperation of informants” (Hine 2000: 23).

I signed up for a YouTube account (February 2011) and created my own personal channel page called “Trans Researcher,” where I identified

myself as a “FTM transguy” and stated my personal and professional motivation for doing the research. I also included my e-mail address and my research weblog on my YouTube channel page so that the vloggers could access my publications and research info as well as contact me with questions and concerns.<sup>5</sup> However, I did not upload videos, as I did not want to be a producer myself and be part of the vlogging community as such. I also refrained from engaging with the vloggers through “liking” and “recommending” their videos or writing comments; thus I tried to balance researcher visibility with researcher unobtrusiveness. I wanted to be visibly present but not encourage certain practices or promote certain opinions. I also created a channel page in order to disclose myself before I asked the vloggers to participate in an interview. It was a matter of gaining the vloggers’ trust but also a way to enable dialogue. Furthermore, I created a channel page because I wanted to approach the vloggers through the medium that they themselves used and I could not write to them unless I had a profile myself. In some instances I could not send them a message before I became “friends” with them and so I did.

When I approached the vloggers I made sure to explain my project in a short and clear-cut way while also once again disclosing myself as a trans person and explaining the intended outcome of the project (that is, “contribute to a more nuanced understanding of being trans”). I was indeed aware that “self-presentation is crucial in forming relationships with potential informants in online settings” (Ibid.: 74). In other words, I positioned myself as an “insider,” highlighting our supposedly shared experiences and mutual fight for trans rights and visibility. Like Internet researchers before me (for example, Janne Bromseth and Laurie Cubbison) I, too, felt it essential to make explicit my researcher persona to the community but also to have a personal and/or political stake in the

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<sup>5</sup> See my research blog: <http://www.tobiasraun.dk/>

community agenda in order to maintain both personal and research credibility (McKee and Porter 2009: 102).

### **The Researcher as Insider/Outsider**

During the research process I have several times asked myself and been asked by others about my investment in the research: “How and why do you research trans people?” For some people this prompts skepticism, as they fear that I might be too personally involved and too politically invested in my research, which might compromise my “objectivity” and jeopardize the critical analysis. For others it prompts enthusiasm, as they perceive it as a strength that I am familiar with the discussions and claims of identity that I am writing about.<sup>6</sup> It is a matter of being close/too close or distant/too distant from your field of research. But as Internet researcher Laurie Cubbison says: “It is unrealistic to expect us to be totally divorced from the topic that the research focuses around. Not only is it unrealistic, I would say it’s bad scholarship” (Cubbison, quoted in *Ibid.*: 100). However, as race and adoption scholar Lene Myong Petersen points out, certain research positionalities are perceived as being more marked and personally invested than others. Some are at greater risk of being defined as too close to their field of study, while others appear to be more distant, thus they are not required/encouraged to consider their own positionality (Myong Petersen 2009: 293). Professor of Film Studies Richard Dyer, who begins his book *White* by positioning himself, illuminates this:

I begin with a consideration of my own relation to whiteness, my sense of myself

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<sup>6</sup> I am inspired by Lene Myong Petersen, who, in her unpublished PhD dissertation, raises these issues in connection with her own positionality as a Korean adoptee researching kinship, race, gender, and sexuality amongst Korean adoptees in Denmark. See Myong Petersen, Lene: *Adopteret—Fortællinger om transnational og racialiseret tilblivelse* [Becoming Adoptee. On Transnational and Racialized Subjectification], PhD dissertation, Department of Learning, DPU, Aarhus University, 2009. Especially pp. 283–308.

as white. It has become common for those marginalized by culture to acknowledge the situation from which they speak, but those who occupy positions of cultural hegemony blithely carry on as if what they say is neutral and unsituated—human not raced (Dyer 1997: 4).

I am very much aware of this when I talk about my research at get-togethers or conferences. I am often asked why I am researching this particular group of people, as if my topic itself requires explanation and cannot “pass” as one of those obviously important and legitimate fields of research. However, I often feel as if it is also I as a researcher whose “passing” is questioned, thus in these cases I am left with two choices: to say that it is because I am trans myself or to say that this particular group of people’s use of the media is interesting, taking into consideration how they are portrayed in mainstream media and positioned within a medico-psychological discourse. And what are the possible effects of my different answers? Does occupying the “same” identity position undermine or strengthen my legitimacy as a researcher and the subject’s scientific relevance? And do I really want to disclose my trans identity in every random small talk about my current job situation?

In gender and new media scholar Janne Bromseth’s research on “sapfo” (a discussion group for lesbian and bisexual Norwegian women), she acted as both a participant and an observer. Identifying as a lesbian herself and participating in the group made it important for her to feel that the group was supportive of her research. It also made her especially sensitive to what effects her presence as researcher might have (Bromseth, quoted in McKee and Porter 2009: 91–92). This makes me wonder whether the need for support from the subjects that you study is more pronounced when you are researching a community/identities that you yourself are part of or claiming. And is it possible that an “insider” might either censor oneself or be more aware of and therefore possibly more critical of tensions/assumptions among or within the group studied?



In my own research I have experienced that my self-perceived insider position made me assume that I already had the consent or support of the online trans community. However, after just a couple months of study I received a Facebook inbox message from an American vlogger situated in Sweden who had come across a posting of one of my articles on the wall of one of our mutual Facebook friends and read it. The article was an analysis of a Danish documentary about trans men, elaborating on the political situation for trans people in Denmark. Only in the short biography was it listed that I was writing a PhD about trans video blogs on YouTube. The article resulted in a longer e-mail correspondence between him and me. He criticized my perception of trans (as put forth in the article), which he felt ignored/negated the possibility of a biological reason for transsexuality that he himself claimed, and as such he was very hostile toward a “humanistic” approach, taking its point of departure in queer and transgender studies. He was also very opinionated about my invisibility as a researcher and the lack of informed consent (accusing me of treating the vloggers as “lab rats”). This continued two years later, again sparked by a Facebook post, disseminating information on an international transgender studies seminar that I had arranged and where I was going to present. This time he went public with the debate, first on the event page on Facebook and then in a vlog (tagging me with my full name), warning the other vloggers against my supposed lurking, and asking for their opinion on the way that I was conducting research on YouTube. I engaged with him on YouTube, stating in the public comment section that I had informed the vloggers who appear in the research and that I had conducted interviews.

The initial incident taught me that I could not take a position as “insider” for granted (which I maybe rather naively had assumed), and I was also reminded of the harm that I could potentially do as a researcher if I did not do justice to the vloggers’ own stories and perceptions of gender, which made me reflect even further on my ethical stances and

responsibility as a researcher. However, the last incident also made me reconsider how power relations work between researcher and research subjects. I as a researcher was not in complete control but could risk my name and reputation anytime by these ever proliferating accusations of unethical research practices that the vlogger posted across media platforms. As he said himself in a reply to my comment on my current practice:

If you would like me to remove your name from the title of the video, I will. While I have the power to make this video show up on the first page every time someone googles your name, I'm not interested in using power that way. Let me know if it makes you feel uncomfortable and I will take care of it (comment 18/10/2011).

I was reminded of the many kinds of power at work in research interaction. As the lesbian self-identified researchers Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp also point out in their study on drag queens in Key West, Florida:

We began this project aware of the complex relationship of our different structural positions, identities, and standpoints and their likely impact on the research. While it was true that we were economically and educationally advantaged, and we were the ones writing the book, the drag queens had other kinds of power [...] And they did not hesitate to use their power to remind us that education and economic security are not everything (Taylor and Rupp 2005: 2123).

Taylor and Rupp explain how the drag queens from the beginning, and in all sorts of public settings, referred to them as “the lesbians,” “the pussy lickers,” “the professors of lesbian love,” and regularly incorporated them into their shows, pulling down Verta’s top and bra to expose her breasts onstage, or grabbing their breasts and pubic areas, which the researchers accepted “as part of a leveling process,” although it made them angry (Ibid.). Although my experiences were nothing like this, conducting

research in the age of the Internet offers potential risks and harms for all parties involved. Although the vlogger removed my name from the title of the video, my name is still present in the description of the vlog (and not least in the video itself), and the video therefore still pops up every time someone searches for my name, and has now had more than 1,400 views. The only disclaimer to what is being said in the video are my comments below the video, but few people might take the time to read these.

My initial experiences of being challenged as an “insider” made me address and discuss in the interviews how the vloggers felt about me researching their vlogs. They all responded that they did not have any concerns and many of them expressed gratitude that I took the time to do it. This could have been an effect of the implicit power relation between them and me qua my positionality as a researcher, thus they might want to make a good impression or please me, hoping that I would produce a positive reading of their vlogs. Besides, if a vlogger were reserved toward a researcher intruding and analyzing their vlogs, they would properly not have responded to my YouTube message in the first place. As mentioned, two vloggers did not answer my messages, which can be interpreted as both hostility as well as indifference. But the ones whom I did interview expressed comfortability with and even happiness about the project, and some thanked me for doing the research. When I asked Diamond at the end of her interview if she had something she would like to add, she said:

I commend you for just taking the time and doing this project, it's just amazing [...] It's such a small community, everybody is not taking the time to be interested in it and just really look and I think it's a jewel that people are not paying attention to, it's beautiful, I learn stuff every day [...] and I'm glad that you are doing this (Interview tape 2: 32:13–32:52).

Mason also wrote me twice before the actual interview: “I'm glad you're doing this study!” (on YouTube when I requested an interview and in an e-

mail when setting up a time for the interview). When I asked him during the interview to elaborate on this he replied:

I think it's a great thing because one of the things that I love about YouTube is that I feel that we [trans people] come from a place of empowerment [...] we are creating our own story and narrative [...] so if you are doing research highlighting the fact that we have been very active in the very process of finding community and defining our experiences, that's important for people to know that we are not just hiding away in our apartments [...] It's good for people to see transgender people as being articulate and creative—and thinking that they deserve to connect and have a community (Interview: 59:29–01:00:36).

One might say that interacting with the vloggers did in fact confirm that I had their consent and support, but that they also expected me to conduct sympathetic readings.

When discussing my positionality, many found it reassuring that I was trans myself, which also made them position me as an insider, while others were more indifferent about whether a researcher had to share their claim of identity. As Erica stated, “Somebody in the [trans] community knows the terminology, they know how to navigate that community so it [...] makes it easier” (Interview tape 2: 18:50). She was not at all dismissive about non-trans researchers, but in her opinion it “makes it easier” when the researcher also identifies as trans, thus it reduces the risk of misunderstandings as the researcher “knows the terminology” and it reduces the risk of violating the informants as the researcher “knows how to navigate the community.”

I am, however, not just an insider; I am also an outsider. I do not uncritically coincide with the trans vloggers just because we share or self-identify within the same label (trans), as there are many other claims of identity that we do not share (nationality, gender identity, sexuality, race, age, and so on). But most of all I am an outsider because I am a researcher and because I am not a vlogger. The vloggers seemed to find my dual positionality beneficial. On the one hand they positioned me as a fellow

trans “activist” with valuable insights into trans issues and communities and on the other hand they positioned me as an “academic” who could help create awareness about trans people and issues in a different way and within other types of publics than they could reach with their vlogs. As Elisabeth stated, “When that information [my research] is out there, I think it’s phenomenal—it makes people interested in the topic or at least neutral on the topic and that’s what we [trans people] are looking for I guess” (Interview: 01:09:22–01:09:34). Wheeler also hoped that my research could spark even more studies on transgender issues and could supply the vloggers themselves with a greater understanding of “the sociological perspective on it [vlogging]” (Interview: 49:50–49:58).

### **Seeing and Sensing**

Conducting the research, I felt that I was not only both an insider and an outsider but that my approach, in the words of Internet research scholar Mary K. Walstrom, was a combination of “seeing” and “sensing” the field of study. Walstrom employs the terms in connection with her research on an online support group for individuals struggling with eating disorders. She uses the terms as a way to conceptualize her position as a researcher, analyzing the interaction/self-representation (“seeing”) while also affectively responding to the interaction (“sensing”) by being a group member and/or being a person coping with, or having overcome, the same dilemma facing participants (Walstrom 2004: 82). I acknowledge my aforementioned “interpretive desire” and my involvement with the field of study, thus as transgender studies scholar Jay Prosser states, “I’m not uninvolved: reading autobiography is always a pointed engagement of the self, and these texts on several levels constitute *my* mirror scene” (Prosser 1998: 103). Recognizing my own attachment has directed me toward theories of embodied spectatorship and affect theory, which I explicitly turn to in chapter 5 and 7. As film and media scholar Laura U. Marks notes,

film viewing is an interactive exchange between bodies, engaging the senses and the intellect, thus the body is always already present in the act of seeing (Marks 2000: 149, 151). Affect studies offers me a platform from which to address or be attentive toward the “cybertouch” of these vlogs, pointing toward the material-semiotic character of digital cultures and accounting for the intertwining of technology and feelings (Kuntsman 2012: 3). Or in other words affect studies asks that one pay attention to the “affective fabrics of digital cultures,” the lived and deeply felt everyday sociality of online presence and interactions, expressions of experiences and emotions, some of which “can be pinned down to words or structures; others are intense yet ephemeral” (Ibid.). Although affect studies explicitly serves as a point from which to pay attention to emotions and affects produced, mediated, and negotiated in the researcher as well as the researched, virtual ethnography or “critical online ethnography” as it is undertaken by gender and media scholar Kathleen LeBesco also promotes or acknowledges the researcher’s personal investments in the field of study. LeBesco researches negotiations of the subjectivity online for overweight persons, and she explicitly states that her research is “a commitment to changing culture [...] rather than just claiming to describe culture” (LeBesco 2004: 71). Thus, she is trying “to invoke, rather than repress, [her] political biases regarding this area of study” (Ibid.). Christine Hine also points out that the virtual ethnographer “is not simply a voyeur or disengaged observer, but is also to some extent a participant, sharing some of the concerns, emotions and commitments of the research subject” (Hine 2000: 47).

### **The Distribution of Voice and Agency in Research Practice**

Within transgender studies the “insider” and “outsider” positionality has been widely debated. Transgender studies started out in the beginning of the 1990s as a “critical project” (Stryker 2006a: 12) or field of study that

specifically objected to “outsiders” theorizations, not least the psychological and medical experts, and objected to the pathologizing discourse that informed these studies on trans people. As transgender studies scholar and Director of an Institute for LGBT Studies Susan Stryker points out, people who occupied trans positions “were compelled to be referents in the language games of other senders and addressees,” whether it was as “objects of medical knowledge” or “dirty little outcasts of feminist and gay liberation discourses” (Ibid.). Only rarely did trans people speak on their own behalf. As trans theorist and performance artist Sandy Stone writes in the manifesto essay that many consider the beginning of transgender studies: “As with males theorizing about women from the beginning of time, theorists of gender have seen transsexuals as possessing something less than agency... The people who have no voice in this theorizing are the transsexuals themselves” (Stone 2006: 229). Stone’s text encourages trans people to engage in research in order to have/develop a voice. This would, according to Stone, not only empower trans people but also improve the quality of trans research, because it would be possible to develop “deeper analytical language for transsexual theory, one which allows for the sorts of ambiguities and polyvocalities” (Ibid.: 231).

I want to pause on the quest for researchers to allow “ambiguities and polyvocalities” because it ties into some of the theoretical and methodological concerns that I will raise in chapter 2. As Professor of Philosophy and Director of a Women’s Studies Program Laurie J. Shrage sums it up, “The emergence of trans studies attempts to contest the ways that trans individuals have been exploited or sensationalized by others with little concern about the lives and perspectives of trans people themselves” (Shrage 2009: 5). Studying trans people is a contested field, taking into consideration the long history of exploitive and harmful research done by non-trans people. Sandy Stone and transgender studies

and philosophy scholar Jacob Hale’s “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans” is a reminder of this history, but also a admonition to all researchers, trans or not, to engage with this field of study with a discerning mind and compassionate heart. Some of the key things that they point out are:

Interrogate your own subject position [...] Don’t erase our voices by ignoring what we say and write [...] Don’t totalize us, don’t represent us or our discourses as monolithic or univocal [...] Be aware that if you judge us with reference to your political agenda (or agendas) taken as the measure or standard [...] that it’s equally legitimate (or illegitimate, as the case may be) for us to use our political agenda(s) as measures by which to judge you and your work (Hale and Stone 1997/ongoing).<sup>7</sup>

What these suggested rules point out is both the importance of a nuanced representation that allows trans people to have a voice of their own, and the importance of the researcher to situate oneself.

### **Heated Debates**

Through the research process I have kept Stone and Hales’s suggested rules in mind, and they have, among other things, spurred me to think carefully about what I would term “narrative ethics” and how I could let the vloggers’ stories “breathe.” One of the guiding principles of this dissertation has been to present the vloggers’ own voices and validate their perspectives. I have deliberately refrained from judging and deconstructing the vloggers self-representations/self-narratives, as it is not the purpose of this research to present some claims of identities/narratives as more correct or subversive than others. This has been a challenge, not least because of the different and often competing claims of identity within trans/queer communities (both online and

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>



offline), where strong personal and political opinions prevail. As also noted by Mason in a vlog, there is a lot of censoring and policing of one another's languages and identities in the trans community, not least in online forums (January 24, 2012). He feels as if "we are forcing each other into a common mindset or value system," which often alienates trans people from their own community and doubles the feeling of alienation and lack of understanding and support from mainstream society (Ibid.). I suspect that Mason is (implicitly) referring to an incident that started out on Twitter where Lucas Silvieira (trans singer), Buck Angel (trans porn star), and Stephen Ira (trans activist, blogger and the son of Warren Beatty and Annette Bening) discussed whether it was OK for a trans man to use the word "tranny" (or if it was only OK for a trans woman). The discussion soon proliferated to other sites and blogs, for example to Lucas Silvieira's personal Facebook fan page, where several trans/queer people attacked Silvieira for claiming the word "tranny" for himself and for not acknowledging his "male privilege." Silvieira ended up stating in a status update:

Yesterday was an incredibly revealing day. I realized that in the last 6 years of being out as a trans man that I have been more criticized, condemned, and judged by the queer community than I have by the hetero/mainstream community. I find this unsettling (January 20, 2012).

This is just one among many examples of the "flamings" taking place through social media about trans identity within and among trans and queer communities/people. This infighting evolves around labeling and power relations, and the tone is often rather harsh. Thus, my research takes place within a contested field characterized by different border wars not only historically and theoretically but also currently within online trans/queer communities, especially around trans male identities. There seems to be a budding of claims of and visibilities for trans identities, evolving in tandem with a continuous broadening and renewal of self-

identifying labels and claims of identities. As transgender migration studies scholar Aren Z. Aizura states, “Trans subcultures seem to invent a new term every week, and render others obsolescent at the same rate.” This diversity of terms does of course reflect “that people engage in many different kinds of practices to negotiate the bodies they are born with, and the possibilities for modifying, re-signifying or living with those bodies” (Aizura 2006: 296). Many of these evolving claims of trans identities are clearly informed by queer politics, renegotiating and challenging what is perceived as previously established hierarchies and legitimate versions of trans identities (the medically reassigned, heterosexually identified trans male/female). Many of these emerging claims of trans identity are outspokenly an attempt to deconstruct “heteropatriarchy,” “male privilege,” and “white privilege” and to combat “cissexism”—terms that now circulate widely and often are used derogatorily in discussions around certain behaviors and identities. It seems fair to say that the circulation of these concepts reflects the emergence of “enlightened” online trans communities as well as the formation of new hierarchies. Public figures such as Lucas Silveira and Chaz Bono circulate in many blogs and online discussions as the personifications of the “patriarchy,” “male privilege,” and “heteronormativity” that trans politics should dissociate itself from.

Participating in the Trans\*Studies Conference in Ontario (March 2012) contributed considerably to my awareness about not only the discussions but also their heatedness or intensity, especially in the United States. As I suspected, the discussions were fueled by divergence between what could be labeled as assimilation-seeking transsexuals and radical genderqueers but cuts across a much broader terrain. After three days of “smoldering fire,” the closing session on “The Future of Trans\*Studies” ended in a heated debate where people started crying and most of the participants claimed to feel misrepresented and policed at the conference.

Trans/queer people of color and female-identified people felt underrepresented while heterosexually identified white trans men felt demonized and ostracized. One could argue that the term “trans” despite its intended inclusiveness seems unable to bridge these divides. Furthermore, students and nonacademics felt their knowledge bypassed and academics felt that they were appointed a privileged position that did not correspond with the struggles they fought within academia being trans scholars and/or conducting transgender studies. As queer studies and philosophy scholar Gayle Salamon also points out, “Trans Studies does not of yet have anything like a stable foothold within the academy (Salamon 2010: 96). Tellingly, the conference was comprised of a lot of tensions as well as a remarkable number of papers (my own included) warning against the waging of war on one another.

Presenting my work for a non-trans academic audience elsewhere has likewise been challenging. Non-trans researchers from a wide range of research fields such as social science, art and media studies, and queer studies have been surprisingly preoccupied with and opinionated about whether the performances and narratives of the vloggers I studied were subversive/radical enough and if I as a researcher was critical enough toward their self-representations. A researcher encouraged me to be critical towards possible (hetero)normative self-representations and to include trans people who did not make use of gender-reassigning technologies and who identified within the genderqueer spectrum because they were “more queer.” Others have been surprised that my examples were not obviously “queer,” implying that I as a trans researcher would be interested in doing research that first and foremost “genderfucked” the binary gender system. I encountered a similar yet different response when I presented my work for a gender research group that I am part of at Roskilde University. Apparently the vloggers’ continued focus on and enthusiasm about their increased “masculinization” and “feminization” left

one of my colleagues, a middle-aged non-trans male social scientist, alarmed and puzzled. He found these outbursts of joy and relief “pubertarian” and “naïve,” thus he was slightly ridiculing the feelings that these vloggers expressed in connection with their transition while also implying that they were more suitable for a teenager. All in all he objected to my reading of the vlogs as political in any sense and he encouraged me to include a critical reading of what he saw as nothing but highly self-centered and exhibitionistic vloggers. This ties into a widespread tendency to dismiss online amateur video as “little more than the digital trash of a generation armed with too much technology, too much spare time, and too little talent” (Strangelove 2010: 12). And yet I find it interesting that these researchers/scholars of different ages and fields of study all seem to be equally preoccupied with the subversiveness and properness of gender expressions among the vloggers. As far as I perceive it, two things are in play here: (1) a widespread expectation that trans people enact (or should enact) a more “queer” version of femininity and masculinity (whatever that means) and refrain from reproducing normative versions/understandings of gender, and (2) an expectation that good research is critical and deconstructive. But what does critical research actually mean, aside from often being connected to some kind of “tracing-and-exposure project” as queer theory scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues (Sedgwick 2003: 124). Affect and queer studies scholar Sara Ahmed admits being attached to being critical and yet warns that “critical” often functions as a place where the researcher deposits their anxieties, protecting oneself from doing—or even being seen to do—the wrong kind of studies. Critical hereby “functions within the academy to differentiate between the good and the bad, the progressive and the conservative, where ‘we’ always line up with the former” (Ahmed 2004b: 8, 2). I do not oppose conducting critical research—quite on the contrary—but I oppose doing a particular kind of critical research, the kind that Sedgwick

pinpoints as “paranoid.” According to Sedgwick, queer studies have a particular distinctive history of and intimate relationship with the paranoid imperative (Sedgwick 2003: 126). Although Sedgwick acknowledges the importance of paranoid exigencies, and makes the claim that they are often necessary for non-paranoid knowing and utterance, she also points out that the mushrooming, self-confirming strength of anticipating negative affect can result in entirely blocking the potentially operative goal of seeking positive affect (Ibid.: 128, 136). The faith in demystifying exposure forecloses other ways of knowing, less oriented toward suspicion. As Sedgwick points out, to produce other kinds of knowledge than paranoid readings does not in itself entail “a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression” (Ibid.: 128). In line with Sedgwick, I am committed to “reparative readings” when analyzing the vlogs and their possible effects. Reparative reading strategies allow for surprises and hope and are “additive and accretive” (Ibid.: 146, 149).

### **Letting Stories Breathe**

In my readings of the trans vlogs I am driven by a commitment to “letting stories breathe,” which is an attitude inspired by the title of Professor of Sociology Arthur Frank’s book about socio-narratology. Frank labels his approach “dialogical,” and opposes it to interpretive analysis based on “decoding,” where the analyst is assigned the privilege to speak and “reveal truths not readily accessible to those who see only appearances” (Frank 2010: 93–94). This opposition is not unlike the “reparative” and “paranoid” reading strategies outlined by Sedgwick. When I came across Frank’s approach it resonated with my own thoughts and considerations about methodology. Some of the fundamental premises of my research are to acknowledge and “*trust the storyteller*” and to avoid letting the vloggers’ life stories be cut up into small pieces, becoming “patients on the narratological dissecting table” (Ibid.: 9, 17, emphasis in original), which

as I will discuss in chapter 2 is often what trans identities/narratives are subjected to. In line with Frank I engage in analysis with the vlogs as somewhat of a dialogical interaction, where I as a researcher will not foreclose what another person might become (Ibid.: 16). I am aware that I am “emplotting the lives of others” (King 2008: 341), which encourages me to pay close attention to not finalizing the story or the storyteller and indeed to approach not only the storyteller but also the story itself as “vital *living things*” (Frank 2010: 20, emphasis in original). My effort as a researcher to not finalize is especially important when taking into consideration that the (life) stories of trans on YouTube are ongoing, continuously being revised, retold, and recontextualized as an individual vlogger’s story changes and is situated within an ever changing personal and collective archive of stories. This indeed makes interpretation a work in progress. The dialogical mode of interpretation also entails that the researcher “takes particular interest in *learning from the storytellers*” (Ibid.: 17, emphasis in original), recognizing vlogging as a (self-)reflexive practice where the YouTubers are not just telling stories but also constantly conducting their own narrative analysis, making sense of the stories they hear and the ones they tell. Also implied is the acknowledgment that each analysis is the relationship between a story, a storyteller and a listener. What is analyzed is “how *each allows the other to be*” (Ibid.: 16, emphasis in original).

The analytical practice that Frank agitates for is one where the researcher is deeply ingrained in what I would coin “narrative ethics.” Frank does not use the term himself but he talks about “ethical will” to understand what “matters crucially to the other” (Ibid.: 95). In that sense, the dialogical interpretative practice is clearly informed by and imbued with ethical reflections. As Frank states, “A responsible relation to stories is a moral imperative, one aspect of which is never to aspire to control stories through their interpretations” (Ibid.: 110–111). The premise is

(though often temporarily forgotten) that no one—and this includes the researcher—has the whole story (Ibid.: 103). This is in line with some of the requests and contributions offered by transgender studies, acknowledging “the embodied experience of the speaking subject” as an important and essential component of the analysis of trans phenomena (Stryker 2006a: 12).

In my own research I am incorporating Frank’s ideas as a tool for approaching the analysis. Conducting semi-structured interviews is a way to engage with the vloggers and allow for a co-construction of meaning while also trying to acknowledge the vloggers’ status as experts, not only in their own lives but also on vlogging as a practice and YouTube as a site. However, I am first and foremost inspired by Frank’s ideas as a pervading attitude or approach that I as a researcher endeavor to have toward these trans self-representations and life-story narratives when developing theoretical and analytical concepts and ideas.

The crux of the matter is an awareness of not consuming or victimizing people and developing the analysis “with respectful curiosity,” trying to follow the storytellers, and to see from other positions (Frank 2010: 99, 104, 106). In the presentation and analysis of the trans vloggers’ self-representations in chapter 3 and 4, I deliberately develop an interpretation that “begins with letting each point of view have its moment of being the perspective that directs the consciousness of storyteller and listener” (Ibid.: 106–107). This is in order to follow the vloggers and allow polyphony to flourish. I am here also inspired by sociology scholar Raewyn Connell’s analytical approach in her work on masculinities, which she describes as “collecting life histories”—documentations of personal experience, ideology, and subjectivity, as well as social structures, social movements, and institutions (Connell 2005: 89). As she states, “Writing up each case study was both an attempt at a portrait of a person, and a reflection on the portrait’s meaning as evidence about social change”

(Ibid.: 91). However, this needs to be developed further in order to address audiovisual representations/stories. Neither Connell nor Frank are preoccupied with the visual enactment of the story or how stories are communicated through visual media. This dissertation is therefore an attempt to think through and develop an analysis that addresses the digital and the visual in relation to trans life storytelling.

Overall, the research is guided by the following research questions:

- How do trans people narrate and visualize the encounter with and experience of transitioning processes and technologies?
- What opportunities do a new media like the vlog bring about for trans people in relation to the representation of self- and community building?
- And what (new) possibilities for the visualization and communication of affective politics does the vlog enable?

But before engaging directly with the vlogs I will offer a comprehensive overview of the psycho-medical and juridical discourses and legislations around trans, as these play a significant role in trans people's lives and rights to self-determination and are fundamental for understanding what the trans vloggers negotiate and challenge through their vlogs. Included in this comprehensive overview is also an extensive analysis and discussion of the ways in which trans identities/narratives have been theoretically framed, which situates the vloggers' self-presentations within a broader gender-theoretical terrain and provides a platform from which my analysis takes its point of departure



## Chapter 2

### Trans as a Pathologized and Contested Identity Category

This chapter situates and contextualizes the trans vlogs within a broader historical, social, psycho-medical, and theoretical field of study. I divide this chapter into two different and yet interrelated parts, where I unfold a nuanced understanding of what trans is connected to or theorized as—as an identity category and as a lived practice. In part one I outline and analyze how trans is closely tied to and dependent on various kinds of psycho-medical health-care professionals and institutions and juridical classification/reclassification systems, systems that I argue need to be considered in order to develop a well-founded analysis of the communication and representation of identity in/through the vlogs. I address the emergence of trans in medical discourse as an identity in need of treatment, the psycho-medical diagnostic procedures and barriers of access, as well as some of the socio-economic issues around (medically) transitioning. Trans is however not just a highly pathologized and regulated identity category within psycho-medical discourse but has also been a site of contestation within gender studies. In the second part of this chapter I engage with multiple discourses of trans as they circulate and are appointed meaning within gender studies. This part offers an analysis of the ways in which trans becomes a theoretical figure, and, as I will argue, becomes part of a ideological project, focusing on normative (re)production and/or subversive deconstruction. Some of the outlined discussions run through and are carried on by the vloggers. This part also serves as a platform, pinpointing my motivation for engaging with the vloggers and the vlogs the way I do and for developing theoretical ways of framing and thinking of trans identities/narratives.

## **2.1. The Pathologization of Trans: Diagnosis, Health-Care Access, and (Lack of) Rights**

### **Trans as a Pathologized Identity Category**

Psychological and medical experts have for a long time dominated the agenda of how to study trans life stories. The focus has often exclusively been (and still is to a certain extent) on diagnosis, classification, and treatment. The clinical bibliography on transgender phenomena dates back to the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States with figures like Richard von Krafft-Ebbing, Karl von Westphal, Max Marcuse, Magnus Hirshfeld, and Havelock Ellis (Stryker 2006a: 13). Trans as an identity category was labeled “transsexuality” and institutionalized by psycho-medical gender scientists such as Harry Benjamin, Robert Stroller, Richard Green, and John Money, often regarded as the “founding fathers.” They offered the theoretical basis for the establishment of gender-identity clinics and programs for trans people in the second half of the twentieth century, considering transsexuality an abnormal psychology and a mental disorder that could be treated with various kinds of technologies. In their writing there is a predominant use of misleading pronouns to describe the trans patients, and a labeling of trans women as “male transsexuals” and trans men as “female transsexuals,” as well as a labeling of trans women who have relationships with men as “homosexual transsexuals” (see Califia 1997: 52–85). This pinpoints the top-down language used to describe trans people/identity, a language and a labeling authorized and controlled by the psycho-medical establishment. The medical profession acknowledged trans as an identity that should have access to transitioning technologies, but the underlying understanding was indeed pathological. Harry Benjamin, one of the first medical authorities to advocate sex reassignment as the only appropriate and effective treatment for transsexuality, developed diagnostic criteria for what he termed a “true

transsexual” (Califia 1997: 58). The notion of a true transsexual is assumed throughout most of the psycho-medical research on transsexuality, highlighting certain experiences, feelings, and self-perceptions as legitimate for medical intervention but not others. The role of the psychiatrist, including such figures as Harry Benjamin, Richard Green, and John Money, is to spot the true transsexual and discard the deceitful, controlling identity of trans. Their approach was based on “a medical model of health versus disease to gender identity and pleasure seeking behavior” (Ibid.: 80). Their diagnostic criteria were based on a belief in polarization between the sexes, upholding society’s definition of masculinity and femininity with heterosexuality as the standard for sexual normalcy. Trans women should therefore show signs of enjoyment in sexual receptivity and trans men enjoyment in sexual activity (Ibid.: 69). It is a powerful past that still plays a role within contemporary diagnostic criteria.

The exclusive focus on diagnosis, classification, and treatment not only reduces the field of study but also dictates what kind of gender identities and life-story narratives trans people can/shall claim in order to be recognized and accepted within a psycho-medical sphere. Being recognized and accepted within this sphere is necessary in order to access medical sex reassignment technologies (hormones and surgeries), as well as a change in legal gender status. Recognition within a psycho-medical sphere involves being diagnosed with “Gender Identity Disorder” (GID). Most clinicians (and health-insurance companies) in the United States and to varying degrees around the world rely on the diagnostic criteria listed in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (usually referred to as just DSM), which is published by the American Psychiatric Association. The criteria for GID are as follows:

- A. A strong and persistent cross-gender identification (not merely a desire for any perceived cultural advantages of being the other sex) [...] In adolescents and

adults, the disturbance is manifested by symptoms such as a stated desire to be the other sex, frequent passing as the other sex, desire to live or be treated as the other sex, or the conviction that he or she has the typical feelings and reactions of the other sex. B. Persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex [...] In adolescents and adults, the disturbance is manifested by symptoms such as preoccupation with getting rid of primary and secondary sex characteristics (e.g., request for hormones, surgery, or other procedures to physically alter sexual characteristics to simulate the other sex) or belief that he or she was born the wrong sex (*DSM IV* 2000).<sup>1</sup>

A diagnosis involves psychological, psychiatric, and physical evaluations/tests and a period of living in the desired gender role, the so-called “real-life-test,” before access is granted. The “real-life-test” was developed to anticipate the kinds of psycho-social challenges that the trans person might encounter and to test whether the trans person was able to live as a full member of the desired sex. However, the test monitors and evaluates a modus of living that is not entirely possible because no

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<sup>1</sup> The complete version is: “A. A strong and persistent cross-gender identification (not merely a desire for any perceived cultural advantages of being the other sex). In children, the disturbance is manifested by four (or more) of the following: 1. Repeatedly stated desire to be, or insistence that he or she is, the other sex. 2. In boys, preference for cross-dressing or simulating female attire; in girls, insistence on wearing only stereotypical masculine clothing. 3. Strong and persistent preferences for cross-sex roles in make-believe play or persistent fantasies of being the other sex. 4. Intense desire to participate in the stereotypical games and pastimes of the other sex. 5. Strong preference for playmates of the other sex. In adolescents and adults, the disturbance is manifested by symptoms such as a stated desire to be the other sex, frequent passing as the other sex, desire to live or be treated as the other sex, or the conviction that he or she has the typical feelings and reactions of the other sex. B. Persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex. In children, the disturbance is manifested by any of the following: In boys, assertion that his penis or testes are disgusting or will disappear or assertion that it would be better not to have a penis, or aversion toward rough-and-tumble play and rejection of male stereotypical toys, games, and activities; In girls, rejection of urinating in a sitting position, assertion that she has or will grow a penis, or assertion that she does not want to grow breasts or menstruate, or marked aversion toward normative feminine clothing. In adolescents and adults, the disturbance is manifested by symptoms such as preoccupation with getting rid of primary and secondary sex characteristics (e.g., request for hormones, surgery, or other procedures to physically alter sexual characteristics to simulate the other sex) or belief that he or she was born the wrong sex. C. The disturbance is not concurrent with a physical intersex condition. D. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (*DSM IV* 2000, <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevision/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=482#>)

transitioning technologies have of yet been applied to enable the trans person's legal and social recognition as the preferred sex (Irving 2008: 44). The test is still applied in a lot of gender clinics as one of the parameters for accessing transitioning technologies.

The mental-health professional has a paradoxical dual role, as they are *both* the counselor and the evaluator facilitating access to medical and legal sex change, which “is likely to compromise the conduciveness of the therapeutic process” (Korell and Lorah 2007: 277). The diagnosis works in several ways, including legitimization and access to intervention or transitioning technologies. However, the diagnosis also operates “as an instrument of pathologization” (Butler 2004: 76). The pathologization revolves around having one's sense of self/identity labeled as a “mental disorder,” which presupposes the evaluation and screening of psycho-medical establishment before medical intervention. Thus, the diagnosis still today renders trans as “an abnormal individual phenomenon” (Aizura 2006: 297). As queer theory philosopher Judith Butler formulates it in her analysis of GID, “one has to submit to labels and names, to incursions, to invasions; one has to be gauged against measures of normalcy” (Butler 2004, 91). The diagnosis thereby “works as its own social pressure, causing distress, establishing wishes as pathological, intensifying the regulation and control of those who express them in institutional settings” (Ibid.: 99). The clinical diagnosis of GID enforces what it regulates—namely a binary and heteronormative model of sex and gender. The diagnostic criteria assume that gender norms are fixed, thus gender identity becomes a matter of finding the right category. Furthermore, any discomfort or distress is assumed to be derived from the trans person and not from the gender norms that are taken to be fixed and intransigent (Ibid.: 95). In this sense diagnoses of GID as a regulatory apparatus “produce and discipline coherently sexed bodies as binarized” (Noble 2012: 145). Social and cultural claims or performances of normative

gender become the criteria by which trans people access transitioning technologies and rights to juridical recognition of their gender.<sup>2</sup>

One's ability to be recognized and legitimized as trans by a psycho-medical establishment is, as transgender studies and political economy scholar Dan Irving argues, also dependent upon class and economic status. It is therefore problematic to advocate for validation for transsexuals within a discourse of economic productivity, as this reproduces discriminatory structures of inequality (Irving 2008: 51, 40). From early medical records and onward, medical experts required detailed information from their trans patients on their own occupation and social status as well as their family's (Ibid.: 42). As Irving notes, a reading of the medical literature reveals a dominant belief that transsexuality as a mental disorder undermined trans people's productivity and created states of dependency: "The transsexual burdened society rather than contributing to it" (Ibid.: 47-48). The doctors therefore maintained that if untreated, this disorder would likely have a devastating impact on the transsexual individual and it was therefore their professional obligation to restore health in order to ensure healthy productive bodies (Ibid.: 48, 43). The so-called real-life-test is not just imbricated in heteronormative assumptions about proper gender and sexuality expressions/practices but has an economic component as well, as the test ultimately monitors "the future occupational capacities for the postoperative subjects" (Ibid.: 45) and the ability to be a proper citizen in the eyes of the state (Ibid.: 48). As Irving concludes, an important part of the diagnostic criteria is to restore or enable the trans person to become a viable social subject by their productive capacity and labor power, reinforcing regimes of capitalist accumulation (Ibid.: 44, 40).

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<sup>2</sup> For an elaboration on the narratological aspects of the diagnosis, see chapter 5.

## **Gender Categorization as a Vector of Discrimination**

Trans is not just an identity category closely connected to (historical) psycho-medical pathologization but also is one that is confronted with a wide variety of current juridical barriers that are of significant importance to many trans people, not least the trans vloggers as recounted in the vlogs. As associate law professor and founder of the Silvia Rivera Law Project, Dean Spade argues there are specifically three areas of law and policy that play a significant role in trans people's lives: rules that govern gender classification on identification papers (ID), rules that govern sex-segregation of key institutions, and rules governing access to gender-confirming health care for trans people (Spade 2011: 32).<sup>3</sup> From birth to death, gender categorization dominates and dictates our lives in various ways. The "M" and "F" boxes are present on nearly every form we fill out and govern spaces we can access (Ibid.: 142). Gender classifications are common and standard, which makes these classification systems seem neutral, given, and necessary for administering government programs. It is, however, a poststructuralist argument that these systems of classification do not merely describe preexisting types of beings but rather shape the world into these categories. Trans can be said to illustrate this in various ways, especially when looking at gender classification and reclassification policies around the world. What classifies and reclassifies one as male or female varies from country to country and from state to state, making it impossible to claim that sex is a universally stable and easily detachable referent.

Systems of classification are an important part of the discrimination of trans people. Or, as Dean Spade puts it, administrative gender classifications create problems for people who are difficult to classify or misclassified and they therefore become vectors of violence that diminish

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<sup>3</sup> The Silvia Rivera Law Project is a non-profit law collective that provides free legal services to transgender, intersex, and gender nonconforming people who are low-income and/or people of color.

life chances in various ways (Ibid.). Having identity documents that misidentify gender causes problems like barriers to employment, heightened vulnerability in interaction with police and other public officials, when traveling, as well as when attempting to do basic things like entering age-barred venues or confirming identity for the purpose of using a credit card and so on (Ibid.: 146). In general, trans people experience great difficulty with all administrative systems (Ibid.: 151). All in all, gender as a category of data for sorting populations operates as a potential vector of vulnerability and discrimination for trans people (Ibid.: 150).

In most countries in Europe, Asia, and Central, South, and North America, a legal change in gender is possible but only with pathologization, gender-reassignment surgery, and/or sterilization. However, In spring 2012, while finishing my dissertation, the government of Argentina approved a historically unique and significant “gender identity law” that grants trans people rights to self-determination and access to gender-confirming medical care in a way and on a scale not seen anywhere else. The law allows trans people to alter their gender on official documents without having to receive a psychiatric diagnosis or surgery. Furthermore, public and private medical practitioners are required to provide free hormone therapy and/or gender-reassignment surgery for those who want it—including those under the age of eighteen (Schmall 2012).<sup>4</sup> This law echoes the requests raised by transgender activists around the world as well as human-rights advocates. What is interesting is that the law stirs up some of the established notions about the relation between socio-geographic spaces and the evolution of identity politics As has been argued by queer theorist Jasbir Puar, global circulations of LGBT rights accord civilizational status to “gay-friendly” nations, cultures, and religions, typically the United States of America and Europe, associating them with modernity (aka liberal-mindedness and tolerance) whereas others,

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/25/world/americas/transgender-advocates-hail-argentina-law.html>



typically middle Eastern and Arab cultures, become framed as conservative and homophobic (Puar 2008; Puar and Mikdashi 2012). How and if this Argentine law will change ways of thinking and legislations elsewhere is yet to be seen.

In what follows I will outline what is still the governing principles and rules in Europe and United States of America for gender classification and trans health care, as these are the places of residence for the vloggers in this study. The vloggers will be included as exemplifications when specific issues concerning legislation and barriers of access appear and are discussed in the vlogs. However, this will primarily be in the outline of the governing principles in the United States, as most of the vloggers are situated there.

### **The Politics of Gender Classification and Trans Health Care in Europe**

As there has not been any thorough juridical and policy conducted and published based research on trans legislation and access to health care in a cross-European perspective, I am in the following relying on reports conducted by the Commissioner for Human Rights and FRA: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights that map the current situation and issue recommendations for EU member states.

As the legal analysis of transphobia and discrimination in Europe conducted by FRA notes, trans people in Europe face political and cultural exclusion and discrimination, as all EU countries require a “medical opinion”—meaning psychiatric diagnosis—before a legal gender reassignment is granted, and seventeen member states demand sterilization of trans men and castration of trans women. In fifteen countries trans people are not explicitly protected from discrimination even though 79 percent of trans people in the EU experience some form of harassment in public, ranging from transphobic comments to physical or sexual abuse (see FRA 2011). As concluded: “[Trans people] remain a

marginalized and victimized group, which faces a high degree of stigmatization, exclusion, and violence” (FRA 2010: 13). This was also the conclusion in an issue paper published in 2009 by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. As stated, trans people’s basic human rights are violated in various ways, including “the right to life, the right to physical integrity and the right to health” (Commissioner for Human Rights 2009: 5). Most EU member states require sterilization and castration or other surgery as a prerequisite to enjoy legal recognition of one’s preferred gender, although this surgery might not be wanted, possible, or available. As the commissioner states: “It is of great concern that transgender people appear to be the only group in Europe subject to legally prescribed, state-enforced sterilisation” (Ibid.: 19). The state not only prescribes treatment in a “one size fits all” manner but also strongly interferes in the private lives of trans individuals (Ibid.).<sup>5</sup> Most European

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<sup>5</sup> The Commissioner has presented twelve human-rights recommendations in relation to trans people that every member state of the Council of Europe should accommodate. To date, none of the member states live up to these standards. (1) Implement international human rights standards without discrimination, and prohibit explicit discrimination on the ground of gender identity in national non-discrimination legislation [...] (2) Enact hate crime legislation which affords specific protection for transgender persons against transphobic crimes and incidents. (3) Develop expeditious and transparent procedures for changing the name and sex of a transgender person on birth certificates, identity cards, passports, educational certificates and other similar documents. (4) Abolish sterilisation and other compulsory medical treatment as a necessary legal requirement to recognise a person’s gender identity in laws regulating the process for name and sex change. (5) Make gender reassignment procedures, such as hormone treatment, surgery and psychological support, accessible for transgender persons, and ensure that they are reimbursed by public health insurance schemes. (6) Remove any restrictions on the right of transgender persons to remain in an existing marriage following a recognised change of gender. (7) Prepare and implement policies to combat discrimination and exclusion faced by transgender persons on the labour market, in education and health care. (8) Involve and consult transgender persons and their organisations when developing and implementing policy and legal measures which concern them. (9) Address the human rights of transgender persons and discrimination based on gender identity through human rights education and training programs, as well as awareness-raising campaigns. (10) Provide training to health service professionals, including psychologists, psychiatrists and general practitioners, with regard to the needs and rights of transgender persons and the requirement to respect their dignity. (11) Include the human rights concerns of transgender persons in the scope of activities of equality bodies and national human rights structures. (12) Develop research projects to collect and analyze data on the human rights situation of transgender persons including the

countries offer medical supervision of hormone therapy as well as perform and fund gender reassignment surgeries, but only after a thorough screening and a subsequent psychiatric diagnosis.<sup>6</sup> The quality of trans-related treatment varies within and between countries and is sometimes very poor (Ibid.: 27–28). In a study on the health-care experience of trans people (EuroStudy) there is reported a general adverse treatment by health-care professionals, which makes many trans people avoid visiting a doctor for fear of “inappropriate behaviour” (Commissioner for Human Rights 2009: 28–29). Many trans people are denied gender-confirming medical treatment because they do not fit the diagnostic criteria of a “true transsexual” that still prevails in many countries. The Transgender EuroStudy found that 80 percent of trans people in the EU are refused state funding for hormone treatments, while 86 percent are refused state funding for sex-reassignment surgeries. As a result, more than 50 percent of trans people undergoing surgery to change their birth sex pay for the procedures entirely on their own (Ibid.: 26–27). Many trans people also choose not to undergo the official procedures due to discriminatory medical processes or due to the fact that only one course of treatment is available, expecting or demanding that one goes “all the way” (hormones and surgeries), which might not fit one’s own wishes and personal health needs (FRA 2010: 13). They therefore transition without or with limited

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discrimination and intolerance they encounter with due regard to the right to privacy of the persons concerned (Commissioner for Human Rights 2009: 44–45).

<sup>6</sup> A legal and health mapping has been conducted by Transgender Europe’s Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide research project in close cooperation with activists and experts from all world regions. At present, fifty-eight countries are listed but further countries will be added. So far the number of countries listed in the following regions are: Africa (nine countries), Asia (thirteen countries), Central and South America (nine countries), Europe (eighteen countries), and Oceania (nine countries). The mapping enables a much-needed quick overview of existing laws while at the same time providing detail and complexity regarding actual practices. It is the intention to present more elaborate information, context information, references, law texts, and so forth on the website during 2012. For more information as well as the mapping, see [http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en\\_US/mapping.htm](http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en_US/mapping.htm)

medical supervision (seeking hormone replacement therapy on the black market, for example, or buying hormones online, which has its own health risks) and are denied legal recognition of their preferred gender and name.

While there is evidence that other groups under the LGBT umbrella experience progress toward better understanding and legal rights, trans people continue to suffer from violations of their basic human rights (Ibid.). What is summed up as particularly problematic is the “cumbersome and sometimes vague legal and medical requirements, and lengthy processes of psychological, psychiatric and physical tests, such as genital examinations” (Ibid.). The often lengthy and bureaucratic processes for the recognition of sex and name change result in the inability to travel with valid documents, and to restrictions on participation in education, and it can mean that trans people without the correct documentation are effectively hindered from meaningful participation in the labor market, leading to unemployment (Commissioner for Human Rights 2009: 17). Many of the European vloggers whom I have come across on YouTube outline and discuss these different laws and practical administrations within the EU as well as the personal consequences this has. As the British vlogger Tony discusses at length in his vlogs, there is a non-transparency regarding expected time frame and case managing, resulting in extensive amount of waiting and uncertainty about diagnostic principles.

Because of various kinds of discrimination and barriers, trans people have a poorer mental and physical health than the rest of the population (Ibid.: 29). Likewise, trans people are statistically much more likely to be unemployed than the rest of the population, and face problems of bullying in school and at work (Ibid.: 30, 34). A vast majority of trans people (more than 70 percent of the respondents) have experienced some form of harassment in public, and many experience expulsion from the family (Ibid.: 34).

## **Systems of Gender Classification and Trans Health Care in the United States of America**

In the United States, the rules and regulations of gender recognition and access to health care for trans people varies from state to state, and varies according to what kind of health insurance one has (if one has insurance at all), what one's place of birth is, as well as one's current place of residence. Many of the vloggers in this study address these different, complicated, and often obscure policies and give one another advice on the procedures and regulations. They also recount the large amount of time, energy, and money that they need to invest in changing name, and/or gender on their different kinds of ID.

Dean Spade has offered a much-needed layout and analysis of the complex set of administrative gender reclassification policies and practices in all fifty US states regarding social security number, birth certificates, driver's license, and passports (for a complete listing, see Spade 2008). Social Security (SSA) requires genital surgery of a nonspecific kind for a gender reclassification (Spade 2008: 736). All states except three (Idaho, Ohio, Tennessee) accept a change of birth certificate but require evidence of surgeries, although it varies what kind of surgery it has to be. Whereas some people get new birth certificates, others get certificates where the old information is visible or just crossed out (Ibid.: 768). The driver's license (DMV ID) is the most commonly used ID in the United States. To change the gender marker on one's driver's license depends on the state and requires either a letter from a physician declaring that one gender predominates over another, medical confirmation of having undergone gender-confirming surgery, a court order confirming gender change, or an amended birth certificate indicating the new gender (Ibid.: 771). For a gender reclassification on passports, one must provide proof of (an unspecified type of) genital surgery (Ibid.: 774). These gender reclassification policies to varying extent all depend on some kind of

medical intervention. No state's Medicaid regulations explicitly say that gender-confirming health care for trans people should be covered.<sup>7</sup> Twenty-eight states have no explicit regulations regarding this care, while twenty-two states have explicit exclusions of gender-confirming health care for trans people, listed as "cosmetic" or "experimental" care (Ibid.: 783–784). As Susan Stryker points out: "This is a truly inexcusable double bind—if being transgendered is not considered psychopathological, it should be delisted as a mental disorder; if it is to be considered as psychopathological, its treatment should be covered as a legitimate healthcare need" (Stryker 2008a: 14). The policies and practices regarding gender reclassification are multiple and conflicting, as Spade points out, "creating seriously problematic binds for those directly affected and bureaucratic confusion for the agencies operating under these policies" (Spade 2008: 733). As Spade shows, gender reclassification is not only dependent on an obscure number of different policies but also the agency workers' bias or unfamiliarity with relevant rules (Ibid.: 764, 773). As Spade states:

Most likely, neither person will have a consistent set of documents that correlates to their current gender. For the many people who feel that neither "M" nor "F" accurately describes their gender, there is no possibility of obtaining records that reflect their self-identities (Spade 2011: 145).

The trans vlogs illustrate the number of obstacles trans people face, as well as the significance of having state authorized gender markers. In Erica's vlogs, we follow her from her application for a name change, a new driver's license, and a social security card until she gets genital sex-reassignment surgery and applies for gender reclassification on all her legal documents. She highlights at various stages the tremendous importance of having state recognition and manifestation of her self-

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<sup>7</sup> Medicaid is the US health program for certain people/families with low income and resources.

identified gender. When she receives her new driver's license with her new name, she is thrilled and even more so because she has also received a letter from her doctor stating that she is allowed to have legal documents listing her as female. The doctor's request is based on diagnosing Erica with gender identity disorder. She expresses great hope and anticipation that this will facilitate a gender reclassification on some of her documents: "That's gonna be everything—I can pull that out and be like—yeah look right there—[Erica surname]—female, and actually I have a legal document that says that" (May 25, 2007). When explaining why it is important for her to get sex-reassignment surgery (SRS), she highlights the legal recognition of her gender as an important factor, as she will not be able to change her birth certificate without the surgery according to the law in her state. And without a changed birth certificate she will not be able to be listed as female on her driver's license in her current city of residence, even though she was allowed to do so in the city where she lived before. Being able to change her official documents is also explained as eliminating her "worry" that she especially has in connection with traveling (she mentions passport and body scanners). As she states: "I don't want to have to worry about or deal with the legal complications" (May 2, 2011). Undergoing all the surgeries and finding out how to change her official documents is a very expensive and "a really long journey." After having undergone all the required surgeries and collected all the required paperwork that is needed for her to finally change her documents there is yet another hurdle: she needs to have a court order, which costs \$400 (August 1, 2011).

Dean Spade also demonstrates how a large subset of gender-reclassification policies requires medical intervention for reclassification but that it differs significantly what type of medical intervention is required (Spade 2008: 736). One example is:

Two transgender men living in Massachusetts, one born in California and the

other in New York City, seek to obtain drivers' licenses indicating their male gender. Both have undergone mastectomy and no other surgical procedures. The California-born man will be able to obtain the reclassification he seeks, because California will amend his birth certificate and Massachusetts will accept this, and evidence of his surgery, as sufficient to change the document. The New York City-born man will be unable to obtain a corrected document, because he will not be able to provide an amended birth certificate. This man will have to carry an ID with a gender marker that does not match his identity" (Ibid.: 737).<sup>8</sup>

There is, as Spade demonstrates, an increasing number of identity-issuing agencies allowing individuals to change the gender marker in recognition of the social and economic difficulties for those whose lived expression of gender does not match their identity documentation. But there is a high degree of inconsistency amongst the most important ID regimes of the state and federal agencies, as these policies vary even within states, contradict federal policies, and are often tied to factors that cannot be chosen or controlled (Ibid.: 761). As Spade points out, some trans people have traditionally been able to change their passport or SSA gender either by being perceived by a clerk to be the lived gender and convincing the person to correct the "mistake," or by providing a vaguely worded letter and letting the person assume this means the applicant has undergone surgery. The latter has, however, become more difficult as more detailed information about one's medical treatment is often requested now as well as a computerized crosscheck of records (Ibid.: 775). One of the vloggers, Diamond, reports being able to correct the gender marker on her driver's license by pretending to have lost her old one and just ticking the box for female. As she states, "I feel like you have to work the system [...] to get what you want" (October 31, 2009). She does not want genital surgery but she wants to change her gender markers, which she was able to do by being perceived as female by the clerk. As she notes: "I sold it to him [...] you need to sell it, let him buy it and you got your *F*" (Ibid.). As Diamond argues, having changed her gender marker makes her much less

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<sup>8</sup> Mastectomy is the removal of breasts and creation of a flat chest for trans men.



vulnerable to discrimination, not least when applying for jobs. But as Spade highlights, new strategies of surveillance and governance have been applied as part of the “War on Terror.” This is the aforementioned computerized crosscheck of records, which for trans people results in a huge number of “no match” of identities coming up (Spade 2008: 731, 737). Employers across the United States have received “no match” letters, indicating that their employees have a different gender marker on their SSA records from the one on their employee records, thereby outing the trans employees to their employers (Ibid.: 738). One of the vloggers, Wheeler, addresses the problems around the “no match” in connection with applying for jobs. He describes in several vlogs how “embarrassing” it is to be outed to an employer, who then cannot hire him because of the mismatch. Wheeler explains how he has to persuade the employer to hold the job for him until he gets his gender changed on all his papers, and how tiring and stressful it is to change the papers (June 25, 2010). The social security office is located several hours’ drive away, and upon arrival he is told that the letter from his therapist is not sufficient enough, thus he has to get a new letter and travel once again to the social security office and meanwhile explain to his employer that there is a delay in his paperwork that is keeping him from starting work (July 7, 2010).

Spade also notes how lack of ID matching a person’s current gender is contributing significantly to employment and housing discrimination (Spade 2008: 752) as well as creating problems for trans people who wish to access sex-segregated facilities like homeless shelters, care facilities, and prison while matching their self-identified gender. Trans people are often in a double bind, as Spade states:

Individual states may simultaneously take the position that this type of health care is “cosmetic” and “experimental” when they deny coverage through their Medicaid programs or for people in state custody, while their ID policies use that very care as the only legitimate evidence of gender change. In other words, for some purposes the state says gender-confirming health care is not legitimate,

while for others it uses such health care as the standard of legitimacy (Ibid.: 783).

As Spade argues, a “feedback loop” is created that often results in economic and social marginalization of the trans population in part due to denial of access to gender-confirming health care and the administration of government gender-classification policies.

The American report *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (2011) documents that almost a quarter of the trans people who appear in the survey have experienced a catastrophic level of discrimination, having been affected by at least three of the following major life-disrupting events due to gender identity/expression: loss of job or eviction; school bullying/harassment so bad the respondent had to drop out; physical or sexual assault; homelessness; loss of relationship with partner, family, or children; denial of medical service; and incarceration (Grant et al. 2011). The report also sheds light on the racialized aspect of the pervasive discrimination against trans people. Trans people of color are far more likely to lack proper medical care, to be unemployed, to live in extreme poverty, and to be HIV positive. Working as a lawyer, providing free legal help to trans people, Dean Spade recounts similar experiences in his new book about trans people facing interlocking problems, problems such as police brutality and false arrests, sexual harassment and assault, beatings and rapes, firings from jobs, evictions, denials and rejections from caseworkers in social-services and welfare agencies, rejections from legal services, and family rejections (Spade 2011: 11). In Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin’s American ethnographic survey study *The Lives of Transgender People*, the conclusion is that a quarter of the respondents had experienced harassment in the past year. Nineteen percent had sometimes or often been denied employment or advancement because of their gender identity/expression and many have often concealed their gender identity

in an attempt to avoid mistreatment (Beemyn and Rankin 2011: 106). Many trans people fear and/or experience harassment and violence with a significantly higher incidence of physical assault reported by trans people of color than by white trans respondents (Ibid.: 96). Interestingly, the most common response to harassment was feeling embarrassed, followed by telling a friend, avoiding the harasser, and leaving or ignoring the situation (Ibid.: 97).

### **Doctor/Patient Relationship Renegotiated Through the Internet**

As illustrated in the previous discussion, trans lives and trans self-definitions are highly limited by current diagnostic criteria, a guarding of access to gender-confirming health care, as well as other institutional and social discriminations. But researchers have argued that the Internet and a growing market for medical tourism enables new possibilities for renegotiating doctor/patient relationships and for accessing skilled and wanted health care. I will in the following attend to the possible and evolving renegotiations of trans as a pathologized identity category, pinpointing the role of the Internet in this. This leads to my concluding discussion on the socio-economic barriers and inequality of these renewed potentials for renegotiation and self-determination.

There is a growing field of research focusing on the use of the Internet to acquire health-related information and the effect this has on the doctor/patient relationship (see, for example, Anderson, Rainey, and Eysenbach 2003; Broom 2005a and 2005b; Broom and Tovey 2008; Burrows, Nettleton, and Pleace 2000). A key argument is that the Internet has a potentially liberating or egalitarian influence for patients because of the ease access to a range of knowledges and the ability to share experiences online (Broom and Tovey 2008: 143–144). As noted by James Anderson, Michelle Rainey, and Gunther Eysenbach: “The Internet opens up enormous possibilities for obtaining information about the most rare

health conditions and experimental or alternative treatments” (Anderson, Rainey, and Eysenbach 2003: 74). Many researchers have highlighted how this contributes to a gradual democratization of medical knowledge. The Internet has become on the one hand a source of expert as well as alternative health knowledge previously inaccessible to the layperson. On the other hand, the Internet is being used for self-help and social support for patients with specific diseases. As sociology of health and illness scholar Alex Broom states: “Online communities are developing around particular health problems, with people ‘chatting’ to others about their health problems, treatment programs and encounters with medical professionals” (Broom 2005b: 87). The Internet enables positive feedback (“positive feedback loop”) and assists in the networking of patients in self-support groups (Anderson, Rainey, and Eysenbach 2003: 73, 75). Researchers have also speculated about the role of the Internet in “promoting alternative paradigms of care and contributing to increased therapeutic pluralism” (Broom and Tovey 2008: 150), offering what sociology of social media scholars and psychologist Roger Burrows, Sarah Nettleton, Nicholas Pleace, Brian Loader, and Steven Muncer term “virtual community care” (Burrows et al. 2000: 96). As stated by Burrows, Nettleton, Pleace, Loader, and Muncer:

Virtual community care represents an elective affinity between technological, social and cultural imperatives; it is a complex amalgam of the anonymous, the public, the supportive and the individualized. It is a phenomenon which is already being widely used and which is set to grow greatly in the next few years. In its potential at least, we suggest that it could represent an as yet little understood challenge to dominant post-war models of social policy; as an embryonic cyberspatial social form it could represent one element of a shift away from a conception of welfare based upon rationally administered state provision coupled with paternalistic professionally determined needs and bureaucratic organizational delivery systems towards one more characterized by fragmentation, diversity and a range of individualization processes (Ibid.: 103–105).

The challenging and questioning of the medical establishment through the Internet can also be seen as part of what health policy analyst and Professor of Sociology Ian Coulter and Evan Willis term a newer history of “politicisation of health” noticeable within feminism (as pertaining to abortion and breast cancer) and the gay movement (particularly concerning HIV) (Coulter and Willis 2004: 588). As noted by Professor of Public Health Michael Goldstein, the social movements that emerged in the United States throughout the 1960s and 1970s tested doctors and a science-based rationality and their “natural” high degree of dominance over the autonomy of patients. Various rights movements “were suspicious and distrustful of authority and unwilling to accept the paternalism and beneficence of professionals such as doctors” (Goldstein 2004: 934). Goldstein argues that the Internet is just the most recent example of a broader historical phenomenon: the persistent antipathy of many Americans toward professionals’ monopoly over health expertise, thus an emphasis on personal rights and freedom of choice are classic American values (Ibid.: 933–934).

This line of research can help contextualize some of the broader shifts that I consider the trans vlogs as working within, namely the questioning and renegotiation of psycho-medical labels and practices as well as the creation of communities/support groups and “virtual community care” through the online platform of YouTube.<sup>9</sup> In chapter 7, I argue that the trans vlogs offer a unique opportunity to access and share embodied trans knowledges that have previously been very limited or simply inaccessible. This potentially challenges the expertise, authority, and monopoly of the clinical expert, enabling a sense of empowerment and self-definition. However, as stated earlier, the trans person is dependent on the approval and recognition of a psycho-medical establishment in a way that is different from many other groups of “patients” or “health-care

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<sup>9</sup> In chapter 7 I address and analyze what I perceive as the “DIY therapy” of the trans vlogs.

consumers.”

The fact that trans people differ from regular “patients” or “healthcare consumers” encourages a rethinking of what kind of alliances can be made. As Stryker points out:

Central issues for transgender activism—such as gender-appropriate state-issued identification documents that allow trans people to work, cross borders, and access social services without exposing themselves to potential discrimination—suggest useful forms of alliance politics, in this instance with migrant workers and diasporic communities, that are not organized around sexual identity (Stryker 2008b: 149).

As Stryker pinpoints, trans people face some of the same problems as undocumented migrants by not having proper documentation and also have problems accessing a health-care system.

And yet as “patients” seeking information independent of the expert, the vloggers can be considered a challenge to traditional biomedical assumptions that the doctor is an expert provider of information and the patient is the passive recipient of knowledge (Broom 2005a: 320). The Internet can help challenge or disrupt the traditional authority of the medical expert, existing monopolies over medical knowledge and medical work, and the traditional asymmetric competence that is at the heart of professional identity (Broom and Tovey 2008: 143). The patient becomes more informed about their disease and about the performance of the medical specialist, potentially transforming patients into experts about their own disease/conditions and treatment trajectories. This can be said to contribute to a diminishment in public deference to expert knowledge and to an increased questioning of doctors’ authority (Ibid.). The doctor-patient relationship is renegotiated, potentially resulting in a decision-making process that is more open, dialogical, and consultative (Broom 2005a: 321, 335), thereby giving the patient a greater sense of control, self-determination and agency (Ibid.:

326).

This is also the approach suggested by WPATH (the World Professional Association for Transgender Health) in their new clinical guide for health professionals.<sup>10</sup> Most noticeable is the shift toward depathologization and informed consent.<sup>11</sup> As recommended:

Ideally, psychotherapy is a collaborative effort. The therapist must be certain that the patient understands the concepts of eligibility and readiness, because the therapist and patient must cooperate in defining the patient's problems, and in assessing progress in dealing with them. Collaboration can prevent a stalemate between a therapist who seems needlessly withholding of a recommendation, and a patient who seems too profoundly distrusting to freely share thoughts, feelings, events, and relationships (World Professional Association for Transgender Health 2011: 12).

However, these guidelines have not yet been fully incorporated and integrated into diagnostic procedures and health-care practices at gender clinics across Europe and the United States, which would make the power dynamic more equal and give the trans person a sense of self-

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<sup>10</sup> The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) is an international, multidisciplinary, professional association whose stated mission is to develop best practices and supportive policies worldwide that promote health, research, education, respect, dignity, and equality for transsexual, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people in all cultural settings. The promotion of these standards of health care does among other things take place through the articulation of *Standards of Care (SOC) for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender Nonconforming People*. As stated the SOC is primarily based on the research and experience in this field from a North American and Western European perspective; thus, adaptations of the SOC to other parts of the world are necessary. The overall goal of the SOC is to provide clinical guidance for health professionals (World Professional Association for Transgender Health 2011: 1).

<sup>11</sup> The core principles in SOC are: "Exhibit respect for patients with nonconforming gender identities (do not pathologize differences in gender identity or expression); provide care (or refer to knowledgeable colleagues) that affirms patients' gender identities and reduces the distress of gender dysphoria, when present; become knowledgeable about the health care needs of transsexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming people, including the benefits and risks of treatment options for gender dysphoria; match the treatment approach to the specific needs of patients, particularly their goals for gender expression and need for relief from gender dysphoria; facilitate access to appropriate care; seek patients' informed consent before providing treatment; offer continuity of care; and be prepared to support and advocate for patients within their families and communities (schools, workplaces, and other settings)" (World Professional Association for Transgender Health 2011: 3).

determination.

### **The Trans Health-Care Consumer and Trans Medical Tourism**

The Internet-informed patient has also been conceptualized as part of a broader shift, where (some) patients can take on a more consumer-oriented “active” role, being able to question professional advice-giving (albeit differentially according to class, education, and so on) (Broom and Tovey 2008: 143). This entails a shift from thinking of oneself as a patient to thinking of oneself as a “health-care consumer,” responsible for getting as much and good information as needed and then acting on it (Goldstein 2004: 934). This might “liberate” or empower some people but can reinforce socio-economic disparities. Studies show that those who are of a higher socio-economic and educational class are the ones most likely to use the Internet to seek and find information on their health (Ibid.: 933; Burrows, Loader, and Muncer 2000: 98).

Medical dominance is also being contested by increased consumerism. Medical tourism has grown rapidly in the past decade, especially for cosmetic and trans-related surgery. As migration and tourism scholar John Connell argues, the rise of medical tourism follows the deliberate marketing of health care, not least through the Internet, where health care is gradually moving away from the public sector to the private sector. It has been facilitated by high costs of treatment in first-world countries, long waiting lists, and relative affordable international air travel (Connell 2006: 1094). Connell notes: “Medical tourists not surprisingly are mainly from rich world countries where the costs of medical care may be very high, but where the ability to pay for alternatives is also high. Most are from North America, Western Europe and the Middle East” (Ibid.: 1096). Medical tourism has grown in a number of countries, for example in South Africa, Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Costa Rica, Hungary, Dubai, Bahrain, and Lebanon, but the main destination for



medical tourism is Asia, particularly Thailand, which specializes in sex-change operations (Ibid.: 1095). Thailand is one of the most well known places today courting a market of trans people from the United States, Europe, Asia, Canada, and Australia seeking available, better, and cheaper surgeries. Most of these are white affluent American, British, or European trans women (Aizura 2011: 145, 161). Gender-reassignment surgeries (GRS) have been an early medical travel niche market in Thailand and date back to the 1970s (Aizura 2010: 6). This market was further sparked by the emergence of Internet trans cultures in the mid-1990s, enabling Thai surgeons to advertise online. Now a number of surgeons have gained a reputation outside Thailand for technical skill and innovation, which, combined with special trans-care marketing and less restricted access to surgeries, are part of Thailand's success as a prominent trans medical tourist industry (Ibid.: 6, 3). Thailand initially had no regulatory framework for assessing GRS, but in 2009 the Thai government introduced legislation requiring psychiatric approval as part of seeking recognition as an elite and globally competitive unit of medical specialists (Ibid.: 7-8). However, access is far less restricted and easily obtainable upon arrival. Aren Aizura has conducted fieldwork and interviews with patients at the GRS clinics in Thailand, and he states that most patients have attempted to obtain approval for surgery in their home countries before coming to Thailand. Rejections and/or experiences of "conservative or openly hostile health professionals" in their home health-care system are some of the predominant reasons for traveling to Thailand. Thus, the highly restricted and pathologized policies and practices in many Anglo-European countries spark trans medical tourism. As also documented in the Transgender EuroStudy, a vast majority of trans people experience their home health-care system negatively, with health-care professionals being "uninformed, biased and sometimes overtly rude with their clients, for example referring to the client in the not- preferred gender" (Commissioner for

Human Rights 2009: 27). Only 30 percent of those seeking help or referral for gender reassignment procedures experienced what the survey defined as the minimum acceptable level of assistance (meaning a practitioner wanting to help but lacking information about trans health care) (Ibid.). In Aizura's study, the patients contrast this hostile or disinterested homeland health care with Thai surgeons' "friendliness" and "respectfulness" (Aizura 2010: 8-9).

As illustrated, socio-economic barriers affect and limit the access to transitioning technologies, making it difficult for certain trans subjects to access these services. As Raewyn Connell also remarks in a recent article: "Class and global inequality, rather than patriarchal gatekeeping, has become the crucial filter" (Connell 2012: 869). Access to transitioning technologies and gender reclassification (the kind that depends on various kinds of medical interventions) is unevenly distributed. What the growing industry of trans medical tourism adds to this equation is that not only transitioning technologies but also a skilled and respectful trans health care seems limited to those who have the means and the ability to travel.

## **2.2. Trans as a Hatchet in Gender Studies. Moving Beyond a Conceptualization of Trans as Gender Traitors and Gender Revolutionaries**

This part looks at the conceptualization of trans within gender studies—streams of feminist thinking, men and masculinity studies, queer theories, and transgender studies. I investigate the roles trans identities/narratives are appointed as well as the research aims and ideological projects that the theoretically constructed figure of trans can be made to serve. Within the broad field of gender studies I would argue that trans people either tend to "disappear" in a discussion of men and women as naturalized

categories or tend to be targeted in a discussion about reactionary gender (re)production and/or subversive gender deconstruction. It is this targeting that I will address in depth, thus questioning how sex and gender become particularly contested signifiers when attached to trans. I will outline and analyze how this targeting forecloses a more complex and diverse understanding of trans and often fails to include a critical reflection about who gets to speak for trans identity. Transgender studies offer a point from which to critically engage with these other streams of thoughts, reflecting the ethical responsibility of the researcher, acknowledging embodied experiences as well as broader socio-economic aspects of transitioning. But at times certain parts of transgender studies create a too-reductive image of what other discourses contribute, especially feminism and queer theory.

Engaging with these different theoretical streams of thoughts and debates is an attempt to situate my field of study within a gender-theoretical framework and to contextualize the works of identity that take place within the trans vlogs. Theoretical concepts and discussions from this chapter will appear and be applied in the following analysis. This part also serves as a platform from which to discuss the contested terrain in which the vloggers negotiate and claim their mediated communication of identity—and from which my analysis starts.

### **Transsexuals as Anti-Feminists?**

Trans people, especially trans women, have been subjected to extended scrutiny, especially within radical feminism. Some radical feminists have presented transsexuals as antifeminist, reproducing a rigid, stereotypical, and normative gender ideology/system that stands in the way of social change (Raymond 1979, Shapiro 1991). Anthropologist Judith Shapiro states:

While transsexuals may be deviants in terms of cultural norms about how one arrives at being a man or a woman, they are, for the most part, highly conformist about what to do once you get there. [...] Many transsexuals are, in fact, “more royalist than the king” in matters of gender (Shapiro 1991: 253).

Perhaps the most controversial polemic is feminist activist and scholar Janice G. Raymond’s book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of a She-Male*, originally published in 1979 but reprinted with a new foreword but same argument in 1994. Here Raymond argues that all trans women “rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artefact, appropriating this body for themselves” (Raymond 1979: xx). Related ways of thinking of trans women runs through the work of other feminist thinkers, for example Elizabeth Grosz in her attempt to outline the specific nature of the female body and female subjectivity. Highlighting the importance and impossibility of escaping corporeality, Grosz states:

There will always remain a kind of outsidersness or alienness of the experiences transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is like to be, to live, as women. At best the transsexual can live out his fantasy of femininity—a fantasy that in itself is usually disappointed with the rather crude transformations effected by surgical and chemical intervention. The transsexual may look like a woman but can never feel like or be a woman (Grosz 1994: 207).

Many of these radical or materialist feminist theorizations of trans (especially women) can be read as a fierce defense of female purity against trans/male contamination. Trans men are characterized as “the lost women” who voluntarily submit to patriarchy and its erasure of lesbianism (Raymond 1979: xxv). This not only assumes that all trans men have a desire and sexual practice directed toward women but also assumes that you cannot be a man without reinforcing patriarchy. Others have brushed aside the use of gender-reassigning technology as nothing but a submission to a patriarchal and capitalist industry from a Foucauldian feminist position (Hausman 1995). And yet others have, from

a lesbian feminist position, labeled gender-reassignment surgery as genital and bodily mutilation (Jeffreys 2005) caused by internalized homophobia (Jeffreys 2003: 137). These positions have led to critical responses from trans thinkers, who express reluctance toward what trans/queer writer and therapist Patrick Califia calls “feminist fundamentalism” (Califia 1997: 86) (see also, for example, Stone 2006, Hale 2009).

However, new feminist publications argue that gender modification and trans issues should be on the feminist agenda—in a non-transphobic way (see, for instance, Heyes 2007, Scott-Dixon ed. 2006, Shrage ed. 2009). Feminist philosopher Cressida Heyes argues that the writing of Janice Raymond and feminist and cultural studies scholar Bernice Hausman have created an overdetermined and problematic opposition between the trans movement and feminism as well as erased the agency and critical awareness of trans people (Heyes 2007: 39). Heyes encourages the fighting parties to unite in “feminist solidarity,” acknowledging the common fight for making the personal political. From a Foucauldian feminist perspective she incites a trans-feminist thinking that takes into critical consideration “the discursive limits on individual self-transformation without denying agency to gendered subjects” (Ibid.: 40). Many trans theorists also consider themselves to be feminists or do feminist research (see Rubin 1998a, Cromwell 1999, Feinberg 1998, Serano 2007). Leslie Feinberg highlights trans struggles as overlapping with the struggles of the women’s liberation movement (Feinberg 1998: 48). Likewise, Julia Serano argues that “trans activism must be at its core a feminist movement,” thus it is time “to take back the word ‘feminism’ from these pseudofeminists” (Serano 2007: 16–17). Transgender scholar and anthropologist Jason Cromwell highlights “the feminist method of reflexivity” as one of the guiding principles of his research on trans men, highlighting how this approach entails a reflection on his own subjectivity and situatedness in the field of study and pays attention to “allowing

individuals to describe their personal self-definitions and self-validations” (Cromwell 1999: 10).

### **Queer Theory and Transgender Studies as Fighting “Twins”?**

Queer theorists have offered a framework for thinking about trans identities in a nonpathological way, highlighting how gender norms and heteronormativity discriminates and silences gender-variant people. Queer theory has also contributed extensively to a problematization of the relation between biological sex and gender identification as well as pinpointing sex itself as a discursively informed construction (Butler 1990, 1993). As Judith Butler famously puts it:

The medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he,” and in that naming, the girl is “girled,” brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that “girling” of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm (Butler 1993: 7–8).

By recognizing the effects of performative speech acts, Butler problematizes an essentialist understanding of sex and sexual difference, which would see the “girling” of the girl as a natural outcome of the biological determination of the child. Butler is not disputing the materiality of the body as such, but she highlights how it is framed and formed, and how the supposedly descriptive statement “It’s a girl” is always to some degree performative (Ibid.: 11). Queer theory’s problematization of sex as a naturalized fact is taken up by transgender studies. As Susan Stryker points out, sex (the sex of the body) consists of numerous parts (chromosomal sex, anatomical sex, reproductive sex, morphological sex) that form a “variety of viable bodily aggregations that number far more than two (Stryker 2006a: 9). In this sense sex is “a mash-

up, a story we mix about *how* the body means, which parts matter most, and how they register in our consciousness or field of vision” (Ibid.).

As transgender scholar and sociologist Henry Rubin polemically puts it, in queer theory “antiessentialism has become de rigueur” (Rubin 1998b: 275), enabling a reframing and reinterpretation of sexed bodies. Gender-variant/trans people have therefore been used as illustrative examples in pinpointing sex and gender as performative and normatively guarded constructions (Butler 1990). In a similar vein, Judith Jack Halberstam presents gender as a fiction, thus “masculinity and femininity *may* be simulated by surgery, but they can also find other fictional forms like clothing or fantasy. Surgery is only one of many possibilities for remaking the gendered body” (Halberstam 1994: 210). Cross-dressing and other trans acts and subjectivities have therefore been celebrated as a kind of gender revolution (Butler 1990; Halberstam 1998a, 2005; Cooper 2002). Others have suggested that trans people are the epitome of postmodernity by the “radical disjunction of biological sex from gender identity” (Epstein and Straub 1991: 14). As feminist cultural studies scholars Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub rhetorically ask: “What is more postmodern than transsexualism?” (Ibid.: 11).

Taking into account that queer theory “remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work” (Stryker 2004: 214), and that the relationship between queer theory and transgender studies is “close and sometimes vexed” (Stryker 2006a: 7), it seems crucial to dwell on the relationship. As pointed out, queer theory has played an important role in shedding light on and revalorizing trans practices and identities, but the premises for these endeavors are at times problematic, as pointed out by transgender studies. The field of transgender studies emerges in the wake of, but also to some extent “in the shadow of,” queer theory, at times claiming its “place in the queer family,” offering an in-house critique, while at other times angrily spurning its lineage, setting out to make a home of

its own (Stryker 2004: 214). Researchers conducting transgender studies do for the most part consider themselves related to but also diverging from queer theory, whereas at the same time trans people may not. Some queer theoretical analysis have been criticized for not paying enough attention to trans as an actual embodied and lived subjectivity, subjected to specific juridical and social discrimination (Prosser 1998; Namaste 2000; Rubin 2003). As Rubin argues, too strong a focus on discursive constructions can easily end up neglecting embodied experience, invalidating the categories through which the subject makes sense of their experiences (Rubin 1998b: 265). Jay Prosser has emphasized embodiment as a topic that he finds to be specifically overlooked within queer theory's study on trans issues, using the term "desomatization" to describe this neglect (Prosser 1998: 66). This has encouraged trans scholars to rethink and focus on the complex relationship between bodily experiences and the social/institutional discourses around subjectivity and gender. Transgender studies is, in the words of Susan Stryker, queer theory's "evil twin":

[I]t has the same parentage but wilfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual) over the gender categories (like man and woman) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim (Stryker 2004: 212).

As Stryker has argued several times, "queer" does all too often become a code word for "gay" or "lesbian," privileging sexual orientation and sexual identity and overlooking other ways of differing from heteronormativity (Ibid.: 214, Stryker 2006a: 7). Queer/homo communities are thereby sometimes perpetuating "homonormativity" as a privileging of homosexual ways of differing from heterosocial norms (Stryker 2006a: 7). Homonormativity is today primarily known as a concept used by Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis Lisa Duggan to describe a queer theoretical critique of gay and lesbian reinforcements of and search for inclusion



within heterosexist institutions and values through a neoliberal politics of multicultural diversity. As Duggan defines homonormativity:

It is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (Duggan 2002: 179).

As Stryker puts it, homonormativity has become a “critically chic term” (Stryker 2008b: 149). But as she argues, the concept was developed and circulated in the early 1990s as an attempt “to articulate the double sense of marginalization and displacement experienced within transgender political and cultural activism” (Ibid.: 145). It was deployed in instances where transgender inclusion was being contested in queer/homo activism, typically targeted toward gays and lesbians who saw transgender issues as entirely distinct from their own politics and culture. It also described communities where “lesbians [...] excluded male-to-female transgender people but nervously engaged with female-to-male people, on the grounds that the former were really men and the latter were really women” (Ibid.: 147). For transgender studies, bearing this initial meaning in mind can be fruitful in order to rethink what kind of alliances can be made and that homo is not always the most relevant norm against which trans needs to define itself (Ibid.: 149).

The linking of queer to “the sexual” and the privileging of (certain) sexual practices and identities within queer theory have been raised and critiqued from different sides. Somatechnics scholars Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray state:

It is this knotty association of queer with “the sexual,” or more specifically, with sexual practices and identities conceived as counter-hegemonic that, in our opinion, limits some of the interventions practiced under the banner of queer (Sullivan and Murray 2009: 4).

However, already in 1994, feminist and queer studies scholar Biddy Martin warned against “the fear of being ordinary” in queer theory:

Having accepted the claim that interiorities and core gender identities are effects of normalizing, disciplinary mechanisms, many queer theorists seem to think that gender identities are therefore only constraining, and can be overridden by the greater mobility of queer desires (Martin 1994: 102).

Martin encourages us to stop defining queerness as mobile and fluid and to think critically about what then gets construed as stagnant and ensnaring (Ibid.: 101). In an introduction to the intersections between queer theory and online community in the UK and United States in the 1990s, Kate O’Riordan also points out:

At the centre of the ideal queer subject is a fluidity rarely experienced by queers, who may be as likely to identify through one of the choices on the queer identity menu. The “queerest” and most “cyber” identity in the imagined hierarchy is trans. However, trans is embodied in transsexual subjects who are neither necessarily queer, nor experience bodies that are constructed as the authentic site of their identity (O’Riordan 2005a: 30).

What O’Riordan is implying is a tendency within queer theory not to be preoccupied with the *experiences* of queer/trans identities. Within recent years, queer studies seem to have moved away from trans issues altogether, according to Bobby Noble (Noble 2011: 265) but the tensions remain in various social movements and everyday negotiations of identity within queer/trans communities, as I pinpointed in chapter 1 and as I will show in chapter 3.

### **Which Trans Subject Is Recognized as Subversive?**

In the following I will outline which trans claims of identity and performances tend to get recognized as subversive within queer theoretical lines of thinking and how this can lead to a certain way of framing trans in analysis.

Trans identities seem to inhabit an ambivalent position and be a vulnerable point within a lot of queer theoretical research, construed as both radically fluid and stagnant. As queer theorist Tim Dean observes, transgenderism now situates itself in relation to transsexualism in a similar way as queer stands to homosexuality, where transsexuals seem quite essentialist and normative (Dean, quoted in Gherovici 2010: 33). Or as Henry Rubin puts it, transsexuals are often disparaged while transgenders are celebrated. Thus, the passing, assimilating, “straight-acting” transsexuals “are made to suffer from another kind of false consciousness within the queer paradigm” (Rubin 1998b: 276). One might say that queer theory tends to celebrate trans identity performances and practices that embrace ambivalence or various forms of transgression/crossings and/or sexual relations recognizable as non-heterogendered. However, queer theory has been more silent or critical toward transsexual identity performances or practices that seem more gender-conforming or that have become recognized as reidealizing heterosexual relations. In other words, various forms of trans identifications and practices seem to possess a norm-breaking potential as well as occupying *the* site where norms become reproduced. The vloggers Erica and, especially, Mason would in a queer-theoretical analysis typically be recognized as a point of possible subversion, exposing and critiquing established gender and sexuality norms, while vloggers like James would be a point of tension, possibly even pointed out as a displaced reproduction of heteronormativity. In attempting to unfold, nuance, and discuss the effects that this has on the analysis of trans life-story narratives I will attend in depth to two recent studies on trans life stories conducted by self-described queer, poststructuralist theorists: Katherine Johnson and Jodi Kaufmann. I have chosen these two as examples of what I see as widespread and problematic trends within certain queer reading practices, studying trans life-story narratives. As examples they condense

and point out some of the fundamental issues that I want to address: Who is given voice and agency in the reading? What or who has to be revealed or deconstructed—and for whose sake? These are highly important questions and reconsiderations for my field of study, as well as some of the founding premises for my own approach (as I discussed in chapter 1).

Johnson's research is situated within the field of LGBT studies and Kaufmann is undertaking research within narratology and gender. Both of them have published several articles specifically about trans people and issues. I will argue that Johnson and Kaufmann first and foremost are using the trans life-story narrative to "expose" heteronormative structures, which in both cases (yet in different ways) results in an instrumentalized and truncated reading of trans. The stories are not allowed to "breathe," and letting stories breathe is exactly what is one of my main methodological premises (see chapter 1).

### **Instrumentalizing Trans Life Stories**

Katherine Johnson's article "Changing Sex, Changing Self. Theorizing Transitions in Embodied Subjectivity" is an attempt to theorize transsexual subjectivity and embodiment (Johnson 2007: 54), using and referencing queer poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Judith Jack Halberstam, and Judith Butler. The overall focus is to explore themes related to shifts in self-perceptions in light of radical changes in gender presentation among a group of FTMs and MTFs whom she has interviewed (Ibid.: 55). The theoretical discussions are highly relevant for my own research, which is what initially sparked my interest in Johnson's article. However, reading the article left me with a lot of critical methodological questions and concerns. The article made me critically reflect on how "we" as researchers approach personal narratives and how "we" explicitly or implicitly inscribe ourselves in the analysis.

Johnson introduces several interviewees, but very few of them are

given more than a couple of lines of presentation. From the interviews Johnson elicits two “constructions of selfhood,” namely “being the same person” and “being a new person” (Ibid.: 56). Billy (a FTM, age forty-six) is initially cast as a representative of a self-perception as being the same person, while Caroline (a MTF, age twenty-nine) is a representative for self-identifying as being a new person. The two of them are analytically constructed as schematically and coherent examples of one and the other, which then becomes a point of reference from which to “expose” the paradoxes in each narrative. As Johnson states:

Despite Caroline’s essentialist claim to have a “female brain,” she acknowledges that the successful manifestation of a gender identity is formulated through an ability to embody cultural practices of that gender: through learning and performing what it is to be a woman or man (Ibid.: 64).

Johnson questions and contests the stories in various ways. As she argues:

Billy is not the same person doing the same thing. Being related to as a man and relating to others as a man, rather than as a woman, will inevitably affect his gender subjectivity. It is, after all, the reason for transitioning (Ibid.: 57).

Not only does Johnson reject Billy’s reluctance to identify with having changed gender subjectivity but she also criticizes Caroline for actually fully identifying with being a new person. The concluding argument is that “for psychic health, it must be important to both accept and play with the inconsistencies in our self-narratives rather than attempting to merely iron out the creases” (Ibid.: 68). What seems to be neglected (even through it is the stated purpose of the article) is an analysis of the individual renegotiation of self and body or why one trope is used (maybe strategically) or feels right and not the other. To explore what function these different narratives serve in these people’s life projects would not only be analytically interesting but also allow for the individual story to breathe. This analytical strategy would also have made room for a certain

degree of identification with the subjects, which is closed down by Johnson's reading. It strikes me that Johnson "Others" the trans interviewees and specifically disidentifies herself with them and assumes that the reader does also. As Johnson states: "*We* might all feel that *we* are "changing as a person," but *she* [Caroline] uses it to acknowledge a radical separation from her previous male gender identity" (Ibid.: 63). This "Othering" is repeated several times, even when kinship is assumed: "*the transsexual subject* is entrenched in the very same process as *all of us*: striving for the effect of 'realness'" (Ibid.: 65) [my emphasis in all of the above].

The article seems to shuttle between offering insights into trans self-perceptions and medical procedures and engaging in problematic presumptions. One example is Johnson's description of genital reconstruction surgery for FTMs, supplying the trans man with what she calls a "penis-like construction" through procedures that are complicated, risky, and expensive (a fact that she points out makes few trans men opt for a phalloplasty).<sup>12</sup> This, according to Johnson, "leaves the trans-man in the incongruous position of attempting to be a man with a vagina" (Ibid.: 66). Johnson is here implying that trans men are failed men by describing the phalloplasty-operated trans man as having not a penis but a "penis-like construction" and the non-operated trans man as "attempting to be a man with a vagina." This coinage seems at odds with Johnson's stated theoretical affiliation with Judith Butler and the argument that "all gender is performative" (Ibid.: 65).

In conclusion, Johnson's analysis is predominantly based on detecting, mapping, and revealing the gaps and contradictions in the stories being told. Jay Prosser's characterization of Bernice Hausman's

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<sup>12</sup> Phalloplasty is the construction of a (recognizable) penis by removing tissue from a donor site (another place on the body, typically on the arm or the thigh) and extending the urethra. Trystan Cotten has edited the first collection of testimonies of genital surgery for trans men that will be published in the fall of 2012. See Cotten (eds.) 2012.

reading is applicable to Johnson's, as she approaches these personal trans stories as "a suspect text," which "uncannily mirrors that of the policing clinician who has gone before her: the critic catches us out in our duplicity" (Prosser 1998: 131). The question is how does this position the researcher and the researched subjects? I would argue that it implicitly casts the researcher as the knowledgeable subject who outsmarts the subjects being researched, misled and caught up as they are in their false consciousness. This is enhanced by the continuous and outspoken evaluations of the narratives and embodiments of the trans subjects being analyzed. I find it relevant to bear in mind Henry Rubin's caution, given in connection with an interpretation of qualitative interviews touching on identity and embodiment among transsexual men:

We [researchers] must ask ourselves what it means that individuals feel like they have a "true self," even if we accept the idea that (gender) identities are fictionalized constructs of our collective imagination. We should be wary of simple attempts to dismiss all experience as false consciousness. Perhaps because transsexuals are already considered suspicious subjects, I insist on taking their experiential reports of a core identity seriously (Rubin 2003: 12).

### **Trans Life Stories on the Narratological Dissecting Table**

Jodi Kaufmann's article "Trans-representation" is a rereading of the trans woman Jessie's narrative, generated in 2004 in a biographical interview (Kaufmann 2010: 105). Although being a rereading, engaging self-reflexively with her own first reading, Kaufmann ends up reproducing yet again a dissection of Jessie's narrative that analytically reduces Jessie's voice to theoretical plots.

Kaufmann precedes the article with telling the story about how she made Jessie cry after she read Kaufmann's completed analysis of her narrative construction of gender. Jessie is quoted as saying, "You have taken away the identity I have worked all my life to build . . . Who am I if you take this away?" (Ibid.: 104). This episode becomes a starting point for

a critical self-reflection as Kaufmann realizes that the queer plot reduced Jessie the person to a chain of signifying links (Ibid.: 112), even though the intent was to bring “light to how we (re)produce gender and the body within the heteronormative” (Ibid.). As Kaufmann further states, “I realized the queer theoretical constructs on which I relied to represent Jessie might have functioned to deconstruct gender but did so at the cost of Jessie’s embodied experience” (Ibid.: 104). Kaufmann rewrites the article in an attempt to rethink how to avoid Jessie’s “analytic erasure” (Ibid.).

This rereading raises important and interesting methodological questions regarding the researcher’s representation of interviewees through different kinds of theoretical perspectives. It also raises the question: Is it necessary for the researcher to encourage feedback and dialogue about the analysis—and how important is it that the researcher produces readings that the participants feel comfortable with and see themselves reflected in? These questions tie into and resonate with the methodological issues that I raised in chapter 1, especially with respect to “narrative ethics.”

Kaufmann’s rereading of Jessie’s story is performed through different plots: The hermaphrodite plot, the misalignment plot, the queer plot (focusing on heterologic and homologic), and the material embodiment plot. These plots become tools for analytical framing, and yet they shove Jessie as a person and the socio-cultural problems that she faces into the background. Kaufmann starts out with the “sex-gender misalignment plot with a residue of a hermaphroditic plot” (Ibid.: 106), which appears to give voice to Jessie’s authentic self as Kaufmann states, but this is exactly the danger, because the heteronorms that saturate Jessie’s telling then become hidden (Ibid.: 112). The plot is also dismissed as a medical narrative, the learned and rehearsed narrative that one should tell in order to receive medical help (Ibid.: 107). Then Kaufmann



attends to the queer plot, which starts out with a long description of different arguments within the field and examples of queer representations of transsexuals, which Kaufmann argues “disrupts heteronormativity” (Ibid.: 108). Disruption was clearly Kaufmann’s analytical intention and strategy in her first reading of Jessie and what made Jessie uncomfortable. However, Kaufmann reproduces an analysis supposedly similar to her initial one under the performative title “Scene 3.” Here an excerpt from the interview appears, which she thoroughly dissects using the concepts of heterologic and homologic as scalpels. The stated goal of this reading is to illustrate “not only that sex and gender are socially constructed but also how they are constructed to (re)produce heteronormativity” (Ibid.: 109–110). Kaufmann continues her plot reading by introducing the critique supplied by transgender studies of the way that queer theory “ignores and erases the lived experiences and desires of many transsexuals” (Ibid.: 110). Reading Jessie’s story through “the material embodiment plot” suggested by transgender studies entails in Kaufmann’s version a heavy use of quotes and hardly any analytical reflections. However, Kaufmann uses the work of Bernice Hausman to conclude, “It may be that all too easily theories of embodiment rely on simplistic notions of essentialism” as sexed embodiment is “presented with the simplistic and highly problematic idea of true gender” (Ibid.: 112). As noted previously, relying on Hausman might be problematic, considering that several trans researchers have dismissed Hausman’s research as transphobic (see, for instance, Heyes 2007; Stryker 2006a; Prosser 1998).

It does not seem clear to me how these plots help save Jessie from “analytic erasure” as the stated purpose was, especially taking into consideration that these plots contribute to a further dissection of the life story and a further detachment from a living, breathing storyteller and the social and political issues present in Jessie’s life. Kaufmann’s reading is, as

I will argue, still primarily focused on revealing and mapping what she labels “veiled ideologies and structures” (Kaufmann 2010: 114). The focus continues to be on detecting how Jessie’s narrative is implicated in heteronormative scripts and finding a representation that contributes to a disruption of heteronormativity. Tracking and mapping heteronormativity was initially an attempt to expose a regime of knowledge and social practice that Kaufmann saw as oppressing Jessie, constraining her from the possibility of living gender (Ibid.). The question is whether Kaufmann’s rereading ends up constraining Jessie as well by reducing Jessie’s narrative to a matter of theoretical plots. As Raewyn Connell argues, the rise of deconstructionist theory poses difficulties for transsexual women, as the focus tends to be on “a problematic of identity,” neglecting to address the social issues of transition so present in trans women’s lives (work, poverty, state organizations of police, health, family services, and so on) as well as degender the groups spoken of. This degendering happens: “by emphasizing only their non-normative or transgressive status; by claiming that gender identity is fluid, plastic, malleable, shifting, unstable, mobile, and so on; or by simply ignoring gender location” (Connell 2012: 864–865). In my own reading of the trans female vloggers I will attend to these social issues while also connecting their vlogging practice to a reformulation of feminism.

### **Who Lets the Subaltern Speak?**

Johnson and Kaufmann do not situate themselves in their study, which results in readings that reproduce a “seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway 1988: 581). In Kaufmann’s case, it is a self-reflective yet unmarked, disembodied nowhere. The apparently high degree of critical reevaluation does not include a reflection about the power relation implicated in a (supposedly) non-trans female researcher deconstructing the life narrative and gendered self-perception of a trans woman.

Likewise, Johnson only positions herself in the abstract “we” (an assumed non-trans position) and she does not reflect on the ethical and methodological implications of conducting research on trans people as a (supposedly) non-trans person. I am reminded of the valuable insights delivered by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she warns that theoretical thinking (in her case Western, post-colonial) that seeks to allow the subaltern to speak might unknowingly perform the same kind of dominance that it seeks to dismantle. As Spivak states, radical criticism “gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge” (Spivak 1998: 24). She acknowledges the attempt to undo the “epistemic violence” done upon (in her case Indian) subalterns, but doing it from the outside risks reproducing a dependency and power relation in which (Western) intellectuals “speak for” the subaltern condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. In my own analytical approach I engage with the vloggers as a somewhat dialogical process, letting the material speak *to* or *with* me instead of *for* me.

### **Relying on Exposure and Subversion**

I argue that trans circulates as a particularly contested intelligibility, as a “sticky” sign saturated with affects, and as a site of personal, social, and theoretical tension (see Ahmed 2004a). Trans becomes impregnated with fears and hopes, as a privileged point of contestations. This has also been a concern raised by Henry Rubin, who argues that trans people have been criticized as “gender traitors” and celebrated as “gender revolutionaries” (Rubin 2003: 163). Rubin has in various writings been critical toward what he calls trans people’s expectance to carry “the revolutionary burden of overthrowing gender or imagining what to replace it with” (Rubin 1998b: 273). His critique is directed toward feminist and queer studies that he accuses of “passing moral judgments on transsexual subjects, who

should somehow know better than to ‘believe’ in gender (while letting nontranssexuals off the hook)” (Ibid.: 271). What is at stake is on the one hand the status of trans life stories as a field of study and on the other the purpose of the analysis. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, many researchers rely on the power of unveiling, thus “unveiling [has] become the common currency of cultural and historicist studies” (Sedgwick 2003: 143). She calls this a “tracing-and-exposure project” that is “widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities” (Ibid.: 124–125). The exclusive focus is on revealing and/or subverting heteronormativity/heteropatriarchy through analysis by pinpointing normative assumptions and/or drawing attention to “tricksters.” This does in some instances lead to a kind of radical avant-garde thinking, which tends to be more pronounced within (but not at all restricted to) queer theoretical studies, illustrated in the common use of words like “reveal,” “exposure” (Ibid.: 139), “subvert,” and “disrupt.” This also runs through more radical streams of transgender studies and politics as put forth by, for example, Kate Bornstein (1994) and Dean Spade (Spade 2011). This kind of approach has the potential to offer a radical cultural critique but is potentially lacking an engagement with the individual (re-)negotiations of gender and the contradictory terms by which people tend to live their lives and tell their story. That said, many trans/genderqueer people do have lived experiences of or life projects directed toward disruption, because a binary gender system is unable to grasp and contain their self-identifications, desires, and sexual practices. My analysis is an attempt to move beyond a search for “unveiling” or “subversion” by paying attention to individual claims of identity appearing in/through the vlogs.

## **The Missing “Trans” in Studies on Men and Masculinity**

What I will attend to in the following is how men’s and masculinity studies tend to overlook or marginalize trans as a category of analysis. In this vein I will pay special attention to trans men and the challenges and tensions that this group of people give rise to in connection with critical thinking on men and masculinity. Whereas trans women tend to be particularly privileged points of fierce reflections within certain feminist theories and excluded from certain women-only spaces, trans men tend to be privileged points of critical discussions within queer theories, movements, and communities. I will address and analyze the tensions this gives rise to, reflecting on theorizations of hegemonic masculinity, the patriarchal dividend, male privilege, and heteropatriarchy. All of which queer lines of thinking have as their declared goal to overthrow, which I claim in recent years has truncated trans men in a crossfire of hopes for subversion from “within” and critiques of supporting a repressive system. These tensions are also present in the vlogs as an undercurrent, which I touch upon in chapter 3. But let me address the positioning of trans within men’s and masculinity studies before moving on to trans men’s ambivalent position within disputed regimes of power.

Within the studies of men and masculinity, trans men are an overlooked group (Green 2005: 291), even though it is often argued that masculinity is a social and historic construction and that the link between men and masculinity “is not as straightforward as it may, at first appear” (Beynon 2002: 7). However, men’s and masculinity studies have not paid much attention to how masculinity is enacted and experienced by people not assigned male at birth. And as Jamison Green states, “The majority of the literature about masculinity (at least, that which I have reviewed) is not sufficiently subtle or specific in its use of terminology” (Green 2005: 295). Judith Jack Halberstam notes that men’s and masculinity studies have “no interest in masculinity without men” (Halberstam 1998a: 13),

and that there is a “seamless translation of masculinity into men” (Halberstam 2002: 352). The work produced “has largely and almost exclusively addressed men and maleness” (Ibid.: 345), highlighting the lack of research on and inclusion of what she labels “female masculinity.” The refusal or lack of attention is, according to Halberstam, sustained by “a conservative and protectionist attitude by men in general toward masculinity” and “a more general disbelief in female masculinity” (Halberstam 1998a: 15). This is, according to Halberstam, not just the case within the studies on men and masculinity: “In both the heterosexual conversion films and in masculinity studies, in both popular culture and academic discourse, maleness remains a protected provenance for the cultivation of privileged forms of masculinity” (Halberstam 2002: 347). Masculine women have, according to Halberstam, played a large part in the construction of modern masculinity, but yet masculinity studies insists that masculinity is the property of male bodies (Halberstam 1998a: 14–15, 46). Her research is an attempt to compensate for that lack by “conceptualizing masculinity without men” (Halberstam 1998a: 2), drawing attention to and valorizing masculinity enacted by (primarily) butch lesbians who are overlooked or shamed.

Looking at men’s and masculinity studies today it seems as if some focus has been put on the pluralities of masculinity enacted by people of different sexes but little on actually expanding or questioning men/man as a category. As masculinity and cultural studies scholar John Beynon states in *Masculinities and Culture*, “While all men have the male body in common [...], there are numerous forms and expressions of gender” (Beynon 2002: 1). This quote is telling, as it naturalizes who gets to be included in the category of men and what these men’s bodies look like. The embodiment of people within the category of men becomes an unquestioned fact, whereas masculinity becomes a potentially free-floating signifier that can be subjected to thorough examination. In this respect, trans men as a field

of study can fertilize and push the boundaries of the studies of men and masculinity. As Raewyn Connell and criminology and sociology scholar James Messerschmidt acknowledge but leave unfolded: “The need for a more sophisticated treatment of embodiment in hegemonic masculinity is made particularly clear by the issue of transgender practices” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 851). One could add that trans men could be of particular interest for the study of men and masculinity when developing a more nuanced reflection on “the limits to discursive flexibility,” thus how male gender positions “are constrained massively by embodiment, by institutional histories, by economic forces, and by personal and family relationships” (Ibid.: 842–43). Some attempts have been made to include trans men, for example in the expansive *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities* from 2000. But the as the authors behind the single essay on trans men state, “Although there are occasional references to transgender in the masculinity literature [...], this latter literature has largely ignored the area of transgender” (Ekins and King 2000: 380). Trying to compensate for this the chapter offers a theoretical introduction to trans, explained broadly as “a social process in which males *renounce* or *suspend* the masculinity that is expected of them and females (unexpectedly) *embrace* it” (Ibid.). The introductory character of the text as well as the rhetoric (explaining trans women as “males” who renounce or suspend masculinity and trans men as “females” who embrace it) signals that sociologists Richard Ekins and Dave King are presenting subjects and issues that indeed are underdeveloped within studies of men and masculinity. Trans is reduced to a matter of renouncing masculinity/femininity, which bypasses the complexities and differences within trans identification. But maybe most problematically, trans women are profiled as inherently “males” and trans men as “females.” However, the chapter does offer a solid overview, including the voices of trans theorists themselves, and ends with the argument that trans is an

important contribution, highlighting that “there is more to Men and Masculinity Studies than men and masculinities” (Ibid.: 391). Ekins and King hereby seem to include as well as exclude trans men from not only the field of study but also the category of “men” and “masculinity,” suggesting that trans cannot claim to be part of or be understood within these categories.

The recent publication *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular Culture* by English scholar Michael Boucher also includes an essay on trans men and issues of visibility. Still, trans men comprise a small and marginal area within the studies on men and masculinity, something that seems to be added as an appendix. Tellingly Boucher’s essay is also framed as “a much-needed queering of the entire subject of masculinity” (Shaw and Watson 2011: 5). Overall, trans men are in recent publications pointed out as an important field of study, pushing the studies on men and masculinity toward researching alternative ways of doing sex and gender, but is still appointed a role as a rather peripheral field of study, detached from the normative category of men and hegemonic masculinities.

### **Hegemonic and Subordinate Masculinities**

In R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt’s rethinking of the concept “hegemonic masculinity” trans men are pointed out as an underdeveloped field of study, but as the authors state, it is “not easy to be confident about the implications of transgender practice for hegemony” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 851). In Connell’s own previous writing on masculinities, she touches upon the case of trans but first and foremost in connection with trans women, telling the story of Paul Gray, who cross-dresses and “now is trying to live as a woman” (Connell 2005: 113). An analysis of trans men’s position within and negotiation of hegemonic masculinities has not been pursued. In my own reading of the trans male



vloggers (see chapter 3) I am not only inspired by Connell's way of reading personal narratives but also focusing on vlogging as part of a "gender project" where "trans" and "male" becomes negotiated (Ibid.: 72). I am analyzing how the trans vlogs address the plurality and hierarchy of and relationship between masculinities as well as embodiment in contexts of privilege. And how the vlogs illustrate and create an attachment to different masculinities.

The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" was introduced in the 1980s (Ibid.: xviii) and has since then earned a prominent position within the studies on men and masculinity as a concept that researchers have applied, rethought, and challenged. As critics have pointed out, the concept is rather blurred and uncertain in its meaning (Ibid.: 436), which might also be the reason why it has been used across such a wide variety of research fields.

Hegemonic masculinity is a concept developed to explain the pattern of practice "that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832) but also the legitimated authority of some men over others (Connell 2005: 183). Hegemonic masculinity is "not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same" (Ibid.: 76) but rather a normative system. It is "the currently most honored way of being a man" at a given time, narrated by mass media or celebrated by the state (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832, 838). On the one hand, Connell presents hegemonic masculinity as primarily a normative ideal that is rarely met or enacted by actual men, but on the other hand Connell also highlights hegemonic masculinity as a socio-economic matter-of-fact-position that some men hold, albeit one in constant contestation. Connell and Messerschmidt explain hegemonic masculinity as something men can adopt when it is desirable but also strategically distance themselves from (Ibid.: 841). And yet the possibilities are constrained by various factors—for example, embodiment

and economic forces (Ibid.: 843). Not many men actually meet the normative standards, thus the number of men “rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small” (Connell 2005: 79). As Henry Rubin also points out, most men (trans or not) are already outside of the hegemonic constructions of masculinity, which means that they are engaged with some kind of struggle (Rubin 1998: 322). However, the majority of men gain from this hegemony because they benefit from the overall subordination of women—that is, the patriarchal dividend (Connell 2005: 79). Connell also presents the term “complicit masculinities” to describe masculinities that “realize the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy” (Ibid.), distancing themselves from the direct display of power but accepting the privilege (Ibid.: 114). There is an ongoing domination and subordination of masculinities where some become authorized and others marginalized, labeled as “hegemonic masculinity” and “marginalized masculinities” (Ibid.: 80–81). Men of color might be marginalized in the United States and yet a particular black athlete can be an exemplar for hegemonic masculinity but without a trickle-down effect: “It does not yield social authority to black men generally” (Ibid.: 81).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity seems to be an attempt to account for or analyze masculinity formations and power relations within a range of fields: cultural representations, everyday practices, and institutional structures. Critics such as men’s studies researcher Jeff Hearn have noted that it is unclear how hegemonic masculinity relates to each of these fields—and what the relation between them is (Hearn 2004: 58). The persistent question is, as Hearn states, “What is actually to count as hegemonic masculinity” (Ibid.)? I would add that Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity tends to equal masculinity and men, neglecting to address masculinities that are not enacted by people assigned male at birth and therefore not accounting for its own premises, namely that

masculinity is a potentially free-floating signifier/practice.

The more “positive” aspects of hegemonic masculinity as a phenomenon are important to address as well if one wants to explain why some men, subordinate or not, strive for or evaluate themselves against hegemonic masculinity. As Connell and Messerschmidt point out:

Indeed it is difficult to see how the concept of hegemonic masculinity would be relevant if the only characteristics of the dominant group were violence, aggression, and self-centeredness. Such characteristics may mean domination but hardly would constitute hegemony—an idea that embeds certain notions of consent and participation by the subaltern group (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 841).

In order to address this, it seems important to pay attention to the personal investments and desires implicated in striving to comply with hegemonic masculinity and fitting into a heterosexual matrix even though one is bound to fail. Queer theory makes room for such thinking but rarely pursues it. A telling example is gender and media analyst Brenda Cooper’s queer-theoretical reading of *Boys Don’t Cry* that offers a profound analysis of the movie’s portrayal of what she calls “dominant heteromascularity” or “heteronormativity” in its most extreme and violent version. She traces the movie’s portrayal of the naturalized assumption of a coherent and binary gender system where gender is supposed to follow from sex and result in a sexual desire/sexual practice directed toward the other gender, and the (sometimes violent) punishment of those who put this system at risk. She also focuses extensively on how the film “queers the center” (Cooper 2002: 57), pinpointing the continuous gaps and negotiations of the selfsame heteromascularity and heteronormativity. However, she bypasses the representation of Brandon’s investment in and longing for recognition within heteromascularity, which plays an important role in the story. This longing seems to manifest itself as the reason why Brandon chose to stay in Nebraska instead of going to the gay mecca of San Francisco. He seems

to have a strong desire to fit into the all-American (heteronormative) dream instead of belonging to a gay/queer subculture. This is also noted by Bobby Noble, who states, “Brandon seems to have found himself in a non-queer but working-class rural community where he could more readily pass as male because he did not identify either himself or his desires as ‘female’ or ‘queer’” (Noble 2004: xxx-xxx).

### **Trans Men and Hegemonic Masculinity**

In order to address hegemonic masculinity as a cultural and institutional system of authority and subordination, it seems crucial to touch upon which kinds of embodiments and enactments of masculinity are restricted. One study conducted by sociology of gender scholar Kristen Schilt has tried to apply the notion of hegemonic masculinity to trans men as a field of study, looking at gendered workplace inequalities. Based on in-depth interviews with twenty-nine FTMs in Southern California, Schilt argues that FTMs may not benefit at equal levels to non-trans men, but many of them do find themselves benefiting from the “patriarchal dividend” (Schilt 2006: 486). Many trans men gain competency, authority, respect and recognition for hard work, economic opportunities, and status compared to before transitioning (Ibid.: 475). However, as the findings demonstrate, this is not just a matter of becoming a visible man (instead of a visible woman) but due to obtaining a more gender normative appearance, no longer being an “obvious dyke” (a masculine-appearing lesbian woman), which proves to be beneficial (Ibid.: 481).

I would therefore argue that the patriarchal dividend is not what these trans men benefit from (at least not in any clear-cut way), thus it is not just a matter of exchanging one social gender category for another but about more complex power relations where privilege is ascribed to those who do gender in a culturally acceptable way. As Schilt points out herself, the degree to which the trans men gain authority and respect is based on

their height, race/ethnicity, if they are “going stealth” or not, how young they look, and how well they pass.<sup>13</sup> Thus, looking young (like a boy), being short, or being of color and “out” has a negative effect on accessing authority and respect. As Schilt concludes:

Examining how race/ethnicity and appearance intersect with gender, then, illustrates that masculinity is not a fixed construct that automatically generated privilege [...] but that white, tall men often see greater returns from the patriarchal dividend than short men, young men and men of color (Ibid.: 485).

Gaining the full privileges of manhood depends not merely on being recognized as male, but on the whole ensemble of signs that are conventionally taken as evidence of a masculine self (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009: 284). As Raewyn Connell also highlights, hegemonic masculinity is not just defined against femininity but also measured against subordinated forms of masculinity.

A heterogenic view on masculinities is crucial if one wants critically to reflect on what kind of masculinities are culturally acknowledged and praised and how that relates to embodiment and social categorization. This includes analyzing barriers of access and policing, as a way to address how domination and subordination works, not least for various kinds of trans and queer masculinities.

It would therefore be reductive to assume that trans men automatically access male privilege and use transition as a way to escape the social condition of femininity, aka debased or lack of privilege. As Judith Butler makes clear, this assumption “tends to forget that the risk of discrimination, loss of employment, public harassment, and violence are heightened for those who live openly as transgendered persons” (Butler 2004: 9). In line with this, Bobby Noble pinpoints hegemonic masculinity as a specifically white and non-trans subject position (Noble 2012: 141).

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<sup>13</sup> To “go stealth” means that one does not disclose one’s trans status. For a more elaborate discussion of stealth and passing see chapter 7.

This calls for an intersectional awareness and analysis of power that does not equate trans men with male privilege in a simplistic way. As Noble points out, several factors are at play when he manages to get past the border control having a male appearance but a female gender marked in his passport:

[W]hat allows masculinity to function with privilege is a privileged relationship to power in the first place. If I move through the world with power as a man, it certainly is both my whiteness and my class position articulating my gender [...] in my case, it isn't quite as much my gender as my race which facilitates mobility (Ibid.: 144).

Medical transitioning does not automatically and unconditionally give a trans man privilege, thus in a North American context, "it would be a serious failure of our anti-racist analytics to ascribe to [a] man of color the status of categorical privilege" (Ibid.). What Noble pinpoints is that the people who can negotiate national boundaries are people who are in a privileged position, thus having a matching and recognizable gender in appearance and on your documents might be one of those privileges but being white, Anglo-European (unless you are from eastern Europe), and middle-or upper class are other privileges, facilitating your movement.

### **Trans Men as Always Already Queer?**

Trans men might (still) be fairly absent within men and masculinity studies but are more often included in queer studies. However, trans men's enactment of masculinity is almost exclusively both within men and masculinity studies and within queer studies discussed in connection to "other" subcultural, "queer" masculinities. The predominance of academic research on trans masculinity (medically reassigned or not) bunches trans masculinity together with the masculinity performed and claimed by butch lesbians and drag kings. These different kinds of masculinities are often discussed under the label "female masculinity," referencing a range of not-

assigned-male-at-birth subject positions, including trans men (Halberstam 1998a; Noble 2004). Halberstam works with the term “female masculinity” and has devoted large parts of her research to address the “collective failure to imagine and ratify the masculinity produced by, for, and within women” (Halberstam 1998a: 15). She is primarily theorizing and analyzing (lesbian) butch identities under the label of “female masculinity,” but she also includes trans men. This seems like an inappropriate term to use, at least for the group of trans men who specifically disidentify with being female in any sense.

In Halberstam’s writing, butch and FTM masculinity become different yet closely connected positions on the same continuum, thus they are assumed to have a kinship that distinguishes them from men assigned male at birth. What tends to be neglected in this assumed kinship is that not all FTMs identify or present as “butch” and not all have a “lesbian” past or a sexual practice directed toward women. My suggestion is that FTMs might for the most part want to be recognized and addressed as men but they do not necessarily claim or perform “masculinity.” The vlogger Mason is one among other trans men on YouTube who specifically seems to disavow masculinity, hailing a position as a “femme FTM” and being a “sissy” (see my analysis in chapter 3). Although assuming a kinship between trans and butch, Halberstam also privileges lesbian butch masculinity as a per se subversive form of masculinity. As Halberstam argues:

[Butch masculinity] refuses the authentication of masculinity through maleness and maleness alone, and it names a deliberately counterfeit masculinity that undermines the currency of maleness [...] it offers an alternative mode of masculinity that clearly detaches misogyny from maleness and social power from masculinity [...] [It] may be an embodied assault upon compulsory heterosexuality (Halberstam 2002: 345).

Butch masculinity is celebrated for its disruptive potentials as a

subversion of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality. Halberstam seems on the one hand to suggest a deconstruction of gender, claiming that masculinity and maleness are acts that can be appropriated by everybody. On the other hand, female-bodied masculinity (butch masculinity) is celebrated as ultimately and inherently a subversive version of masculinity, implying a kind of essentialism.

Bobby Noble in his earlier work also includes trans men (both operative and not) under the label “female masculinity” (Noble 2004: xi, Noble 2006: 5). He describes female masculinity as “constituted by irreducible contradictions between (de)constructions of ‘bodies’ misread in a certain way as ‘female’ and yet masculine” (Noble 2006: 5). Noble also profiles and focuses on trans men as inherently alternative men, in a kind of in-between position, having what Noble calls “intersexed bodies.” These “intersexed bodies” are marked masculine through various signifiers like facial hair, flat chest, dense muscle tone, and so on, but they “do not seem to bear that supposedly ultimate signifier of maleness: a stereotypical, conventional-looking penis” (Noble 2004: xxxii–xxxiii). As Noble argues elsewhere, the trans man both embodies and is articulated by a paradox due to inadequate or extremely expensive genital surgical solutions. This leads Noble to conclude: “Trans men cannot leave the *trans* behind and be *men*” (Noble 2006b: 98). Noble seems biased by a Canadian-American context where only a small number of trans men have genital surgery, as it is not covered by health-care services. But in various countries in Europe genital surgery is covered (if you get approved), enabling more trans men to have phalloplasty and have bodies that are not “intersexed.” It is important to take into account that trans men’s bodies, perception of self, and everyday experiences are diverse, and that the label “female masculinity” does not cover how all trans men identify and that one cannot make generalizations about trans men as inherently “intersexed.”



## **The Butch/FTM Border Wars**

Trans men also surface within research exploring what has been called the “butch/FTM border wars” (see Halberstam 1998a and 1998b; Halberstam and Hale 1998c; Halberstam 2005; Noble 2004 and 2006). These border wars are, as Halberstam sums it up, about some butches who consider FTMs to be butches that believe in anatomy while some FTMs consider butches to be FTMs who are afraid to make the transition from female to male (Halberstam 1998a: 144). As Halberstam notes, the debate proceed on the assumption that “masculinity is a limited resource, available to only a few in ever-decreasing quantities” (Halberstam 1998b: 287). Aside from being a debate about who is in denial of what and who has access to masculinity, it is a debate centered on complex personal, political, and theoretical questions. In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Jack Halberstam tries to unravel what seems to be at stake on both sides. However, she puts special emphasis on how new discourses on transsexual masculinity are problematic and demonize (lesbian) butch masculinity. She pinpoints how some trans male autobiographies and passing tips among transsexual men online depend on pronouncements about the differences between themselves and (lesbian) butches (Halberstam 1998a: 154). As Halberstam critically sums it up: “Such distinctions all too often serve the cause of hetero-normativity by consigning homosexuality to pathology and by linking transsexuality to a new form of heterosexuality” (Ibid.: 157).

From my virtual field studies on YouTube, the disavowal of being a lesbian seems less to be a matter of sexuality than gender, thus lesbianism is not consigned to pathology but becomes a way to claim a male identity. “Lesbian” is a category that for many (trans men included) is coded as female, which makes it problematic to claim or become affiliated with. Furthermore, many trans male vloggers have no problem with and even at times embrace (no matter their sexual orientation) being affiliated with or read as gay men. This implies that sex/gender maps sexuality, making

certain homosexual categories unwanted while others are embraced with enthusiasm or indifference. Homosexuality is therefore not demonized as such as a sexual practice or identity. That said, having identified as and/or being recognized as lesbian before transitioning, might make “lesbian” a particularly sticky category that gives rise or loyalty to certain negative affects in connection with one’s own male identity formation. Meanwhile, for others it becomes important to claim a continuum between a (former) butch identity and trans identity. However, as Henry Rubin argues, in order to qualify for treatment with hormones and surgeries, FTMs have to distinguish themselves from lesbians: “FTMs are still compelled, literally and figuratively, to cite the differences from lesbians in order to make themselves recognizable as transsexual bodies in need of treatment” (Rubin 2003: 179). Rubin here implies that social forces (the process of evaluation by psychologists or psychiatrists) have a constitutive effect on the disidentification from lesbians.

Halberstam is also objecting to “mainstream attitudes” toward transsexual men versus butch lesbians, focusing on an article in the *New Yorker* where the female reporter praises the masculinity of—and finds herself in flirtatious heterosexual dynamics with—the transsexual men she is writing about (Halberstam 1998a: 157). Halberstam problematizes how masculinity is celebrated when it is enacted by—or a visible trait on—trans men but stigmatized on butch lesbians; thus trans men become legitimate masculinities at the expense of butch lesbians because, as the reporter remarks, these men are nothing like butch lesbians, they are not unattractive masculine women but men. As Halberstam notes, the masculinity of trans men tends to be more accepted and embraced by a mainstream society than the masculinity of butch lesbians. Although not upholding the same structural power position, one might claim that trans masculinity on the contrary becomes problematic within (some) lesbian/queer communities. As Vivianne Namaste points out, certain

masculine identities are embraced and celebrated as breaking gender stereotypes before transitioning while often interpreted as reproducing typically masculinist behavior afterward (Namaste 2005: 53). Trans men can be said to be a particularly condensed point from which to illuminate not only what a heteronormative society acknowledges as legitimate performances of masculinity, requiring an attachment to a recognizable male embodiment, but also how certain lesbian/queer communities likewise legitimize certain masculinities primarily when attached to a recognizable female embodiment. One could polemically ask whether the body in both cases becomes a privileged signifier, foreclosing a rethinking of the meaning of sex. If we want to move beyond a deterministic meaning of the sexed body (as many lesbian/queer communities do), then why reproduce in reverse a heteronormative assumption that only certain bodies can do certain things? Is it possible to move toward thinking of certain practices themselves as problematic (for example, taking up too much space) instead of allowing these practices when enacted by one type of bodies and not by others? To exemplify, misogyny can be considered a *practice* of denigration (of women) no matter the gender assigned to the person enacting it, and yet it seems easier to detect when enacted by recognizable men. I will engage more with these questions in chapter 3.

Halberstam is also critical toward the transgender studies enacted by Jay Prosser and Henry Rubin, whom she accuses of contributing to a polarized opposition between transsexuals and queers. Prosser and Rubin develop their theories in critical dialogue with queer studies and articulate transition as a quest for a (gendered) home, a place of belonging where one finally settles or longs to settle. Approaching and framing trans narratives as a homecoming project is, according to Halberstam and Aren Z. Aizura, problematic, as it situates certain kinds of trans identity (the non-medically transitioned or non-passing), as “an almost impossible and fundamentally dislocated or unreal location” (Aizura 2006: 295). Home

becomes the vehicle and end point of social inclusion (Ibid.: 296), which runs the risk of essentialism and even colonialism by assuming that there is a logos and an end point that one can/shall search for with clear and specific boundaries (Halberstam 1998a: 163). Although I do not perceive either Prosser or Rubin as universalizing home as a possible or sole end point for trans identities, I acknowledge the need for another concept, more suitable to grasp a variety of trans experiences and claims of identity. My suggestion is that the concept of “(un)comfortability” (Ahmed 2004a) is more useful when trying to articulate and grasp various affects connected to (mis)recognition and (non)belonging. The concept of (un)comfortability does not assume or presuppose the need for a determinable “home” (see my analysis in chapter 3).

In conclusion, the trans man seems to be a central figure in Halberstam’s writing, although not as central and positively extrapolated as the butch lesbian. Despite the critical reservations, Halberstam argues that “transsexuality and transgenderism do afford unique opportunities to track explicit performances of nondominant masculinity” even though not all obviously “present a challenge (or a want to) to hegemonic masculinity” (Halberstam 1998a: 40). I would argue that the trans man in Halberstam’s writing is cast as either a utopian promise of a counterhegemonic masculinity or as a story of failed opportunities. Bobby Noble also supports the idea that trans men have a (privileged) potential (and obligation) to expose the structures and logics of heteronormative/hegemonic masculinity. He notes how FTMs “linger in and around the critical limitations of heteronormative masculinities” (Noble 2004: xii), articulating possibilities of “progressive and counter-normative masculinities *after* transition” (Noble 2012: 141).

It seems inevitable that gender crossings can demonstrate the vulnerability of otherwise naturalized gender orders—and that trans men can disturb the assumption that masculinity is something that people

assigned male at birth have ownership of. However, it might be time to reconsider the assumption (that sometimes seems to become an obligation) that trans men inherently are or ought to be more counterhegemonic than non-trans men. What seems to be forgotten is, as Rubin points out, that “transsexuals per se are neither *essentially* gender normative nor *essentially* gender subversive” (Rubin 2003: 164).

### **Research on Gendered Self-Perception Among Trans Men**

The research conducted by Jason Cromwell and Henry Rubin is an anthropological and ethnographic attempt to analyze how trans men understand themselves and construct a meaningful identity. Cromwell pinpoints the importance of letting the participants have control over their history as a way to recover and uncover what has been “hidden through silence, neglect, or marginalization” (Cromwell 1999: 14). Or as Rubin points out, he is in favor of tipping the epistemological seesaw toward experience, to counterbalance what he calls “an undue emphasis on structural constraint and the discursive constitution of the subject” (Rubin 2003: 11). Both Cromwell and Rubin write in (at times critical) dialogue with feminist thinking and queer studies. I situate both researchers within an evolving field of transgender studies preoccupied with rendering visible different trans subject positions and voices while theoretically exploring how trans embodiment can challenge essentialist as well as poststructuralist notions of the (gendered) body and identity. These are ideas and debates that are highly relevant for my own research in various ways. In line with Cromwell and Rubin, I am preoccupied with contributing to an overall knowledge about the lived experiences and notions of trans and how one can theoretically and analytically rethink these. My research is similar and yet remarkably different as the focus is on the *mediating role* of the vlogs as a site of (trans) experiences.

## **The Diversity of Trans Male Experiences**

Jason Cromwell's *Transmen & FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders & Sexualities* profiles his personal bias as a trans man, thus the research is a way to "give voice to others like myself"—to "my people" (Cromwell 1999: 5–7). The book is written in opposition to medico-psychological studies that have dominated the research on trans people, many of which assume that trans identity is inherently problematic (Ibid.: 15). As Cromwell describes, the discourse of the wrong body was originally ascribed to homosexuals but became *the* transsexual syndrome in the early 1950s. According to Cromwell the idea "has been imposed upon transsexuals by those who control access to medical technologies and have controlled discourses about transpeople" (Ibid.: 104). The trope has been adopted by trans people as a way to access these technologies and as a way to describe the feeling of body incongruence. Likewise the notion of gender dysphoria (used by a psycho-medical establishment) is inadequate as a description of trans experiences, as it is not gender as such but rather certain body parts that cause dysphoria according to Cromwell (Ibid.: 105). Cromwell objects to and expands the medico-psychological literature as well as earlier studies on trans men that tend to conclude that trans men are a homogeneous group; being men trapped in women's bodies, androgynous in appearance and behaviors, and exclusively heterosexual, obsessed with having a penis (Ibid.: 16). As Henry Rubin also states, the FTM identity "was first constituted by the medical and psychological experts as hegemonically heterosexual" (Rubin 2003: 90). This forecloses and silences the large number of trans men who identify as gay, bisexual, queer, and so forth. Furthermore, Cromwell pinpoints how some but far from all trans men feel the necessity to have phalloplastic surgery—and that the sexual practices that trans men engage in are far from always understood or self-perceived within a heterosexual frame (Cromwell 1999: 112–115, 122–136). His research offers a relevant critique of some

of the dominant paradigms within medico-psychological studies on trans men, highlighting diversity and unfolding a palette of self-identifications and experiences. He is theoretically framing his analysis by feminist theory and discourse analysis (Ibid.: 8), which is chosen as a way to pay homage to individual stories while also paying attention to “what people do linguistically to communicate identities” (Ibid.).

Cromwell seems on the one hand very inspired by Judith Butler’s thinking, labeling a chapter “Queering the Binaries,” and pinpointing how “identifications are multiple and contestatory” (Butler, quoted in Cromwell 1999: 126). On the other hand he seems critical toward Butler’s thinking, misleadingly presenting her approach as a radical form of constructivism, where gender becomes clothing one can put on and take off. He objects to her notions of gender as a performance with no “gender identity behind the expressions of gender” (Ibid.: 42). He argues that trans people’s self-perception is in conflict with Butler, because for them gender is not drag performance but a mode of being (Cromwell 1999: 42–43). Like Henry Rubin, as I will unfold later, Cromwell profiles Butler as a radical constructivist who bypasses the material aspect of gender identity formation, and he uses his interviewees as “evidence” to prove Butler wrong. Cromwell argues that trans people both “feel” that their (gendered) being is essential but also “know” that what they feel is partly due to dominant societal constructs (Ibid.: 43).

Cromwell seems to suggest that trans people as a case study can pinpoint the insufficiency of essentialist thinking on gender as well as help modify constructivist notions of gender. In making this claim he nevertheless makes generalized assumptions, assuming that trans men have the same experiences and perceptions. This is also the case when he frames trans people as “social disruptions” that reject essentialist constructions of gender categories and reinterpret social constructions of those same categories (Ibid.). The analysis pinpoints trans people as a field

of study that not only challenges theories about (gender) identity but are also extraordinary agentive individuals. As he states, trans people are “not like other people. Rather than allowing society to dictate who and what they are, they define themselves” (Ibid.). Suggesting that trans people are not restricted by or part of broader societal norms seems not only to be at odds with his proclaimed discourse analytical foundation but also to be an overtly heroic portrayal.

### **Seeking Gender Recognition**

Henry Rubin’s *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment Among Transsexual Men* is based on ethnographic fieldwork, generated through life interviews with trans men who have undergone or are undergoing bodily modifications, as well as fieldwork observation in San Francisco, Boston, and New York. The book is an “account of life stories of a group of FTMs and also a general meditation on identity” (Rubin 2003: 175). The research is informed by genealogy and phenomenology in an attempt to, in the vein of Cromwell, emphasize the “discursive constraints” as well as “lived experience and embodied agents” (Ibid.: 21).

Rubin is in critical dialogue with radical feminists who, as discussed in an earlier section, have been very hostile toward trans people and medical transition. As he points out: “Body modification is not self-hating misogyny, but rather an attempt to secure intersubjective recognition” (Ibid.: 173). Intersubjective recognition is explained as “the mutual process whereby we acknowledge others and are acknowledged as authentic selves” (Ibid.: 181). Without body modification many trans men are subjects to misrecognition by others and by themselves (Ibid.: 15). If they do not choose modifications they are more likely to be subjected to suspicion, stigma, discrimination, and misrecognition, thus altering the body is “a logical step in order to be granted human status as authentic



and recognizable individuals” (Ibid.: 180–181). As he also points out, most trans men feel that they are changing their sex, not their gender.

Rubin is also in critical dialogue with Foucauldian and queer theoretical lines of thought that have declared the death of the subject (Ibid.: 13). There is, as he points out, a discrepancy between the critique of the idea of a core self yielded by these theories and the claims of having a true (gendered) self put forth by his participants. As he states, “The idea of an essential self is not currently a popular one, but I believe that FTM reports of the perception of a core self are sociologically significant” (Ibid.: 11). Rubin perceives categories of identity as cultural abstractions, never exactly met by any single person or any sum of individual life experiences, but opposes to bypass or dismiss these trans men’s experiences as “false consciousness” (Ibid.: 12). As he points out trans people are already considered “suspicious subjects,” which makes him highlight the experiences of his participants and “insist on taking their experiential reports of a core identity seriously” (Ibid.).

### **Critical Dialogues: Establishing a Theoretical Platform from Which to Address Trans Digital Gender Representations**

Rubin’s methodological/ethical considerations lead him, like Cromwell, to a critical dialogue with Judith Butler about the status of and relation between the (gendered) body and (gender) identity. He problematizes the move to collapse sex and gender, referring to Butler’s idea that “sex” is just mediated through culture as “gender,” which, according to Rubin, “ignores the defining tensions of transsexual narratives” (Rubin 2003: 18). As he points out, implicitly referring to Butler: “Bodies matter for subjects who are routinely misrecognized by others and whose bodies cause them great emotional and physical discomfort” (Ibid.: 11). His point is that bodies are far more important to (gender) identity than other factors are. Rubin’s critique of Butler is in line with several other trans theorists who, as Susan

Stryker puts it, are “somewhat misguided,” accusing Butler of believing that gender is a mere performance, a costume that can be changed or rescripted at will (Stryker 2006a: 10). Gayle Salamon has questioned the ways that some trans writers present trans as “a challenge to the theory of social construction, that the materiality of the transgendered body exposes social construction as a fiction, and a dangerous one” (Salamon 2006: 578). This hinges, according to Salamon, on “a fundamental misreading of the meaning of social construction and a misunderstanding of the use to which it has been put in theorizing gender” (Ibid.: 579). Social construction offers a way to understand the historical and cultural shaping of the felt sense of gender. Neglecting that risks championing a subject who can freely choose what gender to belong to (Ibid.: 582, 585). The critique is relevant to the work of Cromwell and Rubin, as they both end up claiming that the individual experience of an essential sense of self is an argument against social constructivism. I would argue that particular forms of social constructivism tend to neglect individual experiences that are important to bring forth, especially for marginalized/underrepresented groups like trans men and trans women, but not that these experiences in and of themselves prove social constructivist approaches wrong.

Many of the debates between queer theory and transgender studies (some of which I have listed) point toward a difference in worldviews and research aims, although the topic is related. Queer theorists tend to be preoccupied with mapping the broader cultural constructions of gender, and trans theorists tend to supplement this with the personal stories of gender, highlighting the voice and knowledge of the individual.

Using Butler’s early work as an example, the critique raised by Cromwell, Rubin, Prosser, and Namaste pinpoints how the development of the theoretical concept of (gender) performance and performativity lacks a reflection of the actual contexts in which they occur and omits inclusion

of trans people's actual lives and political demands. As Namaste points out, there is "little concern for the individuals who live, work, and identify themselves as drag queens, transsexuals, or transgenderists" (Namaste 2000: 9), thus they appear as "rhetorical figures" wherein "the voices, struggles, and joys of real transgendered people in the everyday social world are noticeably absent" (Ibid.: 16). This does not mean that Butler's overall framework is necessarily in opposition to trans experiences or interests as such, but it needs to be developed further to address the specificity of trans as a field of study. Furthermore, as Michel Boucher also argues, Butler does later, in *Undoing Gender* (2004), respond to some of these critiques by highlighting the material effects of those outside of the culturally intelligible and the ways in which different institutions produce and police boundaries for trans people, among others (Boucher 2011: 202), offering an analysis of the DSM diagnosis and the "the Joan/John case".<sup>14</sup> *Undoing Gender* also seems to be responding to and warning against some of the radical avant-garde readings produced under the banner of queer theory—some of which Cromwell and Rubin accuse Butler of, but which I see more present in activist and theoretical applications of Butler's thinking than in her works themselves. As Butler makes clear, queer theory is not by definition opposing all identity claims, including stable sex (re)assignment, and "more important than any presupposition about the plasticity of identity or indeed its retrograde

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<sup>14</sup> It has been a widely discussed case within gender studies and public media. David Reimer was a healthy child, assigned male at birth, whose penis was accidentally destroyed during circumcision. Psychologist John Money persuaded David's parents to reassign and raise him as female after the accident. Psychological support for the reassignment and surgery was provided by John Money, who continued to see Reimer annually for about ten years. For several years, Money reported on Reimer's progress as the "John/Joan case," describing apparently successful female gender development, and considered the assignment an especially valid test case of the social learning concept of gender identity. However, Dr. Money forced David and his twin brother to engage in sexually simulating interaction as a supposedly important part of creating healthy adult gender identity. Other kinds of abuses also took place. Reimer failed to identify as female and began living as male at age fifteen. Reimer eventually went public with his story and later committed suicide.

status is queer theory's claim to be opposed to the unwanted legislation of identity" (Butler 2004: 7). Butler seems to answer to some of the critique raised by transgender studies as mentioned earlier, as she implicitly warns against creating a queer theoretical hierarchy or "normativity" where only claims of identity outside or between established categories are celebrated and recognized as "queer." This was also my objection towards the readings of trans narratives conducted by Katherine Johnson and Jodi Kaufmann. As Butler specifies in connection with trans identity claims: "The transsexual desire to become a man or a woman is not to be dismissed as a simple desire to conform to established identity categories" (Ibid.: 8). She hereby implicitly addresses the critique mentioned earlier by such feminist theorists as Raymond, Shapiro, Jeffreys, and Hausman. As Butler states, the motivations for medically transitioning are multiple:

It can be a desire for transformation itself, a pursuit of identity as a transformative activity. But even if there are, in each of these cases, desires for stable identity at work, it seems crucial to realize that a livable life does require various degree of stability. In the same way that a life for which no categories of recognition exist is not a livable life, so a life for which those categories constitute unlivable constraint is not an acceptable option (Ibid.).

Butler highlights how sex, despite the construction of sex through discursive practices, does affect our lives and to some extent works to constitute them as livable. Dean Spade's research, mentioned in the first part of this chapter, is a documentation and contextualization of what makes trans lives (un)livable (see Spade 2008 and 2011).

I see transgender studies as an important supplement to queer theory by focusing on personal and lived experiences of differences, and how these experiences are shaped and ordered culturally, socially, and institutionally, paying special attention to questions of narrative ethics and power distribution in connection with producing (trans) subaltern knowledges. I therefore also find it necessary to supplement Butler's

notion of heteronormativity with Julia Serano's notion of cissexism as a way to specify the bodily norms and social and state institutionalized classification systems that trans people to varying degrees and with various effects fail to comply with and thereby become apparatuses of othering. Cissexism is the naturalization and authorization of the sex that one was assigned at birth as one's real and proper gender. Likewise, the relation between sex and gender is assumed to be natural and unproblematic, making trans people's sense of gender less authentic and legitimate as well as attributing trans people's potential incoherence between sex and gender an individualized problem and/or disorder. This creates a huge disparity between trans and non-trans people, not least in relation to access to gender-related health care, which Serano from a US point of view exemplifies as insurance companies' coverage of hormone-replacement therapy, genital and breast reconstruction, and procedures that enhance or enable fertility and sexuality for non-trans people but not for trans people.

Furthermore non-trans people are neither being pathologized nor require anyone else's permission or approval for accessing gender-related health care or for having legal documents that reflect the gender one identifies as (Serano 2007: 157). Thus, there are different standards of legitimacy to people's identified and lived genders based on whether one is non-trans or trans (Ibid.: 168). Cissexism is also connected to cissexual assumption, which is analogous to heterosexual assumption: one is assumed to be non-trans and fall naturally into the category of man or woman, making it impossible to be open about one's trans status unless one continuously "comes out" (Ibid.: 164–165).<sup>15</sup> Cissexual privilege is the gender entitlement and legitimacy that non-trans people are given and assume in their gender identification, which at times can also be extended to trans people when addressed in one's chosen gender or being allowed

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<sup>15</sup> In chapter 7, I will discuss issues of coming out in greater depth.

into gender-segregated spaces that one feels one belongs in—restrooms, for example. But as Serano states, “However, because I am a transsexual, the cissexual privilege that I experience is not equal to that of a cissexual because it can be brought into question at any time. It is perhaps best described as *conditional cissexual privilege*, because it can be taken away from me (and often is) as soon as I mention, or someone discovers, that I am transsexual” (Ibid.: 169).

In conclusion, this study draws on and is inspired by a range of gender-theoretical thinking, from feminism and men and masculinity studies to queer theory, but transgender studies is the flag under which I conduct my analysis because of the at-times-problematic role that trans identities/narratives have been appointed in these other fields of study. My project is theoretically as well as analytically an attempt to move beyond what I would call “dissecting” readings of personal narratives and claims of identity, which tend to focus on unveiling repressive systems. I am inspired by feminism in making the personal count as a political issue, questioning who gets to talk and make decisions on others’ behalf, although this has not always been practiced in connection with feminist readings of trans. From men and masculinity studies I am inspired by rethinking masculinity in the plural and how subordinate masculinities negotiate and position themselves to hegemonic masculinity. Many of the concepts that I use, for example heteronormativity and performativity, are derived from queer theory, and I am informed by a queer-theoretical denaturalization of what one can take for granted or assume about other people’s identities. However, I am first and foremost inspired by transgender studies, acknowledging embodied experiences and voices and connecting these to a broader socio-medical field that enables and limits these experiences/voices. Part one was therefore a deliberate attempt *not* to disconnect trans from the pressing issues of legislation, practices, and

socio-economic barriers around gender reclassification and access to trans health care.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Looking Man Enough? Embodiment and Narratives of Men and Masculinity among Trans Male Vloggers**

This chapter outlines and investigates embodiments and narratives of masculinity as they are communicated and portrayed in trans male video blogs. We will meet James, Wheeler, Tony, and Mason, appearing in the order of when they started to vlog. James is one of the trans male YouTubers who initiated trans vlogging as a genre, and managed to create a career for himself within social media. Wheeler and Tony are part of a rapid increase of trans men vlogging about their transition, helping to establish this form of media communication, while Mason points to new ways of formulating and expressing trans identities.

My aim in this chapter is to bring forth the uniqueness of each individual audiovisual story as they are told and enacted through the vlog as a medium. I will follow the storytellers in an attempt to allow both the stories told but also the identities claimed to “breathe” (see Frank 2010). This chapter, therefore, includes a close reading of the ways these trans men present themselves and interact with the camera and their peers, as well as the labels, concepts, and language they use to express themselves. I want to acknowledge their audiovisual stories of experiences and identifications in and of themselves as productions of knowledge about what is it like to be a trans man in a contemporary Anglo-American society while also paying attention to the mediated layers of visual self-presentations. My prime concern is to portray these trans men’s digital lives—stressing “lives” and “digital” equally. I also want to create a platform from which the reader will get to “know” these trans men and their vlogging practice, which will help enrich my later readings that engage more closely with the vlog as a medium and YouTube as a site.



This chapter is focused on the different ways that they document and discuss their bodily transformations and the different notions of men and masculinity that come into play. What kinds of masculinities are embraced or even celebrated and what kinds are problematized? How is male embodiment pursued or performed? How does the camera become a technology (among others) that enables becoming male or becoming trans man?

### **Longing for Representation: James**

James is a very active video maker and social media user with several personal profiles and blogs. He is currently twenty-seven years old, living in California in the United States. He was among the first wave of trans people who started vlogging about their lives. He started in the spring of 2006, uploading videos while he was living in Florida.

During the six years James has been vlogging about his transition and everyday life as a trans man, he has been very focused on documenting every (in)significant event that has happened as well as every emotional trough that he has passed through. His vlogs are predominantly centered on his experience of transitioning. In his first video he looks very young, situated in his room with a rather tense look on his face as his girlfriend at the time nervously is giving him an injection of testosterone (May 17, 2006). Not long afterward we can witness his first self-injection of testosterone (May 30, 2006). The morning before his top-surgery<sup>1</sup> he seems torn between excitement and edginess as he is crying and laughing at the same time, saying: "I don't even know what to say, I'm so emotional [...] We [James and his friend] are gonna be boys [...] it's gonna be so cool!" (July 12, 2007). He lets his viewers enter the recovery room as he wakes up from his surgery and later on we witness his checkup at the surgeon, who tells him what he can do to facilitate the healing

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<sup>1</sup> Top-surgery is the term often used by trans men to describe the surgical removal of tissue and creation of a flat chest.

process. We follow James at the beach without a shirt on for the first time since his surgery, and we see him walking around with a big smile saying that he has waited twenty-two years for this—and “I feel free” (May 25, 2008). We also follow him as he goes to the courthouse to get his legal name change, and we see him getting his first tattoo. Through the vlogs it becomes obvious that James’s desire to archive his transition also entails saving different artifacts, such as the calcified hematoma that was the cause of his top-surgery revision and that he now keeps in a little glass along with the drains from his surgery (January 1, 2008 and February 28, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

During the first couple of years of vlogging, James often hands the camera over to his partners and friends, who record these significant events in his (transitioning) life. The person behind the camera becomes present not just through the handheld style but also through actively engaging with James through conversation, comments, or questions. Recording seems partly to be a collective project, engaging his significant others, but with James in the absolute lead role and as the driving force and decision maker behind the shooting.

Aside from an extensive interest in documenting and archiving his personal experiences, James also seems indefatigable in sharing knowledge and giving advice on all kinds of trans-related questions. What he is sharing is his accumulated knowledge about trans-related issues as well as his psycho-social experiences and reflections about (trans)gender through different stages of transitioning. The vlog seems on the one hand to be a site for communicating his emotions or getting things off his chest; as he often says, “It’s always good to get it out” (November 3, 2011). On the

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<sup>2</sup> Before the incisions are sealed, two “drains” consisting of long, thin tubing are placed along the length of each incision. The drain tubing exits the body through a small incision hole under each armpit, and is attached to a small plastic bulb on either side. The tubing/bulbs are to help drain off and collect excess blood/fluid so that it will not build up under the skin. They are left in place for several days to a week, depending on how much fluid continues to drain.

other hand, the vlog seems to be a site for knowledge sharing or archiving as James eagerly goes through his massive book or film collection and summarizes how they are trans-related. He is indeed aware of and creates his vlogs with a viewer in mind, whom he addresses as a primarily trans male-identified other, a “buddy” whom he “talks to,” gives advice, shows things, or directs to further information. I interpret the contact that he tries to establish with his fictive audience as an act of friendly (male) bonding as he engages in a forthright and heartfelt man-to-man-talk, always ending on a kind of “I’ll manage” endnote and a “Peace, guys.”

James is part of the first wave of vloggers who creates what I call “commemorating vlogs” (more on this in chapter 5 and 7). Commemorating vlogs take advantage of the multimodality of web 2.0 by including video clips (for instance from earlier vlogs), photographs, written text, or spoken words through a voice-over and music, which all contribute to emanating a certain feeling and narrative. James creates his first commemorating vlog in 2007 that processes his transition. The vlog establishes a narrative of his transition with the use of photographs and video clips, starting with pictures from when he was a child, then video clips from when he initiated the medical transition, followed by clips from his top-surgery, and a happy and smiling James without a shirt on, before returning to show more pictures from his childhood. This flow of living and still images is accompanied by the music of Cat Stevens and the song “Don’t Be Shy”: *“Don’t be shy just let your feelings roll on by / Don’t wear fear or nobody will know you’re there / Just lift your head, and let your feelings out instead”* (May 22, 2007). The lyrics (along with the images) support the creation of a heroic narrative, highlighting overcoming great challenges and finding oneself while also comforting others who might “be shy.” James has since then created several commemorating vlogs that serve as a kind of status update bearing witness to a life in transition. This practice of commemoration has helped to create heroic and encouraging

trans narratives that both the vloggers themselves as well as other trans people relate to.

### **A Love-Hate Relationship with Gender Binary**

In his vlogs James typically appears with a beard, wearing a t-shirt or being bare-chested, allowing his athletically slim and toned chest to be fully visible. His way of presenting his body on screen embodies the quintessential Californian style, with printed T-shirts and shorts and a casual and laid-back attitude. He is often physically active in his vlogs, skateboarding or moving in front of the camera and rarely just sitting still talking. Through his vlogs James expresses a strong and yet ambivalent investment in a binary gender system. He positions himself as exclusively male-identified, having a desire and sexual practice that is directed toward the opposite gender. It seems important to James to appear as a man and to be able to fully incarnate that category. Being trans is something that he embraces as an opportunity to get insights into “both sides,” but he is also continuously frustrated with being trans. His trans status is therefore on the one hand celebrated as a way to manliness but on the other hand pointed out as the source of many of his problems as it prevents him from living life as unquestioned male. He does not identify as an “FTM” but more as “trans” because “I never really felt female.” He therefore prefers the label “transguy, fine, dude, even better” (August 11, 2009). The different ways that he conceptualizes his scars after his top-surgery illustrates this ambivalence about being trans. At first he expresses being worried about people noticing the scars because they make him visible as trans (December 12, 2007). He is later making a vlog, walking through the city bare-chested showing off his “battle scars to everyone.” The meaning of being bodily visible as trans is renegotiated and instead of being articulated as a potential marker of not being man enough, it becomes a symbol of masculinity as the scars bears witness to his psychological and

physical battles and obstacles: “Hell yeah, I went through all that shit!” (May 19, 2010). I interpret his vlogs as tools that act as catalysts for finding pride in and ease with his trans masculinity. What seems to start out as a personal pursuit becomes part of a more collective project about creating trans male visibility.

His vlogs become a forum for documenting, reflecting, and discussing what it is like to inhabit or navigate the world as a trans man. James often addresses how his masculinity is related to—but not exclusively dependent on—the visual appearance and functionality of the body. For James it is an important marker of masculinity that he can urinate standing up (July 6, 2008), that he can grow a beard (October 4, 2009) and that he has a flat chest. But most importantly: “dick and deep voice,” as he says (Ibid.). Not having these bodily markers is often pinpointed as a source of dysphoria. James also uses the word “traumatic” to express how he felt about having female bodily signifiers, thus his top-surgery is articulated as “pure relief,” but nonetheless a relief that he was not able to grasp the scale of until after the surgery. As he says, he did not know “how traumatic it was for me, and truly that is the word [...], it was traumatic to have those things” (December 12, 2007). He is also continuously vlogging about his “dysphoria” in relation to what he abstractly calls “lower stuff” (March 11, 2008). As he says: “I hate life without a dick” (July 17, 2008), and “not to have whatever normal functioning equipment down there” (April 10, 2008). He explains that he has not sought out surgical procedures yet because of a lack of money (as they are very expensive surgeries) and because he is not content with the current results of these procedures (February 20, 2009). The penis is a recurrent topic through the six years that he has been vlogging, as his body image and sexuality seems to center around it. On the one hand he seems to reconcile himself with his current penis through reading countless books on men and masculinity and through building friendships with non-

trans men who fully recognize and treat him as male and with whom he can discuss these issues and realize that “part of being male—any kind of male [...] is coming to accept your penis, its size, its limitations, its functions, its appearance [...] so we are not the only ones” (February 16, 2010). He realizes that non-trans men have difficulties living up to the ideal of manliness/hegemonic masculinity too and what a male body should look like but that a non-trans man “doesn’t necessarily talk about their issues” (March 1, 2009). This brings to mind how Raewyn Connell suggests that hegemonic masculinity is a normative ideal that hardly anyone feels they embody or possess. Hegemonic or normative versions of masculinity might therefore always already be “phantasmatic sites, impossible sites” and hence “alternately compelling and disappointing,” as Judith Butler puts it (Butler 1993: 188). However, some men may be more questioned than others, and therefore more directly confronted with this incapacity or disappointment. On the other hand, James expresses a profound investment in (the size and shape of) this particular body part, which results in recurrent incidences of “dysphoria,” as he calls them. He seems to have difficulty coming to terms with the limits of the transition and the perpetual feeling of inadequacy.

James seems to be deeply invested in having a body that is unambiguously masculine-gendered and able to perform certain (hetero)sexual practices. In his vlogs he always labels his body parts and his sexual activity in masculine terms, which seems to help him connect with his bodily self and which becomes yet another performative constitution of him as a man. His gender identity is interlinked with sexually playing a “male role.” His self-discovery as trans was prompted by a wish to be the “boyfriend” of his female partners. As he explains, “I just had to date girls and it slowly moves into taking a male role with them and then having to be in that role all the time” (November 18, 2009). His partners are all “straight identified,” which makes it easier for him because

“the political-identity thing doesn’t get in the way like it does with a queer woman, not necessarily that’s true for all cases, a lot of queer women are cool, but...” (February 16, 2010). He does not elaborate further on what he actually means by “the politically identity” getting in the way, but he seems to refer to women who are politically invested in deconstructing heteropatriarchy and whose desire is oriented toward a more lesbian or queer spectrum. Any of these investments seem threatening or just unwanted. The self-identified female straightness on the other hand seems to assist in securing or leaving unquestioned his manliness and their (hetero)sexual interaction. However, it also sparks a nagging doubt about not being “man enough” compared to previous non-trans male partners: “Am I man enough? Do I act like them, do I do the same thing like them?” (March 11, 2008).

It is difficult for James to come to terms with the fact that he has once shared the same gender category and bodily attributes as his partners. As he states with clear distaste, “It fucks me out that I had the same parts as my girlfriend [...] and that we both had to use the same bathroom, that fucks me out!” (Ibid.). He sneers in disgust while he is saying it, sitting bare-chested in an armchair with his legs spread apart in a “traditionally masculine pose.” It is the absence of an unequivocal male body and male history that is the source of many of his agonies and the problems he encounters with other people and institutions. He expresses these problems as being “haunted by your former self” (Ibid.). In line with the empirical findings of Henry Rubin (Rubin 2003: 10–11), James talks about the puberty as a period where “your body betrays you” (July 17, 2008). The bodily changes, and not least menstruation, contribute to this feeling. As Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin point out in their recent extensive study, transsexual men are more likely to have been traumatized by the experience of puberty compared with transsexual women, because they have usually enjoyed a greater freedom in expressing their gender

identity as children but lose that freedom when entering adolescence due to gender norms and bodily development (Beemyn and Rankin 2011: x). The medical transition is therefore experienced by James as a reclaiming of his body and he talks about slowly (re)connecting with his body, being able to “inhabit” his body (November 23, 2009).

James identifies as “heterosexually queer” (April 30, 2009) or as a “hetero-flexible male” with an attraction almost exclusively directed toward women, however, with few exceptions, but “not in the sense that I think I would hook up with one [a man]” (August 6, 2009). Thus, “heterosexual” refers to his desire toward women while “queer” points to his self-perception as an alternative masculinity. He is not the “tall, beefy, beer-drinking football-loving guy” but instead “this nerdy, beatnik, leftist, this counterculture-type dude,” he states (Ibid.). Henry Rubin argues that the motive for identifying as queer for a heterosexual trans man can be a need to signal his resistance to hegemonic masculinity (Rubin 1998b: 275), but I would argue that there are several other reasons, such as a sense of kinship with other “queer” identities through shared experiences or histories of marginalization and stigmatization. For James it seems primarily to be an effect of or a feeling of kinship and an interest in queer/trans politics.

He is often giving advice on and reflecting on his experiences with dating and interacting with heterosexually identified women as a man. Many of these women perceive him as gay, supposedly because he is a “feminist,” “friends with gay guys” and “really sweet and compassionate,” which he finds odd and discouraging (March 22, 2009). His explanation is that straight women “have been mistreated by guys,” which makes it a challenge to date them because of “the [negative] expectations they have of you” (February 16, 2010). Being trans is not something that he has experienced prevents women from dating him. As he comforts other (heterosexual) trans men, “Straight women will date you and they are very



forgiving about the lower stuff, you'd be surprised" (Ibid.). As he explains, it is a matter of confidence and not a matter of being trans. He also reassures other trans guys that one of his partners thinks that "blow jobs and hand jobs it's the same thing," one just needs to "scale down" (March 25, 2009). His own issues with phallic (in)capabilities is eased by his realizations that a woman "just wants to get off" no matter the "tool" (June 19, 2009) and are more focused on "emotional bonding." As he explains it, women are interested in "a man who'll ask them how their day was and really mean it" (February 16, 2010).

### **Tracking Bodily Changes: Wheeler**

Wheeler is twenty years old, living on the West Coast of the United States. He is living at home with his mother and an older brother when he starts vlogging in February 2009, but he later moves away from home to another city in order to attend art college. He usually vlogs wearing a T-shirt or a hoodie, and with a lot of laces and ribbons around his wrists and neck. He presents himself as an environmentalist who loves art and plays music. In several of his vlogs, he is performing self-composed songs or cover versions—sometimes love songs directed toward or written for his current girlfriend. He is usually smiling a lot and keeping a lighthearted tone.

His first vlog is recorded the day he has just gotten his first shot of testosterone. He seems a bit nervous in front of the camera and expresses being overwhelmed, surprised, and excited by the fact that the endocrinologist actually proscribed him testosterone and that he was able to get his first shot. But as he states, "I don't care as long as I can shoot myself up with man today" (February 3, 2009). He is seventeen years old when he starts medically transitioning and therefore has to have his parents' permission. Contrary to the experience of many other and older vloggers Wheeler expresses having a supportive family whom he can

involve in the process of transitioning. Especially his mother is very present in his vlogs as he often talks about how supportive she is. He has also facilitated a series of vlogs with his mother where the vloggers can ask questions, offering support and advice for other parents and for trans people who have difficulties with their families.

The process of identifying and coming out as trans is different from the other male vloggers, as it has been an “experimental process” (September 27, 2010b). Rather than struggling secretly with these questions on his own as it is typical for an older generation of trans people (Beemyn and Rankin 2011: xii), Wheeler openly told his mother, family, and friends that he was “questioning gender” and started in therapy. As he states, “It was like testing out waters” (April 7, 2010). Questioning gender became an open process involving collective sharing, which, together with therapy, was a way for him to say things out loud and then understand how he actually felt (September 27, 2010b). Wheeler is an example of a new generation of trans people who have access to more information than previous generations and tend to come out or question gender at younger ages (Beemyn and Rankin 2011: xi–xii). Wheeler, like many other trans men his age, only identified as lesbian and androgynous briefly before settling into a trans male identity (Ibid.: xii). He labels his childhood identity as “tomboy” and describes how he liked “androgynous things from the start” (July 2, 2009). This initially made him believe that he was “gay,” but after a short period of self-identifying as an androgynous lesbian he started identifying as male and realized as he explains that “I’m actually straight” (April 7, 2010). Wheeler is more reluctant than any of the other male vloggers to share information about and thoughts on his sexuality. He also tends not to talk about his body parts and what kind of sexual practices he engages in. His preference for women is obvious, as he often mentions his non-trans female partners who also appear in his vlogs. He does, however, briefly address sexuality when he and his long-term

partner have broken up and he talks about his new partner, who is a friend of his. He expresses being insecure and nervous about dating a strictly heterosexually identified woman as a trans guy, but as he says, to her, “I’m just a guy and that’s all that matters” (October 3, 2011).

He exclusively self-identifies as male and considers himself “totally male at this point” after testosterone and top-surgery (October 23, 2010). He is more hesitant and unsure about identifying as trans (Ibid.), which seems to be an identity category that he claims as a matter of fact and not as a productive label in and of itself. As he points out, all he ever wanted was to be male, thus trans is not an identity category that he would ever voluntarily choose, as he would prefer to be non-trans (September 27, 2010b). Like James, Wheeler self-identifies as and seems invested in an unequivocal (heterosexual) male identity, which makes trans a category and an embodiment that he embraces with certain reservations. And yet, like James, Wheeler keeps updating his transitional vlog, offering detailed information about his bodily transformation and other kinds of trans educational information with an always fully visible rainbow flag in the background.

His vlogs start out as shorter pieces serving primarily as a personal documentation of his changing body, but later on when he becomes more and more accustomed to appearing and talking in front of the camera and starts getting a group of followers, the vlogs become longer and more educational, offering information and resources, being more directed toward an audience. As he states, vlogging initially started as “talking for myself,” but after a while he started to “talk to people” (November 29, 2010).

I perceive Wheeler’s vlogs primarily as an archive, where he enthusiastically documents the physical changes facilitated by testosterone, surgery, and working out. As he states in an early vlog, he is not quite sure if his voice has changed but he will know after this vlog

(February 5, 2009). Later he also points out that he wants to show his chest “for documentation purposes” (February 2, 2010). He is often sampling from earlier vlogs in order to compare and track the changes, praising the bodily masculinization and highlighting the transformative power of testosterone. Emphasizing the archiving function, Wheeler pinpoints how vlogging enables him to “see myself from a long time ago,” keeping track of the changes. However, it also makes him self-consciously aware of his appearance retrospectively, thus listening to the sound of his own voice before testosterone makes him realize “how I totally thought it was a lot deeper than that [laughs]” (January 21, 2010b). What he is implying is a gap between his own self-perception back then and the representation, serving as a kind of audiovisual “proof” of how he looked and sounded.

### **The Trans Male Body as a Visual Spectacle**

Wheeler seems preoccupied with the body on different levels, applying different kinds of “technologies” to nurse it, decorate it, and keep it healthy and in shape. He talks a lot about and displays vegetarian/vegan food, ecological and environmental friendly food, herbal medicine for well-being and healing, working out, and tattoos. As he states, “The main goal for me with my body is that I just want to treat it right when it comes to food and exercise” (March 26, 2012). He claims a holistic approach to bodily well-being as well as a desire to build a lean and muscular male body. The vlog first and foremost becomes a site for tracking and comparing the bodily changes during transition. He is often posing and turning in front of the camera, using the vlog as an extended mirror (see more in chapter 5) and as a way to audiovisually grasp and catch his transitional body. Wheeler seems self-conscious about the appearance of his body, showing off the results of his workout or trying to capture the continuous growth of hair on legs, arms, stomach, and face.

There is in Wheeler's vlog a dwelling on the body as *the* privileged site for re-creation, displayed as a visual spectacle whose tactile surface often takes up most of the screen and in some instances almost becomes the skin of the film (see more in chapter 5, where I discuss Laura U. Marks's concept of haptic visuality). Using the vlog as a way to keep track of the bodily changes seems to assist in and encourage Wheeler's re-creation of himself as a desirable male "image" that must be constantly evaluated. As he is posing and flexing in front of the camera to proudly show the results of his new workout program he is also pinpointing the slight bulging of his stomach (the result of having just eaten, as he explains) and expressing a wish to get rid of the "love handles" (August 24, 2010). The vlog seems to both positively and negatively heighten his bodily self-awareness.

He seems invested in communicating himself as an attractive and positive role model to his viewers, lending himself to a kind of visual consumption as a desirable male image. This has supplied him with a large number of followers and subscribers, and he has become the object of many supposedly non-trans people's sexualized consumption, not least teenage girls/young women (judging from the usernames and comments). His videos are often supplied with text comments below stating how "cute" and "hot" he is.

### **Video Diaries from the Boys' Room: Tony**

Tony is twenty-one years old and from northeast England. He signed up for a YouTube account in the spring of 2009, where he introduced himself as a "pre-op, pre-T trans boy" (April 18, 2009). He is in college and lives with his mother and stepfather when he starts vlogging but he later gets his own place and is working at times and unemployed at other times but hoping to start studying at the university.

His vlogs bear the marks of diaries, as they seem like short and unpretentious updates, trying to catch his physical state of being and emotional state of mind. They all seem relatively unedited and are usually recorded with a still camera that “just” documents his monologue in an unrefined image- and sound quality. There is often a television or the sound of music running in the background—none of these seem like intended effects. Sometimes his mother enters the room while he is recording or you can hear his parents call out for him in the background. He is often not sure how much battery he has left on his camera, so he is continuously jumping behind the camera to see. This all contributes to marking his vlogs as straightforward, informal, and everyday testimonies. He often seems rather unprepared and distracted, as if vlogging on the one hand is an everyday pastime along with other mundane activities, and on the other hand a social activity directed toward a trans audience whom he asks for advice and to whom he gives advice (for example on “passing,” making a “packer”, “STP” and “binding”).<sup>3</sup> I interpret his vlogs as implicitly staging the viewer as a trusted other—like a good friend who listens patiently and offers constructive/positive feedback.

Most of Tony’s vlogs represent the difficult time when he has just “come out” as trans and is waiting to get approved for testosterone through NHS (the British health-care insurance). Tony’s vlogs bear witness to the long period of time that many trans people have to wait before getting approved for hormones. In Tony’s case the waiting time is around one and a half years (April 20, 2009b), causing stress and depression, which at a point becomes unbearable for him, resulting in a breakdown

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<sup>3</sup> A “packer” is an item used by some trans men in the front of his pants or underwear to give the appearance of and instill a feeling of having a penis. A huge number of trans vlogs share information about how to make your own packer out of different kinds of cheap material and where to buy a good and cheap premanufactured lifelike packer sold online. An “STP” is a kind of prosthetic device used by some trans men in order to be able to urinate standing up. The STP is sometimes part of a packer, supporting the feeling and appearance of a functioning penis. A “binder” is cloth, tape, or bandage used by many trans men to give the appearance of a flat chest. Trans men either make them on their own or buy them premanufactured and sold online.

and a notification of illness (January 21, 2009). One senses that Tony, contrary to James and Wheeler, grows up under impecunious conditions, thus he does not have money to buy prosthetics and harnesses and instead makes them himself and seeks help through NHS due to a lack of money. However, after his breakdown his family manages to find funding for him to start hormone therapy through a private clinic.

He seems frustrated and depressed in most of the vlogs from the waiting period—and as I will later argue (see chapter 7)—the vlog becomes a therapeutic tool that he uses in order to communicate his thoughts, frustration, and emotions, seeking recognition and support. He is using the vlog as a way to “express how shitty I feel” (April 19, 2009) and he is often thanking other trans vloggers for all the support he receives online, hoping that he himself through his vlogs “can follow in your footsteps of wisdom” (April 20, 2009a). He is also expressing gratitude for getting insights into other trans people’s transition, “the real deal” as he calls it (Ibid.). When he later starts testosterone, his vlogs are centered on the physical changes, which he continuously talks about and exhibits.

### **Comfortability as a Cissexual Privilege**

In Tony’s first row of vlogs, before the testosterone has “masculinized” his body, he is articulating a feeling of bodily and social disorientation. The vlogs bear witness to how important it is for Tony to be recognized as male—and how much time and energy he invests in thinking about and monitoring his appearance. He tells the story of being at a concert with his favorite band, getting involved in a crowd crush where he can hardly breathe and being helped by the ambulance service, but as he says, all he thinks about is whether they will discover his “binder” (May 13, 2009). His vlogs also indicate how important it is for Tony to be addressed as a man, thus he lists all the times that someone calls him “sir” or uses male pronouns. Gender is articulated as a time- and energy-consuming

negotiations project, where he continuously tries hard to pass but also has to align his look to possibly not passing. He balances the wish to “pack” but not using too big a “pucker,” as that might result in mockery: “Hahahaha—you got three socks down there trying to be a man” (May 20, 2009). Comments like these are anticipated and feared because trying to impersonate manliness without being recognized as such can result in shaming and/or bashing. As Judith Jack Halberstam has pointed out on several occasions, there is a strong mistrust in and stigmatization of “female masculinity.” For Tony the question of recognition as male is crucial and connected to various affects, not least feelings of (un)comfortability. Sara Ahmed’s line of thought is productive when grasping how the phenomenological feeling of comfort is closely connected to and contingent on norms. Tony’s audiovisually communicated urge for recognition as male and fear of and unacceptability with not being perceived as such illustrates gender norms as affective. What is interesting and useful is the way that Ahmed theorizes how norms settles in/on individual bodies as emotions. As she states, “Normativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it” (Ahmed 2004a: 147). Ahmed specifically links comfort to heteronormativity, making it something that various “queer” subjects are often cut off from. As she argues, “Heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape” (Ibid.: 148). The same could be said of cissexism, understood as the socio-cultural assumption that everybody identifies with the gender assigned at birth and unproblematically can move around and into gendered spaces and find recognition in the gender category ascribed to them. Ahmed uses the comfortable chair as a metaphor for what it (bodily) feels like to fit into the norm—a chair that fits one’s body, one you can sink into because you are at ease with your environment. A chair that “acquires its shape by the repetition of some bodies inhabiting it: we can almost see the shape of



bodies as ‘impressions’ on the surface” (Ibid.). Comfort is about a fit between body and object. As Ahmed states:

To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. The disappearance of the surface is instructive: in feeling of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies (Ibid.).

Comfort is well-being, satisfaction, ease and easiness—it just feels right and natural seamlessly and is often not even noticed—unless you experience a mis-fit. To be uncomfortable is the (bodily) feeling of sitting in a chair that has already acquired the shape of other bodies, and where your comfort is contingent and restricted—you have the bulging impressions of other bodies in the back, making your sitting in the chair never quite comfortable. It is a feeling of not fitting in, not being embraced or at ease with your environment. This results in a feeling of estrangement and “acute awareness of the surface of one’s body, which appears *as* surface” because one “cannot inhabit the social skin” (Ibid.). Not to be comfortable is a feeling of socio-geographic disorientation—“one’s body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled” (Ibid.). For Tony, not being recognized as male results in feelings of uncomfatability, thus he is not being seamlessly embraced by his environment and he becomes highly aware of his body as a surface, that is supposed to act and signify in certain ways that it fails to do. YouTube becomes a virtual “place” where he can share and co-inhabit these feelings with others, being at ease with his environment because it is structured around another corporeal schema.

Tony presents testosterone as a substance that makes him feel “comfortable with my body” (August 4, 2009) and embraced by the world. The newly won comfort is expressed as a combined visibility as male and invisibility as gender ambivalent or female. As he states, “I can get on a bus, sit, put my music on, and not think oh maybe that person is looking at

me thinking, is that a boy or a girl?" (November 26, 2009). Passing supplies him with a sense of comfort, as he does not have to worry about misrecognition and bullying, thus it lessened his need to be "paranoid" (August 4, 2009). Paranoia is explained as "worrying about things, overthinking things, planning ahead and making sure that you are prepared for the worst" (January 7, 2010). Tony is not the only one who connects passing and paranoia; also trans thinker and performer Kate Bornstein notes: "You worry it's your paranoia. And you always hope it's only your paranoia" (Bornstein 2006: 240). Being "comfortable" and "recognized" is for Tony, as well as for James and Wheeler, a matter of "passing." To pass is for Wheeler to be an unquestioned male, to enjoy the privilege of being uncontested and unquestioned: "No one questions anything" (September 9, 2009). To be recognized as male produces a feeling of comfortability and relief in Tony, James, and Wheeler. James presents medical transition as a way to (re)inhabit his body and a way to (re)experience the body as a comfortable site to explore and from where he can be comfortably at ease with the environment (January 26, 2010). As he states, "I feel so much more comfortable seen as a guy, addressed as a guy, navigating the world as male, and being in relationships as a male with a woman" (November 23, 2009). Wheeler also uses the word "comfortable" when describing how the medical transition has changed him—"I feel more comfortable with myself, which I think is adding to me giving off a vibe where people are more comfortable with me too" (October 21, 2009). Wheeler articulates comfortability as feeling "so much better in the world," which is enabled by having people recognize him as a male, having the support of his family, and to "just physically look in the mirror and see that's the person I always thought I was" (January 21, 2010b). It is a matter of being visibly readable by others as well as oneself and being addressed and embraced as the preferred gender. And yet the feeling of comfortability is not without momentary feelings of

uncomfortability, as the recognition as male usually levels out or estranges the trans identity. Tony does not escape the feeling of being nonrecognized and uncomfortable altogether. Having a trans history and a body that is recognizable as a trans body means that one's involvement in the world is called into crisis from time to time, thus the "world is shaped by the directions taken by some bodies more than others" (Ahmed 2006: 159–160). As Tony states:

I am just different than the average person and how am I going to cope with living an average life? How do I get from being a boy who used to be a girl to just being a guy who gets on with his life? (January 7, 2010).

Comfortability is a cissexual privilege, ascribed to those who identify with and are socially and institutionally recognizable as the sex that they were assigned at birth, thus conforming to a certain kind of gender norms. Having cissexual privilege entails having your determination of sex considered universally valid, acknowledged immediately, and without hesitation. It also includes having government-issued identification that accurately represents who you consider yourself to be and not having your identification be contested or jeopardized by any legal or "historical" documents. Being a trans person who passes as male might grant you some privileges or comfortabilities, but as James, Wheeler, and Tony all pinpoint, these are always contingent. As James states:

People are born with this privilege that they don't think about daily, they can go to the bathroom without thinking about it, they can have sex and just hook up with someone randomly without thinking about it; they don't have to worry about if their legal gender is OK on their passport (August 21, 2009)

As James pinpoints, non-trans people have certain privileges around bodily appearance and bodily functionality that is often taken for granted and assumed to be a natural fact.

The vloggers also recount uncomfortable situations and problems around government-issued identification (driver's license, national security card, name change, diplomas and transcripts, and so on) as well as denied health insurance. Wheeler talks about the pleasures of passing as male, but being at constant risk of having his male identity compromised because his legal name change has not yet come through. He talks about the stress, frustration, and worry in school because he is listed under his old name, which is what teachers will say out loud if he does not stop them beforehand (September 16, 2009). Wheeler is also vlogging about numerous and fatiguing fights with his health insurance, which keeps refusing to pay for his hysterectomy although it is (primarily) for health reasons.

### **Squeezed by Homonormativity and Queernormativity**

Tony mourns the loss of an available subculture when starting to self-identify as trans. He misses the feeling of community and visibility that he experienced when identifying as a lesbian (July 19, 2009). It seems that he continues to hang out with his lesbian friends, attending different kinds of LGBT events such as Pride, but he expresses being disappointed in the lack and marginalization of trans people at these events. When attending Pride, he notes that the trans flag that he brought along is “the only trans thing that I have seen all day besides from myself” (July 14, 2009). As Vivianne Namaste has pointed out, most LGBT communities are still dominated by non-trans “lesbian” and “gay” people, who only accept trans people who present in certain ways (Namaste 2005: 53–54). There is, as Susan Stryker labels it, a lot of “homonormativity” in various LGBT communities, suggesting that homo is not always the most relevant norm against which trans needs to define itself (Stryker 2008b: 149).

Tony self-identifies as bisexual but with a preference for women. He is 70 percent into women and 30 percent into men, he states (July 19,

2009). He is physically attracted to men but he cannot imagine himself in a long-term relationship with a man (April 2, 2011). He describes himself as “a twink who likes women,” and as an “effeminate guy who is attracted to women but is always perceived as gay” (July 24, 2010). When he starts vlogging, he is in a long-term and long-distance relationship with a woman, who supports him, offering him a space where he can “just let go” because “she knows who I am and I don’t have to try.” This relationship is articulated as the only place where he does not have to assert himself, be on the guard and “man up” all the time in order to be respected and accepted in his male identity (April 20, 2009). When this relationship ends and he passes as male he starts dating men but expresses having difficulties with finding partners. He has tried online dating sites for gay men but has been deleted from the site because he was an open trans man (April 2, 2011). He also reports feeling estranged and misrecognized in “queer communities” where he experiences “a lot of fetishization” from the kind of gay men who “tries to sleep with me just because I’m trans and they think it’s cool” and from lesbians who consider trans men nothing but a radicalization of a butch identity (Ibid.). He seems in both cases to feel reduced to a token and compromised as a man. He is also in other ways reporting having difficulties with what he calls “the queer scene,” which appeals less and less to him. He vaguely describes this queer scene as a place and a politics where people are “making life hard for themselves,” problematizing and being paranoid about everything, which is “just getting me down” (March 31, 2011). It seems as if Tony is hinting at radical queer politics and the way that categories and power dynamics are constantly questioned and contested. He seems to have been very involved in these lines of thoughts before, but needs to distance himself from them now as they “get him down,” and they become obstacles in finding ease in and peace with his male identity. As he states, “Yeah, I’m just pretty much done with it” (Ibid.). He is considering moving to another city when starting

college in order to “go stealth.” This is something that he would have never dreamed of doing before:

In the past I was really “Oh my God, I can never be stealth, I need to be a martyr for the whole transgender thing because I have three hundred labels and everybody in the world needs to know about them!” and now I am just like, “Yeah, I’m a guy and what?!” (Ibid.)

Tony seems to deliberately simplify things as a way to get away from what he previously has labeled as being paranoid, thus “worrying about things, overthinking things [...] and making sure that you are prepared for the worst” (January 7, 2010). But he is highly aware of the lingo and the agenda of radical queer politics. He “knows” that he should not identify as bisexual but as pansexual instead because, as he states, “If I identify as bisexual that means that I am automatically discriminating against trans people.” And with clear irritation, “It does my head in when people say that.” As he further explains, “That’s why I am getting away from the whole trans and queer scene, because everything is about discrimination all the time when it is not even there. I am just sick of this [...] queerer-than-thou chip on the shoulder of so many people” (March 31, 2011). What Tony seems to articulate is the feeling of being invoked and weighed down by a “chip” that could be coined radical queer politics. The question is if queer politics, which started out as a recognition and re-evaluation of more fluid identity claims and desires beyond the gender binary, now circulate as an injunction rather than as an alternative within (certain) trans and queer communities. Are trans people expected to carry “the revolutionary burden of overthrowing gender” (Rubin 1998b: 273) by their personal claims of identity and identity performances? Is Tony articulating what could be labeled a “queernormativity,” wherein one is expected to be in opposition to existing identity labels and societal norms and use a certain lingo not only to dismantle these labels and norms but also to self-identify? Has it become impossible or just difficult to see the passing, assimilating

trans person as anything but capitulating to heteronormativity or heteropatriarchy, offering no political potential?

Tony also articulates identifying less and less with the term “transgender” because, as he states, “My gender isn’t transing from one thing to the other [...] I am not changing my gender but my sex” (March 31, 2011). He is therefore more inclined to self-identify as transsexual, as it is his sex that is changing and that is “the problem” and not his gender. However, he does not see transsexual as something you can self-identify as but more something one “just do” or something “I just am” (Ibid.). He expresses a wish to “just get on with my life,” implying a desire to assimilate into some kind of non-recognizability as trans, but is confronted with new challenges around how and when to tell future friends and partners that he is trans (April 2, 2011).

Following Tony’s life story illustrates, as Sara Ahmed touches upon but leaves unfolded, that bodily transformations “might transform what is experienced as delightful. If our bodies change over time, then the world around us will create different impressions” (Ahmed 2010: 23). For Tony, inhabiting a pre-medical transitioning body raised one set of questions and concerns whereas becoming a visible man gave rise to others. It is not just his body that is changing but also his perception of and interaction with people.

### **Surrealist Works of Art: Mason**

Mason is a forty-four-year-old old vlogger living in the southern United States. He is a trained psychologist and has worked with trans people but is no longer practicing. He started his own medical transition in 2007, taking testosterone and having top-surgery. But he has not (yet) changed his name and gender on his official papers (February 7, 2011; April 27, 2011). The first videos that he made were not intended for YouTube but were declarations of love to a former partner as well as personal

documentations, reflecting on the transition that he was going through. Mason describes himself as a “latecomer to YouTube” (September 19, 2010g), as he did not sign up for a YouTube channel until the fall of 2010, where he uploaded a lot of his previous videos. Mason turned to the online trans community because he was a therapist and did not want to seek support in the offline groups and resources available in his area, where he might encounter some of his clients (Ibid.).

Most of his vlogs are explicitly performative and very aesthetically and dramaturgically well thought out, rendered in black and white or sepia with a frequent use of background music, underlining or supporting the theme that is discussed or enacted. The imagery is often slightly surrealistic, incorporating and mixing images of himself and images from elsewhere, typically art or film. He also includes self-composed poetry or spoken words, which he reads aloud as a voice-over or displays written across the screen. His vlogs are characterized by evoking a feeling of intimacy and presence as he usually films himself in close-up, looking directly into the camera with an attentive, intense, and often very flirtatious gaze. He is communicating himself and his debated topics in an inciting and slightly provocative modus, hailing his viewers as “darlings” and implicitly proposing an erotic or flirtatious relation between himself and his audience.

The vlog is obviously a tool for autobiographical creation and sense-making, taking the shape of or intersecting with aesthetic experimentation. However, the vlog is also a tool of communication, offering advice and support for other vloggers through video responses. He has with time become more and more interested in photography and is also using YouTube as a publishing space.



## Queer Collage

Mason is a self-declared gender terrorist or gender outlaw, using the vlog to perform different genders and sexual identities in a playful way. He seems to investigate and reflect on his own gender identity in and through the video media. He shifts between wearing more traditionally male clothing and more extravagant and feminized clothing but he usually has short hair, a streak of facial hair, and eye makeup. He prefers to present “mostly as male” (April 4, 2011), and he goes by male pronouns. In his first vlog he is alternately in male and female “drag” while you can hear the erotically inciting voice of Debbie Harry from the punk/New Wave band Blondie in the background. The different and composite gendered performances is supported by different kinds of imagery, from the style of super 8 film to contrasted raster images in black and white with a clear digital touch (September 19, 2010a).

He is, as he states himself, “not a traditional guy” (September 19, 2010i). He often explains it as a deliberate choice not to adhere to certain traditional masculinity codes and norms and as an effect of having a critical awareness of sexism and masculinism, having embodied and been assigned female. Many of his vlogs center on claiming and asserting gender identities other than “man,” which does not cover his understanding of himself as a gendered being. He does not feel part of “the men’s club” nor identify as “fully male” (January 11, 2012), thus, as he states, “We need more than three [genders]!” (September 19, 2010i). Contrary to James, Wheeler, and Tony, Mason explicitly positions himself in opposition to a binary gender system, identifying as “genderqueer,” “genderqueer feminist” (May 11, 2011), “a femme FTM” (April 4, 2011) and “drag-queen daddy” (February 11, 2011)—in an attempt not to foreclose the ability to inhabit both feminine and masculine roles and spaces (February 2, 2011). He is invested in a masculine, toned body, which he pursues through medical intervention and weight training, thus having a recognizable male

body is important to him and gives him “such relief” (September 19, 2010). He is longing for a coherent and unambiguously masculine-coded body while his gender identity or gender performance is in constant flux. As he states, “My gender identity is somehow separate from my body identity” (April 4, 2011). Or, as he explains it, he has a wish to look feminine but in a boy’s body (January 15, 2012). He is very explicitly critical toward heterosexual masculinity norms and cultures, which he often describes as misogynistic: “I don’t really value a lot of aspects of male culture” (May 1, 2011). It is therefore with extreme ambivalence that he transitions: “Believe me, this was not where I wanted to end up!” (Ibid.), referring to being trans and being inscribed as male. He considers himself “bi-gendered” and has no desire to “disappear into a masculine culture” (April 4, 2011). For personal and political reasons he is in opposition to a binary gender system, which he finds oppressive to a number of people, even those who are comfortably identifying within those boxes (Ibid.).

His self-declared queer gender identity is informed by his sexual orientation as “pansexual” or “a transfag [...] who is still attracted to women” (April 16, 2011). Like Tony, Mason expresses feeling more (sexually) drawn to men than before transitioning—which makes him wonder, “Are we more drawn to men because we are just drawn to [...] the male form because that’s something we are trying to attain for ourselves—is it a worship of maleness?” (February 5, 2011). Whereas this sense of being drawn is a source of (sexual) pleasure and experimentation for Mason—it creates confusion and frustration in Tony, who wonders if he searching for a “masculine reflection of myself in somebody else”—a reflection that results in unhappiness about “the way I look” (November 7, 2011). What both Mason and Tony suggest are changes in their sexual desire after transitioning, resulting in an increased focus on the male body, both as an eroticized image and as a desirable reflection of oneself.

Gayness as desire, self-identity, and culture seems to become part of a masculinity project that can assist in creating a male identity.

Mason uploads videos to his channel that he and his now former boyfriend have made for each other, often sexually charged videos where they cross-dress and pose in various ways. He characterizes them as a “genderfucked couple” who are “queering Americana” (April 1, 2011). He (re)presents his gender identity as well as his relationship as a fluid role-play with the camera as an integrated part of the performance. As he states, he is thrilled that his partner “just wants to bake me cakes but also wants to be tied to my bed.” Later in the same vlog he is looking directly into the camera with a very intense and flirtatious gaze, pointing out that his partner makes him want to “put on my liquid eyeliner and my high heels and my apron and cook something for him, make him a pot roast or something” (Ibid.). The camera and YouTube as a public space becomes a vehicle and an arena for staging and mediating the sexual and gendered role-play.

Mason’s vlogs can be perceived as an attempt to “queer” trans men as an identity category as well as an attempt to “queer” YouTube. His vlogs offer another kind of representation of trans male identity than what dominate on YouTube, thus his self-presentation is much more feminized and ambiguous than what is typically enacted and claimed among other trans male vloggers. Whereas many other trans male YouTubers use the vlogs to assert a conventionally recognizable masculinity through sculpturing and carrying their bodies as well as dressing and talking in masculine coded ways, Mason on the contrary explores and plays with ways of expressing femininity within maleness. As Henry Rubin already pointed out in 1998, to be a queer trans man “often means being self-reflexive about gender as a construct, purposely gender fucking to disrupt naturalized gender, living with illegible bodies, speaking the unnaturalness

of legible reinscription, or allying politically with other queers” (Rubin 1998b: 275).

Mason’s autobiographical vlogs have affinities with Kate Bornstein’s fragmentary manifesto autobiography *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, as they each oppose a traditional teleological narrative structure about transsexuality. As Mason states, “I was never one of those traditional stories you see out there” (April 4, 2011). He repeatedly disidentifies with being “a true hardcore transsexual” (February 2, 2012) and expresses having a more “fluent” gender identity, located somewhere “in the middle” (January 15, 2012). As he verbalizes it, “Who I am is a little more complicated than male or female” (April 4, 2011).

His audiovisual identity construction is not directed toward but rather set in opposition to a coherent and unequivocal male narrative. This is audiovisually enacted in one of his vlogs where he invites the viewer in, closing the door behind him, and starts putting on makeup, using the camera as a mirror. He engages in different poses and, as if in a strip show, he starts taking off some of his clothes and putting them on again while he is flirtatiously playing with the camera. He deliberately eroticizes himself, using the vlog as a tool for (re)connecting with and (re)negotiating his modified body as a sexual asset. This seems important to him—first of all because he as a trans person feels that it is hard to be comfortable with one’s sexual desires and pleasures, thus “there is a lot of shame” as he states (September 19, 2010n). Secondly, as a way to explore how a trans male body can be an erotic tool, a powerful sexual instrument in the same way as he experienced the female body to be. The camera seems to be a very important vehicle in these pursuits and the virtual space/the virtual public a relatively safe zone or a testing ground for trying out and claiming a queer trans identity. He dares to be more blunt and more provocative online than offline (March 17, 2011). At the end of this drag performance, a written text appears saying: “On any given day, I transition from female

to male, to female again, to something unknown. Transition isn't about following rules" (September 19, 2010p). Mason is cultivating transgender as a movement across or beyond existing categories without a final end point. Or one could say that Mason is cultivating trans identity as a collage vis-à-vis Kate Bornstein: "[B]oth my identity and fashion are based on collage. You know—a little bit from here, a little bit from there? Sort of a cut-and-paste thing [...] It's a transgendered style, I suppose" (Bornstein 1994: 3). Mason's digital autobiographical project, objecting to traditional teleological trans narratives, can be seen in line with transgender authors, artists, and activists such as Kate Bornstein, Del LaGrace Volcano and Leslie Feinberg.

### **A Self-Generated Cyborg**

Mason's YouTube channel page is named after a concept from the infamous "Cyborg Manifesto" written by the cyberfeminist Donna Haraway (however I cannot disclose this name because of anonymity). The cyborg in Haraway's writing is the "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" that we all by the late twentieth century have become, bodily informed and crafted by communication technologies and biotechnologies (Haraway 1991: 150, 164). Trans embodiment seems to be the quintessential expression of this, as suggested by Mason. In some of his vlogs he explicitly assumes the identity of the cyborg—either in the figure of a self-generating identity assemblage or a perverted android seeking likeminded lovers through electronic platforms (September 19, 2010t; September 20, 2010). In his most explicit Haraway inspired vlog he samples various kinds of moving images, some of them from films, and some of him and a friend walking around the city/the park masked to the sound of upbeat versions of Yael Naim and Britney Spears. With Britney Spears's "Toxic" in the background and himself posing wearing a golden mask, he states: "No mother, no father, no God, no garden of Eden, just me

and this never-ending drag show” (September 19, 2010t), suggesting that identity is a continuous process of re- and self-invention. Mason here draws on and reformulates Haraway’s notion of the cyborg, explicating it as a trans figure. However, what Mason seems to be mostly inspired by is Haraway’s conceptualization of the intersection between the human and the technological as a possible political project in its transgression of boundaries and thinking of the self as “disassembled and reassembled” (Haraway 1991: 163). Writing in the mid 1980s, Haraway tried to carve a space in between a masculinist appraisal of technology and its ability for control over (women’s) bodies and a techno-phobic feminism, rejecting any kind of subversive potential in the technologicalization of the (female) body. Haraway argues that the intersection of human and technology is a “political possibility” that could be part of a “much needed political work” (Ibid.: 180, 154). The cyborg is self-generated as implied by Haraway, thus it does not have an origin and a given embodiment with natural, inherent abilities and skills (“it was not born in a garden”), which gives it the potentiality to challenge dualisms (Ibid.: 180). Mason is, via Haraway, connecting trans identity to technology, playfully reappropriating the assumption that trans people are an effect of technology as Bernice Hausman critically puts it. Whereas this “dependence” on technology perpetuates gender essentialism in Hausman’s thinking, foreclosing that body modifications can have any kind of (identity) political potential, Mason seems to argue that the employment of various forms of technologies can be a trans political act. And in line with Susan Stryker’s trans “monster” rising from the operating table, Mason’s trans cyborg figure is not predetermined by the technology that enabled him to emerge (see Stryker 2006b: 248).

### **Who Becomes a Threat to the Public Comfort?**

Mason's vlogs are both artistic explorations of gender (and sexuality) and digital diaries for trying out and sharing thoughts and worries. Like James, Wheeler, and Tony, Mason also frames transitioning as enabling him to be more comfortable with his body. His medically transitioned body has brought him "tremendous relief" and he is now able to look at himself naked (February 2, 2012). But it seems as if Mason, contrary to the others, feels much more disconnected with society after transitioning. As he states: "I have never been more comfortable with my body, ever, and yet I am so uncomfortable with some aspects of my social world" (January 15, 2012). Mason explains how he feels as if transitioning has made his life more difficult, as it has wrecked his career, the relationship with his family, and his love life (January 11, 2012). As he states:

I can be as comfortable that I want with my body but the fact is that I feel like this emasculated male walking around and somebody who could get his ass kicked any minute because I look really faggy and live [in the South] or somebody who is never gonna be able to find a gay boyfriend because I don't have a dick. I just don't know what I have done all of this for (February 2, 2012)

He also expresses great concern about his own safety as a very effeminate-looking man (faggy-looking, as he expresses it), not meeting or identifying with certain (hegemonic) masculinity norms. Thus, having a male body with different masculine characteristics like a flat chest, facial hair, and so on does not supply him with a feeling of empowerment and strength but makes him feel more exposed to homophobic violence, which is often a punishment for not doing gender properly. As Judith Butler also notes, "Homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals" (Butler 1993: 238). Sexuality is often regulated through the policing and shaming of gender. It seems as if Mason experiences standing out more now than he did before, as if he could enfold in the world around him more unnoticeably before

transitioning. He also articulates feeling more empowered before: “At least when I lived my life as a woman I felt powerful, I felt capable, I feel like I had more options” (February 2, 2012). The feeling of empowerment was connected to being a “hot girl,” which gave him a lot of choices “in terms of who I pursue” (February 11, 2011) and a “sexual power” (April 4, 2011), which he longs for. Being male-bodied and having a “faggy”/“genderqueer” appearance matches his self-image and he takes great pleasure in being sexual with people “as a queer male” (January 11, 2012). But it puts him at risk and disables him in a lot of social situations, which contributes to a feeling of uncomfortability. As he states, “I want a larger dating pool. I wanna rejoin a mainstream society” (February 2, 2012). It seems as if transitioning in some ways has enabled James, Wheeler, and Tony to join “a mainstream society,” whereas the opposite is the case for Mason. Becoming visibly male has not automatically granted Mason privilege but rather dispossesses him of various kinds of privilege. As female-identified and -recognized he experienced sexism but he also enjoyed some kind of invisibility and sexual power, which he is now precluded from. This seems partly to be a result of being able to act and being comfortable with acting as “femme,” and engaging in “heterosexual relationships” before transitioning—which never seemed to have been an option for James, Wheeler, or Tony—and partly because Mason explicitly rejects transitioning into a hegemonic masculinity but instead presents himself as a (hyper)gay and effeminate man. Mason therefore seems to experience another kind of social discomfort than the others, and a lack of social recognition and respect.

For James, Wheeler, and Tony gender is the main source of difference where their self-identity at times fails to be reflected back to them. This becomes less and less a concern as they medically transition and change their government-issued identification. Contrary to the very limited studies on African American trans men, neither James, Wheeler,



Tony, nor Mason report experiencing race as an issue that influences or prevents their properness or inclusion. As Michael Boucher points out:

Whereas transition for many white trans men makes them less noticeable and vulnerable as they move through the world, trans men of color become more susceptible to institutional and interpersonal surveillance and discrimination and continue to experience a sense of misrecognition due to the ways in which gender is formulated through and blended with racial stereotypes in our culture (Boucher 2011: 220–221).

African American trans men articulate becoming hypervisible, not least as a potential offender and criminal, as that which a lot of people fear, thus race is an important factor, affecting the experiences of visibility and (mis)recognition for trans men (Ibid.: 219–220). Becoming hypervisible as a potential criminal is not an experience shared by any of the white vloggers. Quite on the contrary, James, Wheeler, and Tony recount people being more friendly and comfortable around them than before. They feel more at ease and social situations and interaction become easier and less filled with scrutiny and fear, as they no longer present as ambivalently gendered and/or as some kind of female masculinity. This is recounted by several other white trans male writers and advocates (see, for example, Green 2004: 35). Many trans men earn an immediate respect that they were not used to before and yet this respect cannot be equated with male privilege in any simplistic way, as stated earlier. However, Mason is an exception, as he too experiences becoming hypervisible, which makes him susceptible to interpersonal surveillance, discrimination, and violence, thus he too experiences a sense of misrecognition as a man who does gender improperly and reads as too obviously gay or genderqueer. Mason has recently taken down his channel, and he expresses that he needs time and privacy to rethink how to deal with the things that he feels he has lost, transitioning to a queer trans man, while also considering whether he should detransition.

## **Constructing and Reforming Maleness**

James, Wheeler, Tony, and Mason all seem to position themselves in relation to a kind of hegemonic masculinity. There are certain aspects of dominant masculinity as practice and culture that they all articulate a critical relationship to, associating it with men's dominance over women. James terms this a "bro-penis culture," where women are not respected and treated as equals. He exemplifies it by telling a story of a non-trans male friend of his in the southeastern United States who once told him that the best thing about having a girlfriend is that you have "pussy on tap" (December 10, 2009). James pinpoints the sexist implications inscribed in this masculinity and how that also ties into homophobia and transphobia, making him insecure and inadequate in his trans masculinity. Thus, certain dominating masculinities subordinate, at times violently, marginalized masculinities, which makes it difficult for James to be a trans man in a "bro-penis culture." Mason also critically refers to a hegemonic male culture that he classifies as "straight" and "misogynistic." He connects it to his upbringing in the US South, but he also presents it as a dominant masculinity in various parts of present-day United States generally (May 1, 2011). James and Mason are both very reflexive and communicative about gender structures and define themselves as feminists, engaged in not enacting a masculinity that suppresses women.

James, Wheeler, Tony, and Mason do in various ways seem to be engaged in not only constructing but also reforming masculinity. As Mason observes, "It feels to me like there are more discussions in the FTM community regarding joining the male culture and ambivalent feelings about that than I hear from my MTF friends who are electing to join a female culture and I think it's because of sexism and I think it's because a lot of us have been—both FTMs and MTFs—born brats of violence or aggression or sexism or heterosexism—all those ugly dominant-culture things that happens to people like us" (September 19, 2010i). Mason also

touches upon how he in appearance diverges from a hegemonic masculinity, which puts him in dangerous or uncomfortable situations. As he states, “That’s one of the prices you pay for not following in line with the rules of being male in this culture” (September 19, 2010). Even though James, Wheeler, Tony, and Mason seem self-reflexively aware of and engaged in reforming certain aspects of masculinity, most of them nevertheless evaluate themselves and not least their bodies in relation to some kind of hegemonic masculinity. The failure or danger of not being recognizable as a man is one of the reasons for applying to or striving toward hegemonic masculinity.

### **The Talking Torso: The Muscular Chest as a Privileged Site of Masculinity**

Many trans male vloggers appear bare-chested in their vlogs (after having top-surgery) for supposedly educational purposes (showing other trans people how it looks and how the scarring heals or for showing off the results of their workout program) and/or simply because they seem to take great pleasure in their new chest. On the one hand, the vlogs become a didactic technology offering education on the sculpting of the chest. On the other hand YouTube becomes an important part of a trans male visual culture, offering numerous representations of how trans male bodies should or could look.

Talking about working out or how to sculpt the torso is also one of the most frequently occurring topics. Generally the upper body becomes a prime point of focus and labor, often overtly worked on by lifting weights or at least talked about as *the* important site of workout. Working out after surgery seems to be a way to (re)claim and (re)connect with one’s (upper) body after years of dissatisfaction with that self-same body and after medical intervention. It seems to be part of an empowering (re)claiming and self-creation. The vlog as a medium also seems to encourage a focus

on the torso because the torso is what is visibly present when one sits in front of the camera talking or when one points a camera towards oneself to record one's whereabouts. The trans vloggers are predominantly visibly present from the waist and up, although occasionally get up to flex and turn in front of the camera to show themselves in full-length. In this sense, the commonly agreed upon term, "a talking head," is actually not quite adequate, as most vlogs have what I would label "a talking torso." The vlog as a medium (or at least the way it is often used) presents "a talking torso," a vlogging form that highlights a first person appearing and speaking in front of the camera, enabling the registration of facial expressions and miming a kind of conversational form of communication. There might be several reasons for focusing on the torso (besides from the media's encouragements), thus many trans men are dissatisfied with or anxious about the size and the shape of their hips and bum (for example, James and Wheeler). I would argue that the chest becomes a privileged site of self-fashioning and a fetishized marker of maleness in the vlogs, installed as a displaced phallus, and invested with sexual potency and desire no matter the sexuality of the vlogger. James and Wheeler flex their chests in a potent manner, highlighting their strength and build physic and Mason eroticizes his chest through posing and wearing revealing shirts or tops.

There is, as feminist cultural theorist Susan Bordo has argued, social power ascribed to the ability to control the size and the shape of the body. The slender and worked-on body operates "as a market of personal, internal order (or disorder)—as a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual" (Bordo 1993: 193). The cultural meanings of the firm, well-muscled body have changed, thus today it has also become a cultural icon, a symbol of correct attitude: "it means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to 'shape your life'" (Ibid.: 195). Bordo also suggests that there is a gendered aspect to this

self-disciplining, as contemporary women's pursuit of a more trimmed body is a disidentification with a more traditional female role, thus rejecting a softer and curvier body symbolizes a "freedom from a reproductive destiny and a construction of femininity seen as constraining and suffocating" (Ibid.: 209). As Bordo argues, "Taking on the accoutrements of the white, male world may be experienced as empowerment by women themselves, and as their chance to embody qualities—detachment, self-containment, self-mastery, control—that are highly valued in our culture" (Ibid.). For the trans male vloggers this disidentification with a traditional female role and female body seem to be even more pronounced and combined with an investment in a traditionally male body symbolism. Muscles become one among other ways of producing masculinity—a way to produce male "realness" (Boucher 2011: 223), through the bodily feeling and/or visual appearance of strength. It becomes a way to control representation and visibility, making their bodies intelligible as male bodies. Drawing on Bordo's analysis, the massive preoccupation with the firm, muscular (upper) body in the vlogs convey willful, disciplined male self-creation. The built body involves pain and bodily suffering; it is an achieved body, worked on and planned—the literal triumph of mind over matter. The built body is not the body one is born with, it is the body made possible by the application of thought and planning, just like the medically modified trans body itself. Richard Dyer argues that the cultural discourses around race grant the white man's built body with different and more empowering connotations than the man of color's built body. Muscles signify differently when the worked-on body is white, thus this body connotes being built or achieved (Dyer 1997: 148). Looking at the visual representation of the white man's body, Dyer argues that the cultural discourse is that the non-white men might be better at (certain) sports, reproduce more easily, and have bigger muscles—but that the white men "are distinguished above all by their

spirit and enterprise” (Ibid.: 147). The build on body is clearly a capital but not the only one. Black people can, in white culture, be reduced to their bodies and race but white people are something else, not reducible to the corporeal or racial, thus the white flesh has enterprise (Ibid.: 14–15). However, the worked-on white trans-male body is not just an empowered body, trying to assert or manifest itself as a male body, but also a disciplined body along the lines of a Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, subjected to constant improvements and evaluations, not least when broadcast on YouTube.

### **More Audiovisual Stories to Come**

James, Wheeler, Tony, and Mason (re)present different audiovisual narratives and negotiations about what it means to be a trans man. The vlog becomes a way to tell their life stories and investigate and communicate their gendered self-perception. Available to viewers are audiovisual stories that are much more complex and diverse than what most of the diagnostic literature on trans people suggests. Furthermore, the vlogs offer self-representations that, contrary to mainstream representations of trans people, are directed toward like-minded others, offering a user-created trans-male visual culture.

As I pointed out in chapter 2, I don’t find it analytically useful or rewarding to search for subversive and/or normative (re)productions of gender in these online life stories. I am instead introducing the notion of (un)comfortability, inspired by Sarah Ahmed, as way to try to grasp how gender identity is a bodily feeling of (be)longing, where different spaces allow different bodies to fit in (Ahmed 2004a). YouTube becomes one of those spaces where trans-male bodies virtually gather and interact, allowing them a certain degree of comfortability, recognition, and at times even celebration.

## Chapter 4

### **“Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves”: Reappropriating Trans Woman as Category and as Spectacle Through Digital Storytelling**

This chapter outlines and investigates how trans women document and discuss their gender transition online. We will meet Erica, Elisabeth, Carolyn, and Diamond, cultivating the vlog in various ways, from a site of documentation and education to a site for the creating and negotiation of oneself as a brand and as female spectacle. I perceive these trans female vloggers as contributing to a reconsideration of the at times troubled relationship between feminism and trans women. They suggest trans womanhood as an integrated part of a feminist struggle and yet they also highlight the continuous discrimination and exclusion of trans women within female spaces. Erica, Elisabeth, Diamond, and Carolyn inscribe and associate themselves with a feminist struggle that is about female empowerment and questioning gender norms, not least the ones reducing what a woman can and cannot do. It is about the right to define one’s identity and one’s body, suggesting a reworking of trans womanhood and feminism within a politics of social justice. However, they also, like Elisabeth, problematize the way that trans women are ostracized from certain lesbian spaces and dating cultures (January 22, 2009; November 18, 2010) or, like Erica, critique the governing principle of “women born women” spaces, excluding trans women from, for example, accessing health care in certain places no matter their medical transition status (July 7, 2009). As Erica states, “It really gets to me when women look at me and say that you’ll never be a woman [...] I am not trying to take over your womanhood, I’m just trying to express my own” (March 11, 2010). Janice Raymond’s demonizing image of trans women as inherently men in

disguise trying to take over women's spaces and bodies still prevails in some places and in certain ways of thinking. To be recognized and accepted as a woman is a fight as all of the trans female vloggers recount—and it is not always a fight where they can count on the support of other women.

What I will focus on in this chapter (as in chapter 3) is to bring forth the uniqueness of each individual audiovisual story, allowing both the stories told but also the identities claimed to breathe and letting the reader get to “know” these vloggers. This chapter therefore includes a close reading of the ways these trans women present themselves and interact with the camera and their peers, as well as the labels, concepts, and language they use to express themselves. I refrain from reading these vlogs as gender performances, revealing “the imitative structure of gender itself” (Butler 1990: 137), which trans women's self-representations too often have been used for in order to focus on the subversion of identity. As Raewyn Connell argues, these deconstructionist theories of gender pose certain difficulties for trans women, neglecting the social issues they are confronted with and ignoring gender location; the intransigence of gender experienced in trans women's lives (Connell 2012: 864–865). I pay special attention to the way they express and claim their gender identity and the meaning ascribed to embodiment and bodily signifiers, sexuality, and race. I also focus on which transitioning technologies are pursued and why, and not least how this pursuit and their lives online seem to be informed by economic (in)abilities.

### **A YouTube Pioneer: Erica**

Erica is twenty-eight years old, currently living on the West Coast of the United States, identifying in her first vlog as “transgender” and “lesbian,” and stating that this will be the topic of her vlogs (November 11, 2006). Like James, she is among the first wave of trans vloggers, and she profiles



herself as starting the trans YouTube community. Her first vlog is recorded in the basement at her workplace after she has just moved to the East Coast from the small town that she grew up in. Through the vlogs she identifies interchangeably as transgender and transsexual, adding feminist to the list (January 17, 2007).

Already within the first couple of vlogs she tells us that she has a girlfriend, and as time passes by the girlfriend becomes more and more present in the vlogs, both as a person whom Erica continuously talks about or mentions but also as a visibly present person who appears in several vlogs and who at times is behind the camera, recording the actions and whereabouts of Erica.

For a long time Erica is primarily vlogging from her work space because she does not have a computer at home. But with time she is able to get her own computer and a camera, enabling her flexibility in terms of what and where to film. Every time she gets a new job and earns money she invests in new technical equipment for vlogging: computer, camera, and microphone (see, for example, February 27, 2007). Erica supplements the use of the camera as a stationary device recording her “talking torso” with more lively on-the-scene reports. It seems as if she always brings a camera on trips and vacations in order to document and broadcast her activities and whereabouts. She is always looking directly into the camera, establishing “eye contact.” It seems as if she is clearly talking to somebody, thus her vlogs are meant for and explicitly address an audience of primarily other trans women. She invites her viewers in as she shows us around her current city of residence or her apartment, recounts what landscape she is driving through, or makes a toast in Champagne to the camera as she and her partner are lying in bed on their honeymoon, showing off their wedding rings. The audience is addressed with a neutral “Hi, guys” but positioned as intimate and trusted others whom she shares her story with. As she highlights on various occasions, she does and says

things online that she “usually” would not say or do around strangers/acquaintances. She establishes relatedness and contact by presupposing a “we” with somewhat similar life experiences and life goals.

The vlog seems to be initiated by feeling alone, Erica having moved to a new big city. As she states in her first vlog, “I’ve had a lot of things on my mind recently that I wished that I had someone to talk with about but I don’t” (November 9, 2006). She quickly gets a lot of supportive response and a group of followers, which she presents as a huge part of the encouragement to keep on vlogging. What becomes a driving force is, as she argues, not just that people are out there watching, but also that they care about what she has to say and that they “can take something away from this” (March 1, 2007). The social dimension of vlogging is highlighted as an important part of why “I keep putting myself out there” and why she continues “to expose myself, out myself to the entire world on YouTube” (March 22, 2007).

Vlogging also seems to be part of an entrepreneurial project, raising money for her transition and her continuous life online. She has on several occasions encouraged people to make a contribution to, for example, a new webcam (March 5, 2007) and “buy [Erica] a vagina fund” (April 18, 2008), listing a PayPal account on her channel page. She also encourages people on YouTube to visit her website, where she has an online shop, selling merchandise with her self-designed logo that also appears in her vlogs.

Through the six years that she has been vlogging she has managed to establish herself as an acknowledged storyteller, a knowledgeable authority on trans issues, and as a brand with her own logo and commercial spots introducing every vlog. Vlogging has not just established her as a very visible and acclaimed trans YouTuber but also paved the way for her to obtain her current position as a counselor for transgender people at a drop-in center. She is now, in her own words, “helping people

out, supporting people” both through YouTube and in her current job (August 26, 2010). However, working with trans people as her colleagues and clients all day has diminished the personal need to discuss trans-related issues through YouTube. As she states, “So, I spend all day talking about trans stuff so I get home and the last thing that I wanna do is to talk about anything related to transsexuality and that’s kind of what the vlog has been about for the last four years” (Ibid.).

### **A Lack of Family Support**

One of the returning issues that Erica keeps vlogging about is her very difficult relationship with her family, who refrain from accepting and supporting her. Like Mason, she is not invited home for the holidays and they will not be associated with her presenting and identifying as a woman. Many years into her transition they still use the wrong pronoun and have a hard time calling her by her chosen name: “I can’t even tell you how tough it is to be so different from everybody when everybody thinks you’re a pervert or sexual deviant or a freak” (January 1, 2007). The vlog becomes a site where she can share her family experiences, which also in some instances involves crying in front of the camera: “This isn’t a very easy point in my life—don’t ask me why I put this out” (May 11, 2007). She explains how her family made her go home to visit them presenting as male, forcing her to change her “mannerisms,” and the whole way she presents herself, including voice and clothes, which was “very embarrassing and humiliating” and which also “messed me up so bad” (May 3, 2007). It is therefore “huge” when she can finally bring home her girlfriend presenting as female, no matter whether her family still gets the pronouns wrong (Ibid.). She seems invested in having a relationship with her family, continuously wishing that they will come around, being patient with their inability to acknowledge her self-identified gender. However, she later decides to cut the connection completely (December 3, 2011).

Erica describes her hometown as very conservative and religious, making it impossible to access hormones, although she saw a therapist for a long time. As she states, “Finding help was absolutely impossible” (February 13, 2009), thus the town is “not the place for somebody like me” (January 10, 2007). She therefore says she explicitly “moved because of my transition” (February 19, 2007). She was twenty years old and still living in her hometown when starting hormones, acquired on her own because of the lack of access through official channels (Ibid.). After coming to a bigger city she was able to get hormone prescriptions and find health-care professionals who monitor her hormone doses and blood numbers. While sitting in front of the camera, demonstrating with shaking hands how she does her hormone injection, she tells us that her initial self-medication gave her heart problems (November 27, 2006). She therefore warns others from self-medicating: “I wouldn’t suggest doing it without a prescription” (Ibid.). She informs us that she now takes estrogen pills every day, supplemented with estrogen injections every fourteen days (Ibid.).

The wish to be a girl was Erica’s first memory and has been with her ever since (January 26, 2007). She talks extensively about dressing up as a girl, initially persuading the neighbor girl to exchange clothes with her, but later stealing female clothing from her mother and at shops to wear alone at home. She recounts the shame, guilt, and secretiveness associated with these practices, which made her continuously get rid of the clothes to prevent herself from wearing them and then needing to get new clothing. Her parents discovered the clothing a couple of times, and her father labeled it a “fetish,” which she felt banalized her deeply felt desire to dress up as a girl (Ibid.).

## Surgical Diaries

Although she embraces and engages in claiming a trans identity (“I am a proud fucking tranny”) she expresses a strong investment in and identification with “woman” as the most adequate category for how she self-identifies. Trans is not a position and an embodiment that she is content with in and of itself, thus she expresses being unhappy with “being stuck in between two genders” (August 12, 2007). As she states, “To me, my penis is temporary—it’s going away—it’s just a birth defect—it’s not supposed to be there—I’m a girl and girls don’t have penises” (Ibid.). She is able to undergo surgeries partly because she has worked and saved some money and partly because she is so privileged to have a health-care plan through her current job that funds all health-care services that are taxable and recommended by a doctor (April 9, 2011). The orchiectomy surgery she pays for herself, whereas the genital-reassignment surgery is covered by her own savings combined with health insurance.<sup>1</sup>

The vlogs become a kind of digital diary, offering extended information on the surgical procedures and her feelings about altering her body, documenting every step. We follow Erica as she is driving to the doctor in order to get her orchiectomy to the music of Bright Eyes with the telling lyrics:

I don’t know where I am  
I don’t know where I’ve been  
But I know where I want to go  
So I thought I’d let you know  
These things take forever, I especially am slow  
But I realized how I need you  
And I wondered if I could come home (Bright Eyes: “The First Day of My Life,” 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> Orchiectomy is the surgical removal of one or both testicles, or testes, to lower the levels of testosterone in the body and to prepare the genital area for later operations to construct a vagina and external female genitalia.

This song also appears in Wheeler’s vlog, which suggests that some songs are more suitable than others to catch and communicate the feeling of transitioning. As the lyrics also imply, the surgery is celebrated as a milestone, bringing her closer to where she wants to go, closer to “home.” As Jay Prosser argues, home is a widely circulating trope within written trans autobiographies and especially surgery is inscribed as “a coming home to the self through the body” (Prosser 1998: 82–83). It is a narrative metaphorizing of transition as a “somatic repatriation,” underscoring that maleness or femaleness is a foreign land and feminization or masculinization a journey toward home (Ibid.: 184).

Erica’s genital reassignment surgery is documented at length, starting with her extended thoughts on why getting this surgery is so important for her. As she explains: “There are physical reasons, legal reasons, and emotional reasons” (May 2, 2011). The most pressing issue is “sex, quite frankly.” As she states, “A big part of gender-reassignment surgery is that I’m gonna be able to have sex in a way that I feel comfortable with.” It is explained as a matter of “comfort,” both in connection with having sex and in her everyday life. She would be much more comfortable if every morning she did not have to “make it appear as if I don’t have a penis [...] It seems like a simple little thing but that would be really nice [...] And to wake up every morning and not look down and be like ‘Oh yeah, there is penis!’” (Ibid.). It is a matter of aligning her body to a more coherent female image. As she explains, “Looking down and seeing my body the way that I want to see it—how powerful is that! People don’t understand how hard that can be if your body doesn’t match” (Ibid.).

The following series of vlogs are very explicit reports on her surgery and recovery, recorded with her mobile phone because she forgot her camera. It is the night before her surgery and she is standing in front of a mirror in order to record herself as she talks about her bodily discomfort due to the bowel preparation (cleansing of the intestines from fecal matter

and secretions). Then follows a series of footage recorded by her partner, just before Erica goes in for surgery and just after, outside the hospital, where Erica's partner reassures the viewers that everything went well according to the surgeon, and later recordings of Erica from the recovery room, her first meal, and her first walk after surgery with her urine bag (May 10, 2011; May 11, 2011; May 12, 2011).<sup>2</sup> These vlogs incorporate and anticipate a community of followers, concerned about Erica's well-being, thus Erica not only addresses them directly as if the videos were made for them, but also expresses gratitude for all the supportive messages and comments that she has received. These vlogs seem very self-exposing, showing and explaining in detail (both in the video and in text underneath) what the procedure involves and what her experiences and feelings are. This continues in her post-surgery vlogs, where she explains how she has to "dilate," demonstrating the different sizes and shapes of the specially designed dildo-looking dilator that she has to use in order to enlarge and keep her vagina voluminous (May 19, 2011). Being able to dilate is an extraordinary feeling, as she explains: "I just can't get over that I can do that, it's really amazing, kind of a mental feeling even if physically it is quite uncomfortable" (May 16, 2011).

### **From Lesbian to Polyamorous**

Erica explains that she has always been attracted to women (February 15, 2007), but identifying as a lesbian has been a process for her because of the cultural expectation that feminine guys are gay (in other words attracted to men), making it difficult for her to perceive herself as a lesbian before encountering trans as an identity category. But identifying as trans has also required a lot of explaining to people around her, as sexual desire

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<sup>2</sup> The surgeon is Marci Bowers, who is famous for being both an innovator in the field of transgender surgery and being the first trans woman to perform the surgery. She has appeared in several mainstream media outlets and is featured in the documentary *Trinidad* (2009), focusing on the life and image in a city that has become known for the flocking of trans women for sex-reassignment surgery.

is assumed to be directed toward the opposite gender of what one identifies oneself as, thus transsexuality is assumed to be closely connected to “heterosexual desire.” She initially states that she has tried dating men before coming out as trans but that she was not really attracted to them (January 17, 2007), although she likes the dynamic with men because it allows her to be a woman (February 15, 2007). YouTube seems to become a space where she can manifest and situate herself as both trans and lesbian, and where these two identities can coexist without excluding each other. The strong presence of her partner and the rich representation of their life together is part of this constitution. However, this seems to kind of backfire on her as she starts to date men as well and therefore receives a lot of negative and condemnatory response. It seems as if enabling the viewers to follow her relationship at a supposedly close hand and getting “to know” her partner has planted certain expectations about the nature of that relationship and Erica’s sexual identity that the viewers apparently feel the urge and the entitlement to express. The shift in identification and practice is disclosed in a vlog just before Erica is about to get married. Here she explains how she and her partner during the last six months have been working on opening up their relationship. They are “polyamorous,” as she labels it, and especially Erica has started “having these desires to date men” (January 10, 2009). However, the vlog is primarily an attempt to discuss her difficulties with dating, asking other trans women for advice who are dating non-trans men. She is disappointed and sad about men’s reaction when she discloses her trans status: “I’m so tired of being rejected just because I’m trans” (Ibid.), thus being trans disqualifies her on the (heterosexual) dating market. As she states: “It [being a pre-op trans] is holding me back from being with people that I want to be with [...] I just hate that, to me I’m just a girl” (Ibid.). When, some months after the wedding, she makes a vlog about a date with a man, she afterward adds the following written disclaimer: “Apparently a



lot of people weren't aware that [name of the partner] and I have an open marriage [...] We are not breaking up, and just because our relationship is different than some other people's isn't a bad thing. No need to message me telling you don't approve" (October 21, 2009). After this, Erica stops making vlogs discussing her sexual life/identity and dating altogether. She now identifies as bisexual and has "a boyfriend I've been dating for just over a year." But as she writes in a comment, "Just don't talk about my personal sex life too much because the last time I did on here everyone got mad at me for being polyamorous" (January 11, 2012).

### **Close Encounters: Elisabeth**

Elisabeth is a thirty-two-year-old self-identified "transsexual woman," living in New England, USA, who starts vlogging in 2007. Her first vlog is recorded at night after she has just been out drinking and partying with some friends. It seems as if a night out has given her the courage to make a vlog, using the camera as a kind of interlocutor that she shares the events of the evening with. She has been on hormones for two months and is in the beginning of her transition as she states in her first vlog (August 5, 2007). She is self-medicating (February 11, 2010), but she gets her blood checked (November 4, 2007). This first video does in many ways set the tone for her entire vlogging practice as she is at home alone, placed very close to the camera talking, sharing her everyday thoughts and concerns about transitioning and being a trans woman. Because of the close-up imagery, she seems very present, taking up almost the entire screen and directing her speech and attention exclusively toward the camera as if being completely absorbed in the interaction with the recording device. The facial expression of emotions is therefore also very noticeable and she does not seem afraid of showing her feelings on camera of sadness, anger, pain, and happiness. And as she states herself, "The process [of transitioning] is very emotional" (August 7, 2007).

She has a very understated kind of humor that runs through her vlogs and it seems as if she is having fun with trying out different ways of presenting herself and using her voice: “I am using my sexy voice,” she says as she starts to talk softly about her sexuality, lying in bed and disclosing that she sleeps in pajamas and a tank top, which as she states properly will burst some of the sexual fantasies that she might have built up (August 9, 2007). Or she ends a vlog with showing some cleavage saying, “For all of you” (September 5, 2007), and she agrees to vlog naked after having been tagged, lying in bed covering up her breasts with her hands and being cut off just at the waist (April 21, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Or she is making the sexually associated sound and gesture of a growling cat at the end of a vlog (September 20, 2007). She seems to flirt with the camera, having fun with trying out more sexually informed female roles. As she states while moving a bit forward adjusting her breasts: “Oh, and something else—my boobs look great today.” She moves the camera a bit, saying, “I’m gonna show you [...] See!—OK, not great-great—but they’re pretty good—they look like boobs for once” while smiling and looking into the camera (October 14, 2007). Vlogging seems partly to be an experiment with how to appear or pose as female as well as a way to talk about the difficulties of being trans.

Elisabeth often vlogs just before going out because she will be dressed up and good-looking (May 31, 2009), or she vlogs after coming home from a night out or when she seems upset or depressed. She also makes very short videos “just to say hi,” which seems like ways of documenting herself dressed up (April 27, 2010).

### **The Hardship of Transitioning**

In the beginning Elisabeth wears a dark wig, but then she shifts to wearing bandana, but eventually appears with her natural dark hair. When she

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<sup>3</sup> The YouTubers can “tag” each other and request that one does or talks about certain things, like vlogging naked as here.

shifts from the wig to the bandana she expresses being a bit anxious about how her viewers will react: “I’m actually really nervous about it, so please don’t freak me out. I still see a ton of boy in me, especially with short hair, so please don’t scare me and be like ‘Oh, you look like a boy’” (October 14, 2007). She continuously shares these anxieties about looking too masculine, noticing “my masculine traits” (October 23, 2007) and does at various times express dissatisfaction with the way she looks: “When I look in the mirror all I see is a guy—and when I look at the other girls all I see is how little and how pretty they are” (February 16, 2008). She therefore initially refrains from making “educational voice vlogs,” as it is “something I don’t have the guts to do, publicly, because I don’t want people to know what I sound like as a guy” (February 14, 2008), although later on she does make one (July 18, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

When Elisabeth starts vlogging she has not disclosed her trans status to her father yet and some of her other relatives because “I’m just afraid of losing them” (August 16, 2007). However, she has told her mother, whom she again and again mentions in her vlogs as very supportive. She highlights how transition is difficult, but worth it (August 7, 2007). She expresses being scared and worried about transitioning and losing more friends and family than she already has because of her identity: “I know that I felt like a girl more than like a guy. But it’s so big—and I’m scared, I’m really scared” (August 23, 2007). It is the process of transitioning that seems to scare her, being unsure about how, when, or if she will be able to be (completely) recognizable as a woman and if being trans will disable her from dating and keeping a good relationship to friends and family. Presenting as a woman also makes her feel more

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<sup>4</sup> Educational voice vlogs are videos made by and for trans women, demonstrating how to “feminize” or soften their voice and raise their pitch in order to be recognized as female. Contrary to trans men, trans women do not automatically get more “feminine-sounding” voices by taking hormones and therefore have to train their voice, if they want it to have a higher pitch and a softer cling. It is also possible to have vocal-cord surgery, but usually trans women train their voice themselves without having medical intervention.

vulnerable and she fears much more for her safety when going out. As she states, “I feel really vulnerable [...] Now that I present as woman I don’t feel that same kind of protection I had when presenting as male” (August 12, 2007). It seems to be both the category of “female” as well as “trans woman” that reinforces her feeling of unsafety. As Judith Jack Halberstam notes, women are identified as victims of violence rather than perpetrators of violence, taught to fear certain spaces and certain individuals (Halberstam 1993: 191). Likewise, trans women are often targeted in hate crimes and sexual assaults, as stated in chapter 2.

Elisabeth’s vlogs seem very raw and honest, and they are mostly shorter updates on her life and emotional state of mind: “Maybe this is a little personal, but I want this on tape because I feel it is important” (August 23, 2007).

During the years that she has been vlogging Elisabeth is often expressing being in between jobs and having a lot of spare time, which is also part of the reason why she vlogs: “It helps to fill time and it’s so great, it’s so fulfilling,” thus it can “enrich your life a bit,” not least because of all the trans people whom she met online (September 1, 2007). As she states, “The first thing I do in mornings before I take a shower or anything I check my messages. It’s a great feeling that people took the time to message you or comment on a video that you made” (October 24, 2007). She is, as noted, often “bored” but says vlogging “makes me feel like I’m doing something worthwhile” (September 8, 2007). However, she is continuously considering whether she should stop vlogging and takes breaks from the Internet from time to time. At one point she highlights how “I need to clear my head and separate myself from everything and do a little bit of soul searching” (September 12, 2007), whereas she recently wanted to go stealth and stop vlogging (July 26, 2012), making her channel private for a while before recently opening it up again.

She often talks about a shortage of money, not least because of her unemployment, but perhaps her family supports her financially in one way or another. What makes me assume this is that it would not be possible for her to have a place to stay and keep up her lifestyle if she did not get support somehow and, furthermore, when talking about “overprivileged people in the United States,” she says, “And frankly I’m one of them” (October 23, 2007). She seems to have had a wide variety of jobs, which include selling self-created merchandise online, and earning money from vlogging and from webcam modeling. However, she has recently started an education within the field of Internet technology (October 7, 2011). A lack of money is, however, the reason given for not having more surgical procedures done or for not having them done sooner, as well as for not having her name legally changed (March 7, 2009). As she states, “Transition is not cheap” (August 13, 2007). She does manage to gather enough money for an oophorectomy surgery (August 14, 2008) and later for FFS (facial feminization surgery), where she vlogs extensively during her recovery (September 22, 2010; September 27, 2010; September 29, 2010). She lies in bed all swollen and bruised, with a bandage around her head after surgery, sharing details about the procedure and how she feels (September 29, 2010).

### **A Lesbian “Jeans and Pants Kind of Girl”**

Elisabeth identifies as “woman” and ideally she wants to “pass all the time” (August 12, 2007), but she articulates being treated “kind of like a woman but not quite,” which makes her sad because, as she says, “I didn’t transition to be a transsexual” (June 5, 2008). She is in her own words “pretty feminist” (April 13, 2008) and sexuality-wise she identifies as a “lesbian” who is a bit “butch” (June 10, 2010). As she states, “I’m a jeans and pants kind of girl” (October 29, 2007) and not a “girly girl” (September 25, 2008). She articulates the feeling of being pressured to jump from one

extreme to the other when transitioning in order to be recognized as a woman. She felt pressured to be more “femme” than she feels comfortable with, thus transitioning is explained as a process where she learns to accept being more “tomboyish” (April 2, 2009).

For a long time she expresses having a complete lack of sex drive and it is, as she says, not “appropriate to date in that limbo” (September 20, 2008). Not only does she articulate being less interested in sexually engaging with women but also feeling incapable of being in a relationship because of being in the middle of transitioning. Later she talks with frustration about dating. She cannot enter female-only spaces and when she does she expresses being subjected to austerity and suspicion, as if she is requested to explain her identity. As she states with what seems like anger and disappointment, “I don’t want to give reasons why I belong somewhere” (January 22, 2009). She articulates not feeling accepted in what she calls “LGBT communities” (November 18, 2010). Many lesbian women lose interest in her when she discloses her trans status, which “makes me feel less than a person,” she says while crying (Ibid.). However, she does get a girlfriend who also appears on camera in one of her vlogs (May 14, 2011).

In the beginning of her vlogging Elisabeth expresses an attraction toward the role that she could have in a potential relationship with a man, being “the girl in the relationship” (August 9, 2007). As she states, “I like the idea,” but she is not attracted to men as such (September 19, 2007). She highlights how her family is “very supportive” but that they expect her to be “straight” (October 16, 2007). Like Erica, Elisabeth suggests that straightness can reinforce a feeling of femaleness and that trans people are assumed to be heterosexual, which initially made it difficult for her to understand herself as trans and later makes it difficult to explain her identity to people around her.

Elisabeth continuously expresses receiving a lot of attention from (heterosexually identified) non-trans men through her vlogs, and also through dating sites, thus her dating life would be easier if she were attracted to men instead of women (December 11, 2010). As she suggests, in contrast to Erica, (heterosexually identified) men seem less scared by her trans status than many lesbian women. However, she also continuously expresses frustration with the male attention that she receives through her vlogs. She is not there to be “pretty” but “to provide information [...] I like being called pretty, but I would much rather that you said ‘You know what—what you said in that last vlog really inspired me’ or ‘Wow, I really didn’t know transgender people had to go through that’” (August 5, 2007).

### **In Need of Support: Guitar-Playing Carolyn**

Carolyn is twenty-four years old and lives in the US Midwest, initially with her family but she has recently moved in with her boyfriend (March 2, 2012). She started vlogging in 2010, identifying as “transgender” and stating in her first vlog: “Basically I’m gonna do some videos like everybody else” (March 30, 2010). As this statement highlights, Carolyn enters YouTube at a point where trans vlogging has already established itself as a “genre,” and she enters a community that is already there. Her stated hope is that she “can meet some cool people in here and maybe help some people” (April 15, 2010). Already in her second vlog she expresses being surprised that her first vlog got so many views (Ibid.) and it is actually astonishing how quickly she has managed to get a huge number of viewers and followers.

Having an audience watching her vlogs and leaving comments is presented as offering support. After posting a vlog where she talks about the difficulties in her life she receives a lot of feedback and comments, and as she states, “It really did help, it did” (May 20, 2010). She uses the vlogs

as a site for asking for advice, wanting “to know what other girls have done in my situation” (Ibid.), thus, as she states, “I’m just trying to learn here” (August 17, 2010). YouTube is hereby profiled as a site for knowledge sharing: “That’s why I made this YouTube—to learn myself and to help other girls” (Ibid.).

Her vlogs have until recently all been recorded in her room in the basement of her family’s house. She initially predicts that she will only be able to vlog when her parents are not at home (April 15, 2010), implying that vlogging is a manifestation of her trans identity and a reaching out to a trans community that she is only able to do secretly because they do not approve. Being on YouTube is for a long time one of the few places where she identifies and presents as exclusively female. Elsewhere she is “not full-time yet” (September 23, 2010).

YouTube seems to offer her positive “attention” (October 14, 2010) but she also continuously reports encountering “haters” (December 1, 2010) and people (supposedly other trans women) who are very opinionated about her way of expressing womanhood, accusing her of not being feminine enough (September 6, 2011). People are not always “nice online,” she says, which at times makes her “sick of YouTube” (Ibid.). What seems to trip up these offensive commenters is that she “likes boyish things” (September 12, 2011). She is frequently broadcasting herself playing electric guitar and sharing her passion for football and for playing computer games, not least World of Warcraft.

Around one-third of Carolyn’s vlogs include her sitting in front of the camera, playing guitar with headphones on, shaking her semi-long blond hair (initially a wig but later growing her own hair) to the tones of loud heavy-metal music. She seems partly absorbed in the music and partly aware of potential viewers as she looks directly into the camera and smiles a coy and natural-looking smile. She is later using her vlog to



advertise for members for a band that she is putting together in order to make a heavy-metal record (March 7, 2012).

It is not just a specific kind of femininity that she expresses feeling forced by others online to take on but also how to progress on the transitioning path altogether. As she states, “Being on YouTube I also feel pressured to go full-time” (October 14, 2010). In her two-years-on-hormones update she discloses that she is now living her life completely as female (November 28, 2011). What also seems to hold her back in the beginning is having a boyfriend who identifies as gay (June 22, 2010) and therefore wants her to stay as she is (May 13, 2010). However, she later proclaims having a new boyfriend who “just sees me as me” (October 17, 2010).

She is early on explicitly addressing her family’s inability to accept her transition and her female identification (May 13, 2010). This becomes a recurring issue through her vlogs, as she continuously talks about how she is prevented from presenting and being accepted as female when she is with her family. As she states, “I never get to look like this [...] I never get to do what I want because I will embarrass or offend somebody [...] Everybody knows but nobody wants to see it” (July 11, 2010). A year later she still concludes: “My family is never gonna see me as a girl,” thus they still call her by her old name and keep correcting her when talking and presenting as a woman (April 4, 2011). It is therefore no surprise that she characterizes transition as “your last decision next to killing yourself, basically” (September 6, 2011) because she has lost family and friends. Or, as she states in another vlog, “Transition is hard—don’t suckercoat it—it’s not easy” (December 1, 2010). Those who are still in her life continue to have a hard time referring to her by her new name and using female pronouns (April 4, 2011) and her family continues to be unable to support her, making comments like: “‘Ohhh, you are never gonna make it [...]’ ‘That’s disgusting,’ or ‘That’s wrong’” (September 12, 2011). She does not

expect her family to ever accept her as a woman, but what she relies on is that her boyfriend and the new people she meets see and address her as female (April 4, 2011). As she speculates: “Family is tough [...] for me most of them are not OK with it, maybe because I’m tomboyish.” She “did a good job at being a man,” which makes her family and friends surprised about her female identification (September 10, 2010).

Unlike many of the other vloggers, Carolyn does not seem to be afraid to include traces of her acting and presenting as male, thus she has recently posted a video of her playing guitar with her (at the time) very muscular, body-building body, fitted into jeans and a T-shirt, standing with legs spread wide apart playing the guitar (January 27, 2012). As she also demonstrates in an early vlog, she has a “boy mode” that she apparently uses for a long time in her everyday offline life alongside with her online female presence. When she is in this boy mode, her movements and the pitch and way she talks is different as she pedagogically demonstrates (May 27, 2010).

### **A Former Bodybuilder Goes Online to Raise Money for Her Medical Transition**

It took Carolyn several years and attempts to self-identify as trans and start transitioning. Like Erica, she explains how she would dress as a girl as much as she could in her room and be jealous of other girls but that she knew not to tell anybody. She felt like “a freak and weird” (June 5, 2010) and started devoting a lot of time and energy to bodybuilding in order to “make myself so big” that she could not fit the girls’ clothing that she had (May 27, 2010). Bodybuilding was, and to a certain extent still is, a big hobby, but she also explains it as a way to try to make the desires to be female “go away” (May 13, 2010) by embodying and conforming to a hypermasculinity. She discovered other people on the Internet (before YouTube) who felt the same way as she did (June 5, 2010), which

encouraged her to try to come out but as she explains she got “scared,” thus “I just couldn’t do it” (Ibid.). Around 2006 she discovered the trans video blogs as they “were popping up on YouTube.” Here she saw more people her age, which became yet another and an even stronger encouragement in her own transitioning process. These videos gave her the impression that transitioning was possible: “And I was like, ah well, you can do this!” but it still took her some years to find the courage to do it. As she argues, “It was so hard for me to finally do it, but it was like a life-or-death thing—I’m either doing it or not living at all” (Ibid.).

Transitioning is presented as a long and evolving process where finding trans visibility and recognition through the Internet has been an important mobilizing factor. However, as mentioned, although Carolyn is presenting and identifying completely as female online, coming out offline is still challenging, not least when applying for jobs because she is “kind of in that awkward stage where I can’t really apply as a girl” and applying as a man has also become difficult because of her long hair and appearance, which she anticipates will make people think, “What kind of faggot are you” (September 23, 2010). Even if she passes as a woman, she worries they will discover her trans status when they run a background check on her, increasing her chances of not getting a job (August 17, 2010). She is especially worried about her job situation because she has not changed her legal documents and her name yet, which could be a problem when presenting as female because there is not a discrimination law in her city of residence protecting trans people from being deselected or fired from jobs (May 11, 2011). She is supposedly still holding the job as a housecleaner that she managed to get in the fall of 2011 (September 12, 2011).

Carolyn also touches upon her ambivalence about identifying as trans. Like many of the other vloggers, Carolyn highlights how identifying as trans is difficult for her “because society looks down upon it” (Ibid.). She

does not want to be perceived as “that thing,” “the tranny” or “the woman who used to be a guy” (June 22, 2010). She would prefer to be a non-trans woman “and not have to deal with it and explain stuff” (September 12, 2011). As she states, “With everything that I’m going through [...] I’m transitioning to become a woman, I’m not transitioning to become a transsexual but [...] I’m trying to reach people that are feeling transgender thoughts” (October 14, 2010).

As a former bodybuilder she works hard on trying to lose muscle mass and weight, being on a diet where she tries not to consume proteins (July 11, 2010). However, she continuously pinpoints her dissatisfaction with the size of her arms, thus her former dedication to bodybuilding is, to a certain extent, “getting in the way” of obtaining the body that she wants now (May 13, 2020).

The importance and the role of economic funding are at the center of several of Carolyn’s vlogs. She is early on listing a PayPal account at the bottom of her videos, encouraging viewers to donate money to her medical transition (Ibid.). As she writes underneath one of her vlogs: “Money is tight, then add buying hormones and planning surgeries and things seem overwhelming at times” (December 1, 2010). Later on, donation is encouraged as a way to “keep the videos coming and will go towards my transition and future surgeries” (January 7, 2011). An important part of making vlogs seems to be the possibility to earn money for her transition. Entering YouTube at a later stage she seems to be aware of the affordances of the technology, enabling not only support and community-building but also possibly earning money through donations. It is hard to tell how much money she has been able to obtain through vlogging, but as she states: “I have some really nice people on here donating” (May 11, 2011). Aside from asking for donations she is also selling commissioned office supplies that she advertises in her vlogs. As she states, “It can help towards my transition because this isn’t cheap” while also expressing a wish to become

a YouTube partner in order to make money (August 17, 2010).<sup>5</sup> She also explains how a TV channel in Japan has used some of her videos, which has supplied her with some money for electrolysis (laser removal of facial hair). As she states, “Hey, it’s money” (January 7, 2011), implying that her greatest concern is not what her videos are being used for but earning money for her transition. She is therefore “saving everything I have” (July 29, 2010), in order to get the breast augmentation, chin operation, and genital operation that she passionately wants, as she reasons that this would provide her with what it takes to be unquestionably recognized as a woman in public (May 11, 2011). But as she infers: “I haven’t had any surgery, because I’m dead poor” (March 25, 2012). Lack of money and impatience with the gatekeeping function of therapists is also presented as reason for self-medicating with hormones: “I just started self-medicating because I didn’t wanted to wait anymore” (September 23, 2010) and “because I don’t have insurance and I don’t have the money to go to the doctor” (August 26, 2010). For a period she even had to “cut back my dosages” because of a lack of money, which she explains has facilitated some hormonal imbalances and emotional changes, such as getting back her sex drive and being “edgy” but also crying (August 26, 2010).

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<sup>5</sup> Becoming a YouTube Partner is a status that one is either offered by YouTube or applies for and gets accepted as. However, the details about how one qualifies and what one can expect to earn are “shrouded in secrecy” (Schepp 2009: 155). Although it is not stated what makes one qualify as a partner it does seem to require that one has a certain number of viewers and followers, that one vlogs regularly, and that one’s vlog has a certain quality. Being a partner enables one to earn money either through views or through commercials and have one’s channel branded by YouTube. YouTube Partners will make in the range of \$2.5 to \$5 per 1,000 video views and \$.01 per channel view. This range can vary depending on number of advertising clicks. There are many other ways YouTube partners make money, such as through video ads and sponsorships (<http://bizcovering.com/major-companies/how-much-do-youtube-partners-make/>). In April 2012, YouTube relaxed the rules and made it possible for any YouTube uploader to become a partner. However, the YouTube Partner Program has only been launched in the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States (see <http://youtubecreator.blogspot.dk/2012/04/being-youtube-creator-just-got-even.html>)

She often highlights being aware of the risks of self-medication (“I know that it is unsafe”), anticipating that other YouTubers/viewers will warn her against it (August 26, 2010; September 23, 2010). What is implied in anticipations like these is that YouTube functions as a forum for exchanging experiences on trans health, which however at times seems to involve advising others on services and procedures that are so costly that not all are able to afford them albeit they risk their health or well-being by not doing so. Engaging in the YouTube community as an open self-medicator seems both to put one at risk of being scolded for doing so but also enabling one to obtain and exchange personal experiences and information with other self-medicators on dosage and use. Carolyn does, however, express plans for calling a therapist to get “a legitimate letter for HRT” instead of buying the hormones online. She wants to do things “correctly” and will use her savings and the donations she has received online to do so, as she needs to get her blood tested as she says (May 23, 2011).

Her social and medical transition, including changing her voice, is expressed as a self-made and self-facilitated project: “Everything in my transition has been basically me doing it—I haven’t had others help me” (April 15, 2011).

### **“This Is Your Girl Diamond”: Sharp-Edged and Humorous**

#### **Performances**

Diamond is a twenty-eight-year-old self-identified African American trans woman, currently living in the southern part of the United States. She has a bachelor’s degree in psychology and is a very active contributor to many different social-network platforms. Her first vlog was uploaded in February 2008, where Diamond introduced herself as “a transsexual, has been since I was thirteen,” recording her first vlog with a low-level camera, wanting “to put myself out there” (February 27, 2008). The quality of the

sound and the imagery has improved drastically during the years she has been vlogging.

Diamond's YouTube vlogs include her singing/performing, uploading new self-created music, giving fashion advice and modeling. She is dressed very differently but almost always fashionably, with a lot of makeup and different hairstyles (different straight-hair wigs as well as natural hair) and with different kinds of glasses. The vlogs are very explicitly performative in various ways and she always opens her vlog with the following: "This is your girl Diamond." Her look and clothing seem like different costumes that she wears specifically for the camera and she does indeed seem to put on a show for the viewers.

The genre of Diamond's vlogs is very mixed. She is, in her own words, "all over the place" being simultaneously "funny," "serious," and "sexy" (October 31, 2010). Just when she is discussing a serious topic she pauses and bursts out: "Wait a minute, let me get fabulous" and puts on her sunglasses and strikes a pose while laughing (June 16, 2010). She performs as a host in her vlogs that predominantly serve as a kind of news channel where she reports on and shares her opinions on trans-related news and issues, taking their point of departure in her own life experiences. Aside from the first vlogs, most of her vlogs have a high quality of image, sound, and lighting, and they are often recorded with a neutral background, which gives a kind of studio effect.

She is a performer who actively uses feminine sex appeal, not least her curvy body and her cleavage, in order to attract attention. As she argues, "That's how I started doing videos—what I said is that I'm gonna put my body out there and be sexy and that will pull people in but the next video you see is me talking about trans issues, so there was, like, a give and take where I would rattle people in but be educator at the same time" (October 31, 2010). Playing with different feminine sex roles (for example, dominatrix with whip and posing in satin underwear on the bed) is

explained as a way to “please my men viewers” but it also got her suspended from YouTube for a while in 2009. This makes her more cautious now, using XTube instead to post more sexually explicit things because being on YouTube is very important to her, especially since becoming a YouTube partner (Ibid.). The overall stated purpose of her vlogging is “talking about trans issue and trans lifestyles” (Ibid.). She is also discussing sex very explicitly in her vlogs, sharing information on her sex life, dating, and very openly stating that she likes a man with a large penis. In one of her vlogs she gives advice on anal douching (preparing for (anal) intercourse) and demonstrates in her tight and very revealing schoolteacher uniform what tools to use and how they work (October 25, 2009). In another she gives advice on condoms (January 8, 2010) but mostly just on men and sex in general.

Diamond is actively commenting on, negotiating, and critiquing the way that trans people are often represented in mainstream media as “a joke, a comic sketch” (June 24, 2011). She is opposing the trope of the tragic and pathetic trans, which she explicitly caricatures in one of her vlogs, stating with an uncommon serious voice and look: “You know as transsexuals we are always miserable, lonely, and depressed” and then laughs out loud (June 21, 2010). She uses humor as her most prominent tool and asset, which colors not only what she talks about but the way she talks about it, regardless of whether the subject seems very personal, intimate, and difficult. Her vlogs not only reject the trope of the pathetic trans but also offer a new way to connect trans women with humor. She becomes the subject of the joke instead of the object. The comic relief is not based on the “intense contradiction between the ‘pathetic’ character’s gender identity and her physical appearance” (Serano 2007: 38) but, on the contrary, on Diamond’s ability to incarnate and act as a “bitchy” woman to use her own terms, who knows her own worth and calls people out on their biases. It is exactly her use of intertextuality and role-playing



that makes her vlogs so humorous and entertaining. She is also explicitly addressing other representational tropes—for example, the pathologization of trans women as murderous predators. Referencing *Psycho* she states: “No, we are not Norman Bates, dressing up because our mother was mean [...] We are practitioners of our own. You don’t have the right to control my life” (November 20, 2009).

Her vlogs are not just addressing and renegotiating existing tropes but also helping to create different representational trajectories for trans people, offering no less than trans pinup combined with trans stand-up, eliciting humor and preaching pride in trans experiences, identities, and bodies. As she states, implicitly addressing her trans viewers, “I love being me—I love doing me and you should love doing you” (September 29, 2009). Or she offers a humoristic take on it by performing and singing her self-composed song: “It’s just a good feeling to know that you are trans, it’s just a happy feeling to used to be a man [...] and when you wake up ready to say, I think I’ll be a woman today” over and over again while laughing out loud (October 12, 2009).

### **Trans Woman as a Desirable Category in and of Itself**

As Diamond often highlights in her vlogs, she has identified as trans since she was thirteen years old but was not able to get on hormones until years later. It is uncertain exactly when she started hormone therapy, but it was around the age of seventeen. She was self-medicating back then and still is, starting with estrogen pills, but she has moved on to injections. She talks in one of her vlogs about the bodily effect of injecting instead of taking pills, offering her softer skin and slowing down the hair loss as well as the hair growth, and she demonstrates how to inject (April 16, 2011).

She shares in the vlogs how her mother started doing drugs and was very absent when Diamond was ten years old, which made Diamond responsible for her two younger brothers. At that time there was “very

little food in the house” (March 31, 2011). After many years of “family crisis” (December 10, 2009) her mother went to prison and Diamond and her brothers were separated. The youngest brother went to stay with a grandmother, the other brother at his father’s house, and Diamond went to a group home. As she states, the grandmother would not have her because she was a “transsexual” (March 1, 2008). As she notes several times, she has always been detectable as an effeminate boy, which made people label her as “gay, fag, sissy” and she understood early on that people perceived her as different and that this was negatively valued (October 27, 2009). She was bullied at school (December 31, 2010) and was denied graduation and barred from attending prom wearing female clothing (which she was usually wearing at high school) (October 8, 2009). But she fought back, beat up a boy who physically attacked her at school, and sued the school and won. When telling stories like these about difficult times and obstacles, she always makes a good and laughable story out of it, situating the “offenders” as so far-fetched that they become comic and pitiful. She recounts many stories and experiences from the group home, which she reflects on with positivity. Diamond highlights in several vlogs how the group home shaped her, because she learned the skills of being a “flamboyant funny faggot,” which made her “the favorite of the staff members” while also being “a fighter” and enjoying the respect that comes with it (December 10, 2009). This was also the time where she came across the word and started identifying as “a transsexual” (December 23, 2009). She also had her first sexual experiences with boys and learned how to use her femininity to attract them and she met one of her (trans) friends, a “sister” who also appears in several of her vlogs. What she first and foremost learned was “how to manipulate the system” (December 10, 2009).

Diamond identifies strongly with trans woman as a specific embodied category. As she states:

I want to be a transsexual—that’s what I like—I love going out into the world and looking like a female and being undetectable [...] but I absolutely adore my penis [...] I like the dichotomy of looking like a female and having a cock—that makes me different [...] It’s just something about it that is sexy to me—I am a physical embodiment of all that is sensationalized sexually on human beings—you have tits, ass, the feminine curves, the face, and the erect penis—all in one—that is so cool to me! [...] That is what I like to be (September 29, 2009).

She is very shameless about exposing her body and very outspoken (but not visibly disclosing) about her genitalia, which she labels her “pussy stick” (June 21, 2010). She also expresses a dissatisfaction with the results of the current SRS technology, as she is not able to obtain what she wants, namely to be able to have children, to have muscles, and develop moisture in the vagina (May 6, 2011). She has therefore “learned to enjoy my body”: “Why take a risk in surgery when you know going in that you are not gonna get what you want?” (Ibid.). She does, however, in several vlogs recount having difficulties with “hiding” her genitalia and how and when to tell male dates and partners. Coming out as trans is an ever-present issue that she has to negotiate every time she meets a potential partner. It is “The elephant in my mind” (May 11, 2012), as she labels it, which potentially can scare men away, thus she has to continuously consider whether disclosing at the beginning or after they have come to know each other will improve her chances. It seems to be the issue of social acceptability that is the experienced obstacle for Diamond, because there is a social stigma connected to men dating trans women (April 27, 2010). However, it is also a matter of safety and being specifically vulnerable to hate crimes: “When we [trans women] disclose it can put us in danger and we have to be cautious” (May 2, 2011).

Diamond expresses having an attraction toward “straight men” (February 21, 2010), who also have an attraction to her: “Men are visual, and if you give them the female image, why wouldn’t they be attracted to that?” (November 4, 2010). She has a long history of dating straight men,

which in some instances has resulted in a feeling that she had to prove herself as a woman: “that I could do everything right—that I could do everything sexually, that I could suck dick right, I could ride him right [...] I always compared myself to women [...] I was trying to prove myself to him as a woman.” In short, she has experienced a lot of “trauma [...] from ‘straight men’” (January 19, 2011).

### **Challenging the Whiteness of the Vlogs**

Diamond is one of the few persistent, widely exposed, and popular trans women of color on YouTube. This has granted her the position of becoming a YouTube partner, which is an accomplishment she is very happy about and proud of: “I think I might be the first black tranny partner!” (October 6, 2010). She is, in her own words, “the angry black woman,” which she however cannot say without laughing (January 3, 2010).

Her channel is primarily a platform for her satirical sketches while also facilitating trans people of color discussion groups and offering news reports, highlighting and critiquing social and legal discrimination. She uses her channel to address not only her specific situation but also broader issues of racism and how that intertwines with trans, like questioning why “negro” is still a category on the census form that she has received, together with why it is only possible to tick either the male or female box (March 15, 2010). She reports on US legal cases where trans women’s marriages have been annulled, disabling them to receive inheritance after the death of their husbands (for example, the case of Christie Lee Littleton in Texas [October 10, 2009] and Nikki Araguz in California [July 21, 2010]), encouraging her viewers to disseminate information on these cases in order to push for a change in legislation. She also addresses how trans people of color in particular are targeted, reporting on, for example, the shooting and media representation of Angel

Johnson in Indianapolis (January 8, 2011); discussing the case of and interviewing the trans woman Tyjane who was arrested for using the women's bathroom at the Houston Public Library (February 12, 2011); and trans man El' Jai Devoureau, who was fired from a male-only job at a drug-treatment center (watching men urinate) in New Jersey (April 14, 2011). Her vlogs are often dedicated to sharing the experiences or cultural products made by or with trans people of color—for example, the movies *Ticked off Trannies with Knives* (Luna, 2010) (March 28, 2010; June 10, 2010); *Gun Hill Road* (Green, 2011) (June 24, 2011); and the documentary *Lost in the Crowd* (Graf, 2010) about homeless youth in New York City (May 28, 2010). She has interviewed and shared the life story of the porn star and escort Jade (May 27, 2010) and ex escort Toni Newman, who has recently published the book *I Rise: The Transformation of Toni Newman* (May 5, 2011).

Diamond addresses the complex interplay between race and trans as it unfolds for an African American heterosexually identified trans woman. As she states in a vlog, “I am not trying to undermine the white transition, but I think it is much harder to transition to a black woman than a white woman [...] It is not just trans that you have to worry about when it comes to discrimination, housing, profiling, stereotyping” (January 3, 2010). What Diamond addresses is the importance of having a trans woman of color voice on YouTube, representing herself and her experiences but also discussing the “multiple jeopardy” this group faces (for ethnographic research on this, see Hwahng and Nuttbrock 2007). She is not only creating a much-needed awareness and visibility for trans people (primarily trans women) of color but also challenging the whiteness of trans subjectivity, which is circulating not only in academia but also on YouTube. As problematized by Susan Stryker, Bobby Noble, and Katrina Roen, whiteness tends to be a dominant referent for trans subjectivity—also within transgender studies (Stryker 2006a; Noble 2011;

Roan 2001). Stryker therefore highlights the urgent need for transgender studies to engage more adequately and carefully with the complex interplay between race, ethnicity, and trans (Stryker 2006a: 15). Noble expresses concern that transgender studies' public face shares similarities with queer studies and feminist studies in being "white, North American, secular, and always already liberatory" (Noble 2011: 257). The journal *Feminist Studies* has recently addressed this by running a special issue on "Race and Transgender Studies" that focuses on how transgender theory and critical race theory can impregnate each other. Included in this special issue are attempts to theorize "how race and gender identity are co-formative functions of experience and identity" (Richardson and Meyer 2011: 252) and the significance of whiteness in constructing acceptable subject positions or the "good transsexual." As queer studies scholar Emily Skidmore argues, white trans women, not least Christine Jorgensen, were in the 1950s and 1960s able to articulate transsexuality as an acceptable subject position through "an embodiment of the norms of white womanhood, most notably domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality" (Skidmore 2011: 271).

Diamond raises a range of issues and experiences connected to the intersection of trans and race, which are often expressed through satirical sketches commenting on and challenging trans womanhood as white, domesticated, and respectable. In her satirical sketches, serious topics like racial discrimination or white supremacy (although not labeled as such) is taken up in a humorous and down-to-earth literal manner. She sits parodically with a wig with an Afro hairstyle, backgrounded by a large black-and-white poster of Marilyn Monroe in her classic pose. The curvy figure of Marilyn wearing her white dress echoes that of Diamond, thus they complement each other as she starts addressing Eurocentric ideals of female beauty and how that affects her life as a black trans woman. In a (trans) female-empowering stand-up act Diamond promotes the necessity

of creating one's own "ideals of beauty" in an image-centered culture where every woman has to "fit into a fucking box." Pointing at the poster, Diamond states:

My girl right here, Marilyn Monroe, even this bitch had to be put in a box [...] she was not a natural fucking blonde, she is a brunette just like me [adjusting her afro-wig and making a sexy pout looking directly into the camera]—she got her hairline electrolysis 'cause it was too far down. She got tweaked into looking like this box. A lot of times people live up to movie stars and Eurocentric ideals of beauty that you never can live up to [...] I'll never be the beauty status of Marilyn Monroe [...] I have to be content with who I am, what I have, and have my own set of beauty or I'm gonna always be a failure to myself—so fuck you, Marilyn, I'm Diamond!

She laughs, adjusts her wig once again, and steps in front of the poster, posing—and then she starts singing a self-composed spontaneous song: "I'm not the average girl from the video and I'm not built like a super model but I learned to love myself unconditionally because I am a QUEEN." She ends with a big laugh (May 4, 2010).

Diamond also shares her thoughts and experiences of cutting her hair short and having "natural hair," making her more and differently visible as an African American woman. As she states, "It takes a lot of guts for a regular woman to rock it but definitely as a transgender woman" (March 22, 2010). She expresses how it surprisingly makes her feel "more feminine" and that people all of a sudden address her as "sister," as if they now associate her with "black power" and a particular black feminist struggle (October 17, 2010). Although it does not make her "feel as sexy like this" she does enjoy how "it makes me regular," enabling her to slide more unnoticeable into a mass of (African American) women (Ibid.). Having long and straightened hair is presented by Diamond as "sexy" whereas natural hair and "sister" is not sexy but offers her inclusion into an assumed or taken-for-granted non-trans femaleness; she is an unquestioned African American woman. Whereas a critic like bell hooks

has been critical toward the desire for straight hair in black communities, reading it as groveling to whiteness and patriarchy (hooks 1992: 122), Diamond uses various straightening devices as what seems to be part of her parodical mixing of styles and expressions of femininity. If anything, Diamond's deliberate slide into the well-known representational trope of sexualized black female "slut" (Ibid.: 126) is a way to exert power and use it for her own ends to achieve exposure.

Her own attraction is directed toward "dark skin," as she states, thus she has dated "a white boy once" but as she points out, all that she is attracted to, white men do not have in their "genetic" (February 3, 2011). It is uncertain what these genetic qualities are but what is implied is the myth of the black man's genital surplus compared to the white man. What psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon critically wrote about as the black man eclipsed and "turned into a penis" in a colonial discourse (Fanon 1967: 170) is here repeated in a devaluation of whiteness and a reevaluation of blackness. Diamond also fears that she will not be able to "relate" to a white man, and then there is always the danger of being perceived as an "exotic fetish" when dating a white man (ibid.). As argued by sociologist Erica Owens and gender and literature scholar Bronwyn Beistle: "Some white persons who desire a partner of another race base their desire in a wish for the exotic or wild 'other' who is more a sexualized object than an equal partner" (Owens and Beistle 2006: 203). Or as bell hooks argues, the black woman often appears as a "wild sexual savage" in white patriarchal controlled media (hooks 1992: 119). It seems partly to be this deeply ingrained racial power imbalance and stereotyping of the black woman that dulls any wish that Diamond might have to date white men.

Contrary to the other vloggers, Diamond is addressing race much more directly, pinpointing skin color as yet another characteristic that adds to profiling the people that she talks about in her vlogs. She recently



fell in love with a “chocolate thick boy” (May 11, 2012) and when talking about some of the boys at the group home she singles them out as one with “caramel” and another with “dark chocolate” skin, one was a “Hillbilly white boy” and yet another a “whigger” (a white boy trying in every possible way to be/act black) (February 9, 2011). The category of black and white is named and divided into different subcategories, thus she is “light skinned” (May 31, 2011) and others are caramel, dark chocolate, or chocolate as well as Hillbilly white and whiggers. At other times people are just pointed out as white or black and/or of color. Using food metaphors to describe various shades of black bodies seems to be a reappropriation of the language usually used by white people to instantiate the black body as an object for consumption, encompassing “fascination, exaggeration, horror, and taboo” (Owens and Beistle 2006: 201). As argued by Owens and Beistle white people’s “eating” of the black body is an assertion of power and privilege (Ibid.: 204), which is not necessarily what is at stake here, but rather a reappropriation and reformulation of the black male body as alluring and tantalizing. But it is maybe first and foremost an instantiation of her as a (black) man-eater, an autonomous femme fatale, or a vagina dentata.

Whiteness is in various ways pointed out by Diamond as a privileged cultural norm but it never appears as an invisible or unmarked norm. As Sara Ahmed highlights, “Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don’t, it is hard not to see whiteness” (Ahmed 2004b: 1). Diamond’s continuous naming and discussion of race illuminates the lack of such discussion in the other trans YouTubers’ vlogs. Whiteness is something that most of the vloggers express awareness about as an attribute that grants them certain privileges and a level of invisibility, but it never becomes an issue that they address as part of their identity formation. Whiteness is apparent as a given that need not be labeled or addressed either in connection with one’s own identification or

in connection with the identity of one's potential or current partners. None of the white vloggers in my study discusses or flags any sexual investments in the racial marker of their partners. Neither do they express the need to connect themselves to a certain racialized history or culture, but do express affinity to a gay and lesbian history or a feminist stream of thought or a leftist counterculture without color-coding it. "White" is what need not speak its name and what is not considered part of or affiliated with a certain culture. As Ahmed argues, "White bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not orientated 'towards' it, and this 'not' is what allows whiteness to cohere, as that which bodies are orientated around" (Ahmed 2007: 156). Whiteness is sporadically addressed by the white vloggers in this study as a norm or a privilege, that intersect with and is supported by other privileges but it seems almost impossible to address as an identity or as a lived cultural practice. As Richard Dyer argues, whites are everywhere in representation and yet precisely because of this and their placement as the norm they seem not to be represented by themselves as whites but as people (Dyer 1997: 3). As he further states, "Black is always marked as a colour (as the term 'coloured' egregiously acknowledges), and is always particularizing; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything" (Dyer 1993: 127). There is a specificity to white representation and yet it does not reside in a set of stereotypes easily recognizable, or a taxonomy of typification as it has been done for non-white people (Dyer 1997: 11-12). It is hard—especially for white people—to "see" whiteness and analyze it as a category, since it is not there and yet everywhere: "The subject seems to fall apart in your hands as soon as you begin" (Dyer 1993: 128). Dyer exemplifies: the movies *Brief Encounter* and *The Godfather* are not about white people, but about English middle-class people and Italian American people, respectively, whereas *The Color Purple* is first and foremost about black people before it is about poor,

Southern people (Ibid.). Whiteness is felt to be the human condition, thus what one does and achieves is supposedly accounted for in terms of individualism (and not race) (Dyer 1997: 9).

Diamond is not only addressing race much more explicitly than the other (white) trans vloggers but she is also engaging with different kinds of social issues such as homelessness, sex work, imprisonment, and abuse, which otherwise are fairly absent from the trans vlogs.<sup>6</sup> These are all issues that she has personal experiences with. She tells the viewer in a passing remark that she has a history as “escort” but that she is on “early retirement because of my school” (November 23, 2009), and that she is on probation for physical assault (December 11, 2009). Based on her own experiences she makes a vlog about homelessness, highlighting some of the difficulties that trans people encounter when trying to access homeless shelters, a subject that Dean Spade also unfolds. As Spade states:

Trans women in need of shelter (a disproportionately large population because of the combination of employment discrimination, housing discrimination, and family rejection) often remain on the streets because they are unfairly rejected from women-only domestic violence programs and they know the homeless shelter system will place them in men’s facilities, guaranteeing sexual harassment and possibly assault (Spade 2011: 147).

What Diamond shares in the vlog is that although she has a female gender marker in her official papers (having been perceived as female by a clerk, as mentioned earlier), merely disclosing her trans status to the staff at the shelters denied her access. She could not stay at the women’s shelters because she might make the other women uncomfortable and she was denied access to the men’s shelters because they could not take responsibility for her safety and the high risk of rape. At a shelter where they accepted trans people she would have had to be HIV positive. As she concludes: “There was no options for me to stay anywhere!” (March 23,

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<sup>6</sup> As noted earlier, Grant et al. 2011 and Spade 2011 highlight how particularly trans women of color have a statistically higher prevalence for facing these problems.

2011). Not only is she addressing a topic rarely discussed at length among the trans vloggers but she is also sharing her own experiences and listing where to find more information on shelters, offering a different kind of resource from what is usually part of trans knowledge sharing.<sup>7</sup> Diamond's vlogs are humoristic interventions, impregnated with information that creates a collective archive that compensates for the neglect or bypassing of contributes/life stories of trans people of color.

### **Raising Money: The Social and Economic Aspects of Transitioning**

Erica, Elisabeth, Carolyn, and Diamond all recount the difficulties of obtaining funds for transition, which covers a range of technologies and procedures; hormones, electrolysis, orchiectomy, FFS, SRS, and breast augmentation—all of which are extensive medical interventions. As the vlogs illuminate, trans-female transition is expensive and a lot of hard work, which also includes voice training as highlighted by Carolyn and Elisabeth. Hormones work differently for trans women than for trans men; testosterone has a quicker and more radical effect on the body than estrogen. It can therefore take years before trans women obtain the “feminizing” effects from hormones that they strive for. As the trans female vlogs illustrate, becoming a visible woman requires other and more expansive procedures and props. Hormones do not do the job alone, which might also explain why estrogen does not play such a significant role in the trans female vlogs as testosterone does in the trans male vlogs.<sup>8</sup> Carolyn and Elisabeth pinpoint how estrogen does create physical changes but unlike testosterone it takes a long time before they are noticeable. After nine months on hormones, Elisabeth can hardly see any changes, thus she has not developed breasts yet and she feels like she is just waiting but nothing happens. As she impatiently and frustratedly states, “I don't want

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<sup>7</sup> For an extended elaboration of the knowledge-sharing aspects of the vlogs, see chapter 7.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of the role of testosterone in the trans-male vlogs, see chapter 5.

to be in the middle anymore” (February 16, 2008). Carolyn also highlights the slow effects of estrogen: “I’ve been on HRT [hormone replacement therapy] for a year and this is what you get [makes a gesture toward her appearance]—nothing special, that’s for sure—it takes a lot of time and it takes a lot of putting up with stuff” (December 1, 2010). As a trans woman one has to “be patient with yourself,” as she argues (April 4, 2011).

If and when the trans female vloggers are able to access other surgical and medical interventions is highly dependent upon social status, economic support from family, and employment. Erica, Carolyn, and Diamond are not able to get financial support from their family—either because their families disapprove of their transition and refuse to help and accept them in their chosen gender (Erica and Carolyn) or because of an economically destitute family background (Diamond). Erica, Elisabeth, Carolyn, and Diamond are unemployed or self-employed at one point or another during transition and they actively use vlogging or other social media sites as a way to fund their transition and everyday living. There is an economic penalty for transition, thus trans women lose on average nearly one-third of their income after transitioning (Connell 2012: 870). Erica has managed to obtain a job within trans advocacy, which has enabled her not only a steady income but also a beneficial health insurance, making it possible to have SRS. The lack of family support and employment is what disables Carolyn from having the procedures that she wants, thus she tries to raise some of the money by getting on YouTube. Elisabeth also expresses having difficulties with finding a job, which holds her back from procedures and changing her papers, but she engages in webcam modeling as a way to earn money. Likewise, Diamond tries to brand herself online through various social-network platforms in order to make it a career. However, she has also engaged in escorting, which like webcam modeling is a career path that seems to open up to especially trans women in late capitalism. Both escorting and webcam modeling are

“affective labor” of human contact and interaction, part of what has traditionally been designated as women’s work and that has assumed a dominant position in the global capitalist economy, dominated by services and information (Hardt 1999: 89–90). These services include activities like health care, education, the service industry, finance, transportation, entertainment, and advertising, which are all jobs that usually require mobile and flexible skills and are characterized by centralizing knowledge, information (not least familiarity and facility with computer technology), communication, and affect (Hardt 1999: 91, 94). As political philosopher Michael Hardt argues, this labor is immaterial even if it is corporeal and affective, because its products are intangible: “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community” (Hardt 1999: 96). Escorting or webcam modeling is some of the affective labor that many trans women resort to when transitioning, typically motivated by the money, the flexibility of work hours and work space, as well as the prospect of gender-identity affirmation and a desired patterns of gender interaction (Nuttbrock et al. 2009: 123). Trans women are embedded within capitalist productive relations and capitalist systems of power, which needs to be addressed, as Dan Irving argues (Irving 2008: 39). Transsexual people often live a marginalized existence in which they are unable to secure legal employment, housing, and meet other rudimentary needs (Ibid.: 51). It is, as Irving argues, necessary to integrate some trans people into the labor force, and to protect the employment status of others, but it is problematic to claim rights and equality within a discourse of economic productivity, which Irving argues is often the case within US trans politics (Ibid.: 39, 51). Dean Spade’s suggestion, which all of the trans female vloggers in this study agitate for, is to work toward demedicalization, reducing and removing medical intervention as a requirement for gender reclassification, which is important for different reasons, not least of which to reduce the racist and classist effects of these

policies (Spade 2011: 159). Low-income people and people of color are disproportionately deprived of health-care access (Ibid.).

### **A Visual Culture of One's Own: Creating New "Images" of Trans Women**

Erica, Elisabeth, Carolyn, and Diamond present themselves as trans women in various ways, ranging from being a fierce trans advocate to reinventing oneself as a spectacle to broadcasting oneself as a guitar-playing heavy-metal girl and finally acting as a news hostess. The category of trans woman is multiplied, proliferating into representations of strong, agentive, and creative trans women as well as self-sexualized trans women. These vlogs hereby oppose the tropes of the "pathetic transsexual" or the "deceptive transsexual," that tend to be the formula for the visual representation of trans women in mainstream media as argued in the introduction. The flirtatious enactment of sexually suggestive poses and engagements with the camera of Elisabeth and Diamond can be interpreted as a way to define and represent oneself as an eroticized female spectacle. Instead of perceiving these representations from a classical feminist viewpoint, highlighting them as pandering to a patriarchal female image, I want to pose another reading by suggesting that they offer an alternative to existing tropes of representation of trans women. As unfolded in the introduction, trans women are often portrayed in mainstream visual media as failing at expressing femininity and female attractiveness, thus they become comic and pathetic figures (see, for example, *The World According to Garp*, *The Adventures of Sebastian Cole*, *A Mighty Wind*) or harmless, asexual creatures (see, for example, *Transamerica*). Usually the trans female body is represented as anything but sexually attractive to a "male gaze," or just not desirable *as such*, but only when properly "disguised" and unacknowledged as a trans female body (see, for example, *The Crying Game* and *There's Something About*

*Miriam*). Or the trans female body is hypersexualized, as in so-called shemale pornography that tends to present the (pre-op) trans woman as a monstrous creature, endlessly penetrative and penetrable. Creating a visual culture on YouTube for the self-representation of trans women offers a much more diverse and multidimensional “image” of trans female identity as well as helps renegotiate if and how a trans woman, and not least a trans female body, can express femininity and sexual attractiveness. When Diamond lies in bed, gyrating in blue satin underwear or when Elisabeth twists and turns her head with a sexy pout, they are not just relating themselves to long-standing Western codes of female objectification but also almost reiteratively exaggerating them. The “rhetoric of the pose” (posing or acting as an object) can be a radical exposé that both solicits and confronts the “male gaze,” as the art historian Amelia Jones reformulates it in her reading of the performance artist Hannah Wilke (Jones 1998: 153). Or as Julia Serano highlights, acting, dressing, and posing in a conventionally feminine manner is a way for her as a trans woman to reclaim her own body, her personality, and her sexuality (Serano 2007: 18). However, as the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey has famously formulated it, the woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle from pinups to striptease and not least in Hollywood film. Here the women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with “an appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 2000 [1975]: 487). When Elisabeth and Diamond take on the conventional codes of female display, assuming the status of the female image, the “to-be-looked-at-ness,” they constitute themselves as female. To pose and act as a female spectacle is one of the ways in which one makes oneself recognizable and valued as (an attractive) female but also one of the ways in which one puts oneself at risk of attracting unwanted sexist attention, as continuously recounted by Elisabeth. However, one is also always in



danger of not being feminine enough, as Carolyn articulates. As the trans female vloggers make themselves objects of the camera's gaze they try to constitute themselves as female, defining and negotiating how they can be seen, represented, and ultimately how they can be intelligible. In other words, what these trans female vlogs seem to suggest is that one way of obtaining a female identity is to pose as such; thus, one needs to pose as an object in order to be a (female) subject (see Jones 1998: 159). As especially suggested by Elisabeth and Diamond, there is a lot of female recognition and empowerment in posing, thus to pose is not a passive objectification but an active assumption of the status of the desirable (female) image. And hereby this creates a different visual culture for trans female representation that reformulates their womanhood as anything but failed and that allows for an eroticization of trans women beyond "deceit" and "monstrosity" (as discussed in the introduction).

## Chapter 5

### Screen-Births: Trans Vlogs as a Transformative Media for Self-Representation

*So today is my first day, being born, I guess . . . I feel really good, I feel like there is just a huge weight that has been lifted from my soul, I guess, and I feel ready to embrace life now as the person I was supposed to be. I guess it is like being born but being able to form full sentences and walk and talk and, like, do all the fun stuff (Wheeler: March 2, 2009).*

This quote by Wheeler presents (medical) transition as a (re-)birth, which promises a new offline beginning and encourages a new life online. The vlog is his first and was recorded the day he has just been prescribed hormones and has received his first shot of testosterone.

This chapter takes the notion of “screen-birth” as a starting point for outlining and analyzing the various ways that the trans vloggers emerge and develop online in or through the vlog as a medium. What I claim and explore in this chapter is the intersection between trans identity and technology as it manifests itself in video blogs on YouTube. As I will argue, the trans vloggers employ various forms of technologies, including the vlog as a digital technology of the self to renegotiate not only the relation between trans identity and technology but also the political potentials of this relation. The focus is on the vlog as a site for the co-construction and renegotiation of trans identity. What is it that the vlog as a medium enables—and how is the vlog being cultivated as a genre? The exploration of these questions is based on my extensive virtual ethnographic “journeys” where I have paid special attention to the different ways of approaching and mediating trans experiences. What I present in this chapter is what I see as characteristic and significant ways in which the trans vlog is being utilized. As discussed in chapter 1, my case-study vloggers are chosen by virtue of being “typical” vloggers, representing

different ways of identifying and expressing especially (trans) gender and sexuality—and not least different styles of vlogging. In that sense I have appointed each one of the vloggers the role of being a representative for the different streams that I see running through the field of trans vlogging as such. These streams include the use of the vlog as a mirror, a diary, and an autobiography. My overall approach is framed by the metaphor of screen-birth, which by way of introduction I will explore as useful for thinking through how trans identity and the vlog as a medium intersect and co-produce each other. Thinking with and through screen-birth and related concepts such as transubstantiation and transformative potential not only directs the attention toward what the vlog enables but also how this takes place in/through (mediated) bodies. This can take the form of mirroring, present updates/diaries or continuous re-formations of one's autobiography. In what follows I attempt to characterize trans vlogs through readings of individual vloggers. Thus, Wheeler is far from the only trans man using the vlog to document his medical transition and Erica is far from the only trans woman sharing her life story through the vlog. In fact, documenting one's medical transition and telling one's life story through the vlog is the most dominant way of employing the vlog as a medium.

### **Born Online**

Wheeler is one of many trans men who start vlogging around the time of the first shot of testosterone, using the camera as a way to record and track the changing body. His vlogs represent a genre of trans vlogs centered on what I would call performatively documenting the “rebirth” facilitated by hormones. This takes place through a series of vlogs where the physical changes are continuously audiovisually displayed and enumerated. This particular genre is so overwhelmingly present on YouTube that, taking my point of departure in Wheeler's vlogs, I will

analyze in the following what seems to be at stake. How and why is the vlog such a suitable transitioning technology alongside hormones and surgery? In order to answer that, let us return to Wheeler.

As mentioned, Wheeler profiles this first shot of testosterone as a (second) birth; “being born” and yet “able to form full sentences and walk and talk and, like, do all the fun stuff.” It is his “first day” not just on hormones but as “the person I was supposed to be.” Wheeler presents transition as a new start in life and as a new identity. His prime motivation for getting in front of the camera on this particular day seems to be the anticipation and awareness that physical change will happen from this day onward. One might say that this first vlog contains anticipation and investments in the future; it is not a matter of who he is but who he will become. Documenting his current pre-medically transitioned audiovisual appearance seems to serve the purpose of archiving, offering a historical backdrop upon which to project the future. In that sense, his current image is already instantiated as a “before” image serving primarily as a site of comparison. This particular self-image would not be of interest to him if he had not received his first shot of hormones and if he did not know that changes would happen. As mentioned, the camera seems to record and track his changing body—but it also seems to do something else. I would suggest that the vlog functions interchangeably as a site for preservation and creation as the camera not only documents his transition but also partly enables the transformation, assisting him in becoming the man that he wants to be. As the row of vlogs progresses, Wheeler becomes more and more accustomed to the camera, thus it seems as if he becomes more and more aware of and confident about how to present himself and how to carry his body. What seems to take place in front of the camera is not just a manifestation of but also experimentation with gender. In front of the camera he learns and relearns culturally located bodily practices that define gender. In that sense the vlog seems to be a site for producing and

trying out in front of an audience how to appear and embody a male identity. Not just Wheeler but also James, Tony, Erica, Elisabeth, and Carolyn use the vlog as a site from where to performatively document their changing appearance facilitated by hormones and surgery. And certainly Mason and Diamond use the vlog as a way to try out and express different gender identities in front of an audience. As Mason told me in the interview I conducted with him:

When I first started vlogging I looked frightened [we both laugh and I state that this seems true for everybody]—yeah, I look like a deer in the headlights at first and then you become aware that you have control over it and that’s powerful [he puts special emphasis on the word “powerful”] [...] So when I became more out about my sexuality and my political views and some of my darker sides of my personality and my life I also became bolder in my real life because being in front of a camera taught me how to engage people more—it taught me how to use my body, it taught me how to look at people, it taught me how to say things that had impact [...] I think I have become more bold and fierce in my real life after making these crazy videos (Mason interview: 51:20–54:47).

As noted by Mason, the first appearance in front of the camera is typically marked by nervousness, insecurity, and uncomfotability. However, this often changes with time, as one learns to master one’s appearance and learns how to act in front of the camera. Learning and experimenting with one’s on-screen (gender) performance can, as suggested by Mason, become useful, powerful, and something that can spill into one’s offline life. It can be a site for the production of identity. In that sense the vlog can be said to be a procedural medium, a site for becoming or for experimentation.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand the vlog seems to be procedural in the sense that it becomes a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes while on the other hand being inscribed in a medium that

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<sup>1</sup> I am here vaguely inspired by videogame theorist Ian Bogost’s discussion on procedurality and computers. As noted by Bogost, computers have a unique relation to procedurality as the computer “magnifies the ability to create representations of processes” (Bogost 2007: 5). Although Bogost develops the concept of procedurality in connection with videogames, he encourages us to see procedural rhetoric as a domain much broader than that of videogames (See Bogost 2007).

actually enacts processes rather than merely describing them. The vlogs become certificates of presence or birth certificates trying to catch and promote the (re-)embodiment of the subject

Articulating medical transition as a (re-)birth is a strong and persistent metaphor within written trans autobiographies (Stone 2006, Prosser 1998, Meyer 2011). A prominent component in the biographical writing of (especially MTF) transsexuals, dating back to one of the earliest widely published accounts from 1931 (Lili Elbe: *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Change of Sex*) is what Sandy Stone refers to as “almost religious narratives of transformation” (Stone 2006: 222). It is the “(re)birth” of the trans woman through primarily surgical intervention that according to Scandinavian studies researcher Sabine Meyer acts as an almost “divine intervention,” an elevation of the medical into the divine (Meyer 2011: 73). Although Wheeler explicitly formulates transition as a (re-)birth, and hereby recirculates the well-known (literary) metaphor, the concept of screen-birth seems more suitable. I am here thinking with and through the concept of screen-births formulated by media and cultural studies scholar Meredith Jones in the article: “Media-Bodies and Screen-Births: Cosmetic Surgery Reality Television” (2008a). Meredith Jones develops the concept of screen-birth in connection with her reading of cosmetic surgery reality television (CSRTV). I will argue that the vlogs also become screen-births, closely connecting and interweaving fleshly transitioning bodies and information technology. Like the media bodies discussed by Jones, these vloggers blend or combine flesh and media, skin and screen, which helps form (new) identities. The vlogs become sites of “biodigital” intermixtures and re-creations. I am here indebted to Kate O’Riordan for leading me towards thinking of the close intersection between trans bodies, affective energies, interactivity, and the vlog as a technology in terms of the concept of biodigital bodies and politics (O’Riordan 2011; O’Riordan, Bassett, and Hartmann 2011) (see more in

chapter 7). In line with the CSRTV contestants described by Jones, the vloggers can be said to be molded and shaped by the apparatus of the vlog as well as by the scalpels and hormones that slice and penetrate their flesh and runs in their blood (see, for example, Jones 2008: 522). Physical and media worlds mesh as transformations are happening and identities emerge on-screen and are taken into the offline world.

### **Growing Sideways**

Returning to the initial quote by Wheeler, the (re-)birthing metaphor is present in several ways, thus the vlog is not only his “first day, being born” as he states but he has also labeled it “day one,” mimicking the six/seven days of creation in Judeo-Christian belief. After having been on testosterone for nine months, he makes a vlog where he addresses how nine months is the amount of time it takes for a fetus to develop and come into the world, implying that testosterone is a kind of self-generating birthing process (September 30, 2009). The rebirth is articulated as being closely connected to and initiated by testosterone. He is later celebrating his “birthdays” by commemorating and comparing vlogs, highlighting the physical changes, saying, “So I’m one years old” (January 21, 2010b) or “So I’m one year and a half years old,” paying special attention to how “old” he is in testosterone years, and celebrating his birthday by buying a present for himself (July 21, 2010). Although he puts “birthday present” in air quotes when talking about it, he still seems to divide his life story into two coexisting time frames: the birth performed by his mother and the autotectonic birth facilitated by testosterone. He is not just the creation of his parents but also his own creation, initiating his own physical (re-)birth and his screen-birth. Instead of one gradual growth figured as vertical movement upward, “growing up,” toward full stature and the loss of childishness, it might be more appropriate to label Wheeler’s (screen) rebirth as a “growing sideways,” as coined by queer studies scholar

Kathryn Bond Stockton (Stockton 2009: 4). Stockton formulates her ideas in connection with the gay child, however some of her concepts can be fruitful as framings of trans as well. As Stockton argues, growing sideways “suggests that the width of a person’s experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts” (Ibid.: 11). It implies a deferral of experiences, thoughts, practices, and embodiments that one is assumed and supposed to have at certain ages. Wheeler is not supposed to be “born” now but should be on his way to adulthood. I am reminded of the non-trans male social scientist at my university whom I mentioned in chapter 1 who perceived these vloggers as “pubertarian” and “naïve,” and I wonder whether his objections are a manifestation of this break with the order of things. Neither Wheeler nor the other vloggers are apparently supposed to be so preoccupied with the (changing) appearance of their body and with their visual reflection at their present age. This is supposedly reserved to a certain age and therefore becomes an expression of puberty. As Michael Strangelove also notes in his book on YouTube: “Teenagers, in particular, tend to be excessively self-absorbed and this is reflected in their video diaries” (Strangelove 2010: 80). Thus, the trans vloggers are acting as “teenagers” when they are supposed to be “grown-ups.” Their growth is delayed or sideways, as they grow to the side of cultural ideals. What one is expected to do at certain ages is closely connected to cultural ideals that tie into heteronormativity as well as cissexism. Cissexism, as described in chapter two, is the expectance and naturalization that one has a certain body whose gendered appearance does not (radically) change over time. Connected to this is the assumption that puberty, understood as the development of sex markers, takes place at a certain age and that one is overwhelmed by and/or fascinated with these changes at a specific time in one’s life span. I would suggest that the trans vloggers use the vlog as a way to performatively document this



“backward birthing” and sideways growth, trying to create for themselves a kind of “baby memory book” not unlike the one that parents usually make of their newborn. However, there is also an element of “backward birthing” in the sense that the trans child was “intensely unavailable to itself in the present tense” and only is “born” as a trans child after it exits its childhood (Stockton 2009: 6–7). The implicit and naturalized assumption that every child is non-trans (meaning cissexual) makes it almost impossible to be born as a trans child, thus being a trans child is only something that can happen in retrospect. Backward birthing therefore has “postmortem features”; the trans child only appears through an act of retrospection and after death (the death of the cissexual child—the death of the boy/girl that one once was) (Ibid.: 6). Trans people are inscribed in alternative temporalities, thus one is typically not labeled as a trans child before this retrospective construction; one does typically not have the embodiment that one identifies with until later in life, displacing “puberty” or enabling one to have several “puberties.” Many of the trans vloggers are not only being “born” onscreen but also changing in/through the vlogging, bringing together different embodiments of self and including video footage and/or photographs from before transitioning/vlogging. Pieces are being put together from different time zones in a narration of their past selves as trans selves in an act of backward birthing.

### **The Mirror as a Well-Established Trope of Trans Representation**

*Without that mirroring that this camera gives you I am not sure it's really possible to transition fully (Mason: September 19, 2010g).*

Mason is explicitly addressing the vlog as a mirror, talking about the “mirroring” effect that the camera facilitates. He connects the concepts of mirror, camera, and transition, highlighting their intersection and mutual

constituency. The vlog as a medium becomes a multifaceted mirror, enabling self-creation and self-labeling—while also establishing contact and interaction with like-minded others who can encourage and support one's (transitioned) self-recognition. YouTube as a platform becomes a site for identification, for trying out and assuming various identities and for seeing one's own experiences and thoughts reflected in others.

The metaphor of the mirror is, like rebirth, an established trope within the genre of written trans autobiographies. As noted by Jay Prosser, the mirror scene often becomes the transitional point in the autobiographical narrative (Prosser 1998: 100). Prosser states:

Mirror scenes punctuate transsexual autobiographies with remarkable consistency. Almost to the degree of the expected surgery scene, mirror scenes, we might say, constitute a convention of transsexual autobiography. They recur across the texts in strikingly similar fashion (Ibid.).

In historian and travel writer Jan Morris's autobiography, *Conundrum*, she gives herself one "long last look in the eye" in the mirror to say good-bye before sex-reassignment surgery because, as she writes, "We would never meet again" (Morris 2002 [1974]: 140, Prosser 1998: 99). In Leslie Feinberg's fictional autobiography, *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel*, the main character, Jess, "glanced in the mirror and had to look a second time." Being on testosterone Jess is developing, and confesses, "The body I'd expected before puberty confounded me," thus "it had been so long since I'd been at home in my body" (Feinberg 1993: 171). As Prosser argues, this close relation echoes the mutual function of the mirror and the autobiography as an act of self-reflection (Prosser 1998: 100). What the written autobiography does is to include mirror scenes in order to highlight transsexuality as a plot, where transition enables the trans subject to move from disidentification to full identification with the mirror image.

Likewise, “mirror scenes” are also extremely common within mainstream visual representations of transsexuals. For instance, in the beginning of *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005), where Bree gets dressed and throws one last look at herself in the mirror, slightly disappointed, before walking out the door, and several times in *Boys Don’t Cry* (Peirce, 1999) as Brandon dresses up and tries out his masculinity in front of the mirror. But maybe most memorable is in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), where the trans character and killer Jame Gumb (aka Buffalo Bill) dances and poses in front of the mirror, wearing a boa and hiding his/her genitalia between his/her legs. The camera is here placed as the mirror, and becomes the mirroring point of view from where we at close hand follow the killer’s self-evaluating performance. The dancing is enacted to the sound of loud music, put on to drown out the screaming of a woman, whom we know to be suffering from starvation in the next room. This mirror scene visualizes and adds to the killer’s uncanny, perverse, and deranged character. The consistency of the mirror scene is striking and indeed still present, as the new British series *Hit and Miss* (Abbott 2012) illustrates, with the transsexual woman Mia (played by Cloë Sevigny) in the lead role. In several mirror scenes Mia’s (potentially) distorted self-image is literalized as self-destruction and self-humiliation, and therefore as potentially or maybe even inherently pathological. Like Jame Gumb, Mia is represented as potentially or at least momentarily deranged or disturbed, which supposedly is the direct result of transsexuality and bodily dissatisfaction. These scenes seem at odds with the series as a whole, which offers a sympathetic portrayal of a powerful and capable (transsexual) woman.

### **Mirroring as Healthy Narcissism**

The mirror plays a different and much more complex role in the trans vlogs. First of all, the vlog acts as a mirror in a very literal way, as

recording and uploading a video with the webcam build into almost all computers today enables one to look at one's own reflection. It is not only possible but also very tempting to look at or focus on one's own reflection appearing on-screen as one records a video. Thus, instead of looking into the camera (placed at the top of the computer), one tends to look slightly down at one's own (moving) mirror reflection. This, of course, also seems to be the case for many trans vloggers, who to varying degrees seem absorbed in their own reflection, adjusting their hair, clothes, or smile while talking. However, unlike with a mirror, it is not possible to have eye contact with yourself and see yourself at the same time. One either establishes eye contact (looking directly into the little camera at the top) or one sees oneself as an already-edited version of oneself as an image (appearing in the photo booth box while recording).

This mirroring function invites the YouTuber to assume the shape of a desired identity/representation, constantly assuming and evaluating oneself as an attractive image, trying out different "styles of the flesh" (Butler 1990: 177), poses, and appearances. Elisabeth is one of the vloggers who seems to be most absorbed in and preoccupied with her appearance as a specular image, making several very short vlogs using the medium as an moving-image mirror to capture how she looks with a certain kind of makeup or clothing, or by posing a certain way. She continuously acts and poses as if she were standing (alone) in front of a mirror, self-reflexively adjusting her hair, clothing, facial expression, and bodily gestures. As she also notes herself, she just cannot help looking at the icon with her own reflection because she is afraid that if she stops, she will make "some kind of funny face" (August 5, 2007). She seems highly preoccupied with exploring but also monitoring her own appearance, continuously commenting on it while obviously looking at herself in the mirror reflection. She looks like "a mess" as she states, adjusting her hair (August 19, 2007) or she decides "to get a little funky with my makeup

tonight [...] a little more dramatic than usual to see how I look” (September 8, 2007). Her and Mason’s style of vlogging have some striking similarities, as they both seem to explicitly flirt with the camera. Their flirtatious interaction is constituted by the way they pose in an extremely self-aware manner in their close-ups, smile, and talk softly into the camera, constituting themselves as an attractive image. This style of vlogging does for Elisabeth result in comments from (non-trans) men, approaching her and inquiring about her sexual orientation. She continuously complains about these sexual advances that she finds only value her looks not her thoughts and that automatically assume that she is attracted to men, being unable to perceive these online acts as anything other than being directed toward male consumption. And yet Elisabeth and Mason offer themselves to the camera, opening up the circuit of desire, highlighting how gender identity is contingent on relations with others. Elisabeth and Mason’s highly self-aware mirroring spectacles raise several questions: Who is placed as the addressed “other” behind the mirror? Who are they posing for—and who is watching whom? It seems partly to be the act of posing itself that the vlog as a medium allows them to experiment with, simultaneously assuming an image and watching themselves do it. In this sense the flirtatious and seductive interaction with the camera is narcissistic, connected to a (re)discovering of oneself as an attractive image. I am not employing the term “narcissistic” in a pejorative or pathologizing manner but employ it to capture the introspection and visual self-absorption, a preoccupation that is self-directed, but not selfish (Papacharissi 2010: 145). In the narcissistic scenario it is the image that allows the self to love the self and yet in narcissism the image is the self; an Other is both presupposed and excluded (Jones 1998: 180). I understand the vlogs as narcissistic in the sense that they are attempts to connect with one’s visual self, and to self-reflect and to see oneself traveling through the gaze of the Other.

As I reflect on the narcissistic mirroring in Elisabeth's and Mason's vlogs, I am reminded of my interview with Mason. Discussing his motivations for vlogging he explains it as "a kind of self-validation" and "a sort of healthy narcissism" as "the camera acts as a mirror—to the world." The (self-absorbed) preoccupation with one's own mirror image marks, in Mason's words, the beginning of a "self-validation" and a "healthy narcissism," that many trans vloggers express have not been possible before because of a dissatisfaction with one's own appearance and because of a lack of confirming mirroring from one's parents (Interview: 57:37–58: 19). As Mason states:

A lot of trans people have not been mirrored as who they are by their parents [...] If you get people coming back at you [on YouTube], which is mostly positive response, stating you are OK and they like you. That's really huge for somebody who comes from a trans background (ibid.).

The vlog as a medium with mirroring qualities can work both as an individual act of self-validation and as a social act of recognition and encouragement. Being recorded on camera signifies a social acknowledgment or recognition that is needed. It seems both to lift these trans vloggers out of life and into representation (being an image is to be someone) and to make them more real (legitimate and authentic in their trans identity). However, this is not just a private mirror scene but a public broadcast where Mason and Elisabeth are well aware that others are or can be watching. This also seems to be an integral part of the narcissism, as they install and confirm themselves as an attractive "image"/identity not just by watching themselves act as such but through knowing that others are watching too. It might not be the actual interaction or the actual response to their attractiveness that enforces their gender identity but just knowing that an infinite number of abstracted strangers are watching. The camera or maybe even themselves as image become that mirroring and/or significant other that they flirtatiously interact with.

## Connecting with Others Through Mirroring

The YouTubers are watching and talking to themselves, but also know that other people might be watching and listening on the other side of the mirror/screen. As Curator at the Netherlands Film Museum Giovanna Fossati states, “YouTube reflects you and you reflect (on) YouTube. On the other side of the mirror, all YouTubers are watching. For the YouTuber watching, YouTube is hence a mirror maze. Reflections are endless and endlessly reflected into one another” (Fossati 2009: 460–461). What Fossati is pointing to is the multidimensionality of the mirroring effect on YouTube that includes self-reflections, global reflections, and meta-reflections (Ibid.: 461). Included in the trans vlogs are the vloggers’ reflections of and on themselves, everyday events, and political issues. Some of these reflections spread throughout YouTube and become global reflections, such as the “It Gets Better” campaign or “Five Random Facts” and so forth that the trans vloggers take part in.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, vlogging about transitioning also spread throughout YouTube, becoming a style in and of

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<sup>2</sup> The “It Gets Better” campaign was initially prompted by gay journalist Dan Savage’s response to Tyler Clementi’s suicide and other suicides of young gay men but was taken up by several others on YouTube, targeting a broader spectrum of LGBTQ suicidal people experiencing discrimination and bullying. Many queer researchers have been very critical toward the campaign, for example Tavia Nyong’o and Jasbir Puar. As Puar writes: “Savage embodies the spirit of a coming-of-age success story. He is able-bodied, monied, confident, well-travelled, suitably partnered and betrays no trace of abjection or shame. His message translates to: Come out, move to the city, travel to Paris, adopt a kid, pay your taxes, demand representation. But how useful is it to imagine troubled gay youth might master their injury and turn blame and guilt into transgression, triumph, and all-American success?” The most progressive and helpful aspects of the campaign are, according to Puar, that so many “have chimed in to explain how and why it doesn’t just get better,” thus the very technological platform of the phenomenon “allows the project to be critiqued from within.” Her conclusion is: “While it is clear that there is no consensus as to the most responsible reactions to the recent spate of queer suicides, it is imperative that this conversation is connected to broader questions of social justice in terms of race, class, and gender. Otherwise, projects like Savage’s risk producing such narrow versions of what it means to be gay, and what it means to be bullied, that for those who cannot identify with it but are nevertheless still targeted for ‘being different,’ It Gets Better might actually contribute to Making Things Worse.” See Puar’s article here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign>. “Five Random Facts” is one among many petitions/requests that circulates on YouTube. To my knowledge, the YouTubers tag each other to answer the questions.

itself that one can mirror. YouTube also includes researchers' meta-reflections or analysis of YouTube, and, as I will argue, the vloggers themselves offer a similar kind of meta-reflection on their own practice of vlogging and on YouTube. And yet the mirroring effect of the vlog is also at times very literal, trying on different kinds of clothing and asking for feedback on what to wear. Like Erica, who asks the viewers to be her "mirror" and tell her what shirt to wear to a job interview (February 15, 2007). She tries on a lot of different clothing and poses in front of the camera that she holds in her hand. All of this takes place in high speed, which adds a humoristic, slapstick dimension to the situation but nevertheless engages the viewer in the process of picking out clothes for her to wear. Likewise, Carolyn asks for advice, trying on a short cowboy skirt: "I need some opinions as of today—should I wear it or should I just wear jeans?" She is afraid that she will not be able to wear a skirt just yet, as it will not help her appear female but rather as a "fag," risking being "beat up" (June 18, 2011). She needs feedback from other trans women who also have experiences with negotiating and monitoring these kinds of distinctions and identity categories, but she also needs the viewers to act as the abstracted others whom she will meet on her night out. Carolyn positions and addresses the viewer as an intimate and supportive other; it is as if she is asking an off-screen girlfriend, standing next to her in front of the mirror. She also seems to allow the addressed intimate others on YouTube to see more than she would usually prefer people to see, thus after having been vlogging for a while she gets up and places herself in front of the camera in full figure with her arms fully visible: "It takes a lot of courage to make a video where my arms shows like that, uff!" (May 20, 2010). She is clearly not satisfied with the size and shape of her arms (which she continuously labels as too big) but like with a good friend she nevertheless allows the viewer to see and evaluate her body and her appearance.



Returning to Mason and his initial statement on the vlog as an important transitioning device through its mirroring effects, I want to dwell on YouTube as a site for identifications. Mason notes that trans people often feel very alone and alienated, which makes YouTube very important:

Before Internet access, before Internet period, people like us we lived in the closet and we thought we were crazy [...] and until you hear other voices out there [...] that was our reality. So I can't really overestimate the importance of having technologies that can bridge those experiences (September 19, 2010g).

YouTube is here articulated as a mirror, where one's own experiences and thoughts can be reflected in other people's stories. One can recognize oneself in others, which can diminish feelings of solitude and alienation, reassuring one that there are others "out there" like you. Vlogging becomes a way to not "transition in a vacuum," as Mason notes, highlighting the interactive or interrelational dimension of the mirroring effect of the vlogs. What Mason here seems to suggest is the importance of feedback, of having your own image reflected back to you in various and supportive ways:

Because I do think there is a part of going through transition that is adolescent and you do need to have other people out there holding a mirror up to you and saying, yeah, you look great and you're doing OK, you're changing and we love you even if your parents don't [laughing while saying the last part] (September 9, 2010j).

The mirroring effect emphasized in this quote activates a Lacanian specular dynamic, outlined in his theory of the mirror stage.<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan describes the infant held up to a mirror by the mother and the

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<sup>3</sup> Film theory has been highly influenced by Lacan's theory of the mirror phase, grounded in the alienation of visuality from the body. The mirror-phase theory of subjectivity is based in the child's awareness of self and being through being seen from the outside, suggesting a fundamentally alienated selfhood that is constructed visually (see Marks 2000: 150).

infant's jubilation in seeing its own reflection. This mirror scene illustrates the formation of the ego/I via the identification and internalization of one's own specular image, supported by the mother who acts as stand-in for the gaze outside. Identity formation is not something that takes place (solely) inside the subject itself but according to Lacan is closely connected to visibility (taking on or assuming an image) and to interaction with others. What is determinative is not (just) how we see or would like to see ourselves, but how we are perceived by the cultural gaze. As psychoanalytic film theorist Kaja Silverman states in her development of a psychoanalytic politics of visual representation via, among others, Lacan:

All of this suggests that we cannot simply "choose" how we are seen. Nor can we in any simple way conjure a new screen into place. We can struggle at a collective level to transform the existing one. Alternately, we can try at an individual level to substitute another image for the one through which we are conventionally seen, or, to deform or resemanticize the normative image (Silverman 1996: 19).

As suggested by Mason, the vlog can be an important transitioning device, by which the ego is constituted by and as the projection of a surface, and where the viewers/other YouTubers act as stand-ins for the mother (or the parents), offering supportive confirmations of the (gender) identity of the vlogger. However, as Lacan also emphasizes, the infant recognizes him- or herself in the image of the being whose physical capacity outstrips his own. The mirror image seems more complete and coherent than the child actually experiences or sees oneself to be. In that sense the mirroring vlog can be considered a medium from which to master one's identity, trying out and incorporating the ideal reflection of the ego. Furthermore, the mirroring vlog can also become an ideal reflection or a role model for others. As Carolyn states, "I set my camera so it helps me look a little better than I think I look in real life" (March 25, 2012). The vlog therefore presents a mediated identity that, according to Carolyn herself, looks

“better” than she does in “real life”: “I swear to God that my camera makes me look better than I do in my mirror” (September 12, 2011). Or as Elisabeth states, “I don’t like how I look at all—I mean, the camera does wonders you know” (June 11, 2008). The vlog is here positioned as an idealized mirror, allowing her another kind of control over and monitoring of her appearance than the actual mirror. The imagery of the vlog can make one look better in/through proper lighting, when shot from the right angles, and with the right settings of the camera. The image can hide/disguise one’s self-perceived imperfections as well as the actual size or shape of the vlogger. As Erica asked me off-tape when I met up with her in person to do the interview: “Are you surprised by my height?—I’m asking because a lot of people who meet me in person say that I’m much taller than they imagine by watching my vlogs.” I was asked a similar question when meeting up with James in person, thus he told me that people often imagined that he was taller and bigger than he was. As suggested by Erica and James, vlogging evens out the differences in, for example, height, which potentially makes the trans women look smaller than they are and the trans men higher/bigger, enabling them to live up to gendered expectations of bodily size and shape.

Watching other YouTubers’ vlogs Carolyn also positions them as some kind of (idealized) mirrors, thus she articulates being envious that it seems as if other trans vloggers have changed a lot more than she has, being able to go through different kinds of surgeries, leaving her feeling as if “nothing has changed” with her own appearance (May 13, 2010). The vlogs work as mirrors for self-identification as trans, offering guidance and directions on how to transition, proving to themselves as well as others that transubstantiation is possible, but the vlogs also work as ideal reflections, which appear more capable and complete. It seems fruitful to think along the lines of Jay Prosser and see the vlogs as a series of mirror stages. As Prosser argues in connection with transsexual autobiographies,

“For the transsexual, the mirror initially reflects not-me: it distorts who I know myself to be” (Prosser 1998: 100). The look in the mirror initially results in disidentification (not a jubilant integration of body), a split between a body image (projected self) and the image of the body (reflected self) (Ibid.). The transsexual autobiographical narrative becomes a progression through a series of mirror stages that, like transition itself, tries to undistort the reflected self and bring into gender alignment body and body image (Ibid.: 101). It is the desire to see one’s felt sense of gender reflected back at oneself. Like Erica states, “When people see me, I want them to see a woman and when I look in the mirror I want to see a woman” (January 17, 2007). However, this is not always possible or desired, as the written autobiographies by Kate Bornstein (Bornstein 1994, 2012) or Mason’s vlogs suggest. There might not be an available gender category that one can claim, especially taking into consideration that a binary gender system is what one is enrolled in, or one might want recognition in between or beyond the categories that are currently available. Vlogging might be said to be ongoing meetings with “the mirror,” enacting a series of mirror stages, but when and how the disidentification and the identification with the specular image takes place seems to be an ambivalent process. Carolyn’s and Mason’s comments about the flattering effects of the camera might even suggest a coexistence between disidentification and identification in or through the mirroring vlog. For some the “transitioning vlogs” (focused on tracking and mapping the physical changes) might work as a kind of photographic developer that slowly exposes the represented subject that was there all along waiting to emerge and, for others, subjects might never emerge, or only partly. The question, then, becomes whether the vlogs, like Prosser argues in connection with written autobiographies, (re)joins the split self into a single, coherent and connected “life”? (Prosser 1998: 102). As far as I perceive it, the vlogs seem to both expose as well as connect any

contingent split of transsexual life. The split between a self before and a self after (medical) transition seems to be emphasized verbally as well as visually, manifesting that change is happening and has happened. And yet the vlog also becomes a site for connecting the parts, creating a coherent narrative, and storing in one archive the different looks and appearances. In connection with transsexual written autobiographies, Prosser argues:

In preserving in the autobiography a body of transsexual memory, in not performing the renunciation of a transsexual past, all transsexual autobiographers—by dint of their status as transsexual autobiographers—hold on to transsexuality as a subjectivity (Ibid.: 131).

Prosser hereby argues that autobiography not only grants the writer womanhood/manhood but also reinstates the writer as always already a transsexual. Writing an autobiography can become a way to narrate oneself as female/male while simultaneously anchoring oneself in transsexuality. Similar mechanisms seem to be at stake in the trans vlogs as a genre, albeit in a different way. Preserving and visualizing the transsexual body is the epitome of the genre, and in that sense the trans vloggers not only hold on to but claim transsexuality as subjectivity.

The vlog acts as extended motion-picture mirrors with certain affordances: being able to reflect how one looks/appears in the present moment while also archiving the image for comparison later, being a testing ground for trying out and adjusting one's appearance—and enabling specular interaction, making the vlogger the center of and vulnerable to other people's (mis)recognizable looks and feedback. The multidimensional mirroring effect of the vlog therefore ties into and becomes part of what I call the vlog as a site for transubstantiation. It is the complex and reciprocal process of crafting oneself and emerging as a desirable "image."

## **The Vlog as a Vehicle of Transubstantiation**

The camera plays several important roles in the trans vlogs, but as I will argue it is first and foremost a vehicle of transubstantiation. The concept of “transubstantiation” derives from Roman Catholic theology, where it describes the conversion of bread and wine during the celebration of Holy Communion. Bread and wine is transubstantiated or changed into the body and blood of Christ, transformed from one material substance or mode of being to another. Or, if interpreted more symbolically, the bread and wine becomes the literalization of Christ. Judith Butler uses the concept of transubstantiation in her reading of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990) by Jennie Livingston, portraying the ball culture of various drag and trans queens/women of color from the mid- to late 1980s. Here Butler specifically connects transubstantiation to transsexuality, pointing out that some of the characters in the film “are engaged in life projects to effect a full transubstantiation into femininity and/or whiteness” (Butler 1993: 134). Butler also connects transubstantiation to the effect of the camera—as she writes:

[T]he camera acts as surgical instrument and operation, the vehicle through which the transubstantiation occurs. Livingston thus becomes the one with the power to turn men into women who, then, depend on the power of her gaze to become and remain women (Ibid.: 135).

Jay Prosser uses transubstantiation as a way to capture the complex process whereby embodiment and reembodiment play a key role in the narratives of transsexuals. As Prosser notes, the “sex change” is not just a surgical act but a signifying moment in the narrative:

[F]or while it may be somatic transformation that allows the transsexual to feel sex-changed, writing in the autobiographies may generate its own transitional moments (more symbolic, more in keeping with the flow of the story) to cohere

the transsexual subject. Narrative enacts its own transitions (Prosser 1998: 123).

My use of the concept of transubstantiation draws on all of the aforementioned meanings, highlighting the conversion of (bodily) materiality and the performative power of words and camera in connection with this conversion (meaning the trans vloggers' self-representation and self-labeling). As implied by Prosser, the autobiography becomes an important part of a re-creation and re-manifestation of the self, which shares some similarities with the function of the vlogs although the means and the structures of this are different. Like the genre of trans autobiographies analyzed by Prosser the genre of the vlog serves an important function in the transitioning process. The vlog is an important part of a process of self-invention, serving as a testing ground for, experimentations with, and manifestations of (new) identities. Screen-births signal the emergence of identities that have been or are invisible in other aspects of the vloggers' social life. It highlights the construction of gender through technologies as well as the intersection of bodies and information machines. Having a vlog online can help constitute a particular gender identity, enabling one to try out and take on a desired identity but it can also in a much more concrete way facilitate transformation via the donations received online. As mentioned earlier, a significant number of trans vloggers use their vlog to raise money for their medical transition, which literalizes the vlog as a transformative device, engendering re-embodiment by interaction with information technologies.

The metaphor of the screen-birth works here in several ways, as a way for trans bodies to become media bodies (appearing online and at times becoming micro-celebrities) in the process of creation and re-creation.<sup>4</sup> Becoming media bodies or media personas in an act of screen-

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<sup>4</sup> Reflections on the vlogger as a micro-celebrity are presented in chapter 6.

birth is the prerequisite for receiving donations, which then again enables the (off-)screen rebirth.

A surprisingly large number of YouTubers start off their row of vlogs around the time they start taking hormones. There is an emphasis on and strong visual presence of transitioning technologies, whether it is a detailed representation of what kind and the amount of hormones they take, what kind of surgeries they have gone through, and what the effects are and how the recovery proceeds. Various kinds of medical technologies (for example, hormone injections and scenarios from operating rooms) and their bodily effects are extremely visually present and debated in the vlogs. The vlog serves the function of documenting/archiving as well as performatively instantiating the bodily changes, tracking and tracing the transition. In this sense the medical transitioning technologies become closely connected to and intertwined with the vlog as a medium. Both of them can be regarded as technologies of the self. The concept of the technology of the self is, as Michel Foucault describes it, a technology that can:

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 2003: 146).

Often working in tandem with other kinds of “technologies” (technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, and technologies of power), the technology of the self implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals in the sense of acquiring skills as well as attitudes (Ibid.: 147). The concept itself, with these meanings in mind inspires me to think of how the vlog as a digital technology contributes to the expression, fashioning, and enactment of trans identities. The camera and the act of vlogging and connecting with a broader (trans) public becomes yet another technology used in the process of transitioning.



Discussing how trans identities are connected to technology has, as noted in chapter 2, often been theorized in critical (and transphobic) terms as a “dependence” on medical technology and as a submission to a patriarchal and capitalist industry (see, for example, Janice Raymond, Bernice Hausman, Sheila Jeffreys). What these critical voices assume is that trans people (with the use of sex re-assignment technologies) perpetuate gender essentialism, foreclosing that body modifications can have any kind of (identity) political potential. What my reading suggests is that the vlog is employed as a digital technology of the self among other transitioning technologies, thus representation and transformation is not something “done” to them but is part of an active process of self-determination with the vlog as an important site for working on the self as well as for the production and exploration of the self.

### **Visualizing Hormones as a Transformative Drug**

Transitioning technologies, body, camera, and visibility intersect and proliferate in the vlogs, but in different ways. Whereas the trans female vloggers, with Erica as the prime example, tend to articulate surgical interventions as the technology of re-embodiment, offering a careful and intimate visual representation of the various procedures and stages, the trans male vloggers tend to highlight testosterone as the prime transformative technology. The trans female vloggers are not focusing on mapping and enumerating the physical changes facilitated by hormones in the same way as the trans male vloggers tend to. As the trans female vloggers also pinpoint, hormones do spark physical changes but it takes a while before they are visibly notable. Trans men, therefore, typically have a different relationship to “visibility” than do trans women, as it is often easier for them to slide into mainstream society as recognizable men. This seems to partly explain why hormones play such a different role in trans male vlogs than in trans female vlogs.

The trans male vlogs show a significant and overwhelming emphasis on, and preoccupation with, testosterone and its visual effects on the body. Here drugs and camera interconnect in interesting ways, as an extreme focus is put on making the biochemistry of testosterone visible and detectable. The trans male vloggers often inject the hormones online as a kind of double “shot”—they “shoot” testosterone into their muscle and they “shoot” their own vlog as if drug and camera mutually initiate the process of becoming a visible man. The high visual presence of testosterone and how to inject it is partly educational, serving as a kind of show-and-tell. However, it is also part of a celebration of the drug as the transformative technology, producing visibly bodily sexual difference.

The trans male vloggers structure and label their vlogs in terms of how many months they have been taking hormones in a much more explicit and all-encompassing way than the trans female vloggers, Carolyn being the exception. Testosterone is very often the structuring principle, defining when it is time to make a new vlog (monthly or annual updates, for example 2 months on T, 1 year on T, and so on).<sup>5</sup> The effects of hormones is also the prime topic, as the vlogs often center on an audiovisual display and oral enumeration of the changes that testosterone has facilitated. The vlogs can be regarded as mappings of the biochemical effects of testosterone—producing bodily visual truth. The camera is directed toward and thereby performatively constitutes each and every bodily “masculinizing” effect. James, Wheeler, and Tony are self-consciously tracking and pinpointing the changing appearance of their bodies, focusing on the growth of muscles and development of “masculine” features, as well as capturing the continuous growth of hair on legs, arms, stomach, and face. There are several hand-held close-up shots of (especially) James and Wheeler, trying to show the viewer the size and shape of the transitioning body or the growth of hair. In several shots,

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<sup>5</sup> Within the trans YouTube community, testosterone is predominantly referred to simply as “T,” which is the shortened, insider lingo for the substance.

Wheeler's slightly bearded cheek takes up the entire screen as he instructs the viewer where to find the newest growth of hair with a "Wait, wait—you can kind of see it" and then moves the camera a bit to show us another part of his face "and the sideburns, whoopee" (October 28, 2009).

Likewise, James makes a lot of vlogs about the growth, look, and removal of his beard, caressing his facial hair as he expresses what it feels like, moving up close to the camera and turning the camera around to show the viewer how he trims it or shaves (see, for example, September 12, 2010; January 11, 2011; April 18, 2011; July 7, 2011). The trans male vloggers use the camera to construct what the drug does (internally and externally), thus vlogging becomes a way to make the self and the viewer see the biomedical effect. It becomes a record of inner and outer changes, visualized through physical growth and development. The drug itself becomes masculinity through the ways in which biochemistry (the amount of time and doses) is directly connected to visible signs of muscles and hair growth especially. The drug and the camera are mutually reinforcing and constituting each other, instantiating and confirming maleness. The biomedicalized body becomes a visual vehicle and spectacle, installed as evidence of gender transition. The vlog allows the vlogger and the viewer to witness the process (documenting effects) while also being a site for staging what and how to witness (performative effects).

The trans female and the trans male vloggers' different ways of talking about and visualizing the effects of hormones lead to and tie into what I perceive as different ways of engaging with the vlog as a medium. The trans vlogs become sites for the constant and continuous tracking and mapping of visible hormonal changes (as a diary) as well as representations of the visible hormonal changes over time (as an autobiography). All of the vloggers in this study seem, to varying degrees, to utilize the vlog as an autobiography, as a site for life storytelling and for constructing and archiving bodily changes in the *longue durée* (as a slowly

evolving structure). As Elisabeth states: “Vlogging privately is great because you get to see how far you’ve come” (July 26, 2012). Hence, it is the row of vlogs itself that I perceive as a developing autobiography. However, I also perceive one particular kind of vlog as an autobiography in and of itself, namely what I call “commemorating vlogs” (which I will unfold more in depth in the following section). This particular style of vlogging has, like a written autobiography, a coherent and organized structure and narrative. The autobiographical aspects of the vlogs are closely connected to and intersect with what I see as the use of the vlog as a diary. All of the vloggers in this study cultivate to varying degrees the vlog as a site for talking and connecting, as an instant and positive mirroring along the lines of a diary. Like a diary, the focus is on numerous and shorter updates, which does not necessarily “make sense” in and of itself like the more self-contained commemorating vlogs. In what follows I will expand on the concepts of “diary” and “autobiography” as useful framings of the practice of trans vlogging.

## **Video Diaries**

*It is most valuable to think of the skin of the film not as a screen, but as a membrane that brings its audience into contact with the material forms of memory (Marks 2000: 243).*

The trans vlogs have strong affinities with the genre of the diary in their almost obsessive focus on tracking and archiving transition as a bodily and psychosocial process. The style itself seems highly diarylike, with its fairly unedited, fragmented and associative everyday monologue, often communicated in rather raw (low-key) aesthetic imagery and sound, with supposedly little attention paid to the visual form and finish. The videos can be recorded in a number of places, but the home dominates the setting, predominantly acting as a backdrop. The domestic setting offers cues or information to “reading” or “getting a feeling” of the vlogger and it also

engenders intimacy. We are allowed in and listen to the vlogger in their home. As Michael Strangelove states, “YouTube provides us with a window into the home and the changes that are occurring in domestic life” (Strangelove 2010: 41).

Interestingly, diary writing itself dates back to the Christian era and focuses on what Michel Foucault characterizes as “the notion of the struggle of the soul” (Foucault 2003: 155). Several researchers have already highlighted and reflected on the connections between the (written) diary and (written) blogs/weblogs (see, for example Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht 2004; van Dijck 2007; Rettberg 2009). Some of these observed connections and characterizations apply to the video blogs as well, and yet the diary quality also manifests itself in a variety of different ways due to the audiovisuality of the medium, adding something else to the notion of “diary-ness.”

Vlogging is like writing a diary in the sense that it bears the mark of the ephemeral—it documents the YouTubers’ recent activities, thoughts, and problems and enables the release of emotional tension, similar to regular blogging (Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht 2004). At times the vloggers even read aloud in the vlogs from their written diary. For instance, Erica shares her thoughts online from the time before she started vlogging but kept a written transition journal (June 20, 2007). Many of the trans vloggers make “updates,” where they list their current physical changes and/or their current state of mind. They “check in” to signal that they are still there, and sometimes without having anything in particular to say. As Elisabeth states, “I don’t know what to say—there is really not much going on—I’ve got to pick up a hobby or something to keep myself busy” (November 6, 2007). To vlog can be a ritualized activity that receives a place in the vlogger’s life, just like diary keeping “gives meaning and structure to someone’s life” (van Dijck 2007: 69). One does not just vlog when something significant has happened, but one vlogs out of

loneliness, boredom, or a number of other reasons. As comparative media studies scholar José van Dijck notes, a diary is rooted in the daily recording of events, feelings, and reflections commonly thought of as a private recording produced by a single author and closed to public scrutiny (Ibid.: 57). But as argued by van Dijck, a diary is not just for oneself but also directed toward an audience, thus all diaries have an imagined addressee (Ibid.: 67–68). The diary has a communicative and public function that has often been understated but that the weblog bolsters by highlighting the importance of connectivity and sharing (Ibid.: xiv–xv). As van Dijck argues, “Even as a form of self-expression, diary writing signals the need to connect, either to someone or something else or to oneself later in life” (Ibid.: 68). The function of self-expression and communication are not at odds but are co-present in the genre of the diary (Ibid.: 69). The need to express or represent oneself goes hand in hand with the need to connect and communicate.

When Erica is making and uploading three vlogs on her birthday, she is not just continuously documenting present events and feelings as they unfold and are fresh in her memory but also expressing a wish or a need to connect with others on this special day. The character of these vlogs is indeed unpretentious updates but also calls for response as well as answers to the response that she receives. She starts vlogging in the morning after having just come out of the bath as she tells us, wearing a bathrobe that she got for her birthday. Later she tries some of the new clothing on that she has just bought on her birthday shopping tour with her girlfriend. She dances happily in front of the camera while singing, “Erica, it’s your birthday....” The last birthday video is recorded late that night, after she has been out, thus she is obviously a bit tipsy when she lists all the things that she has done during the day (October 4, 2008). The vlogs incorporate a private *mise-en-scène*, thus we are in Erica’s home. The setting and the use of the camera establish a feeling of an intimate

encounter. The vlog produces evidence of Erica's live body and provides a spontaneous, present-status update with the use of deictic gestures ("I want to thank everybody who made video responses [...] and I'm going to bed because I'm really exhausted and you guys won't hear from me before another week"). Like a diary the style is intimate and outspoken, and yet these vlogs are very communicative, directing attention toward a potential sympathetic viewer.

The diary involves both reflection and expression, and is a "hybrid act of remembrance and communication," a way to "record and update the past that simultaneously steer future memory and identity" (van Dijck 2007: 54–55). Keeping a diary is a creative as well as a communicative act; it constructs continuity between past and present but always with the future in mind (Ibid.: 57). As Erica notes, she wants to "document" the upcoming sex-reassignment surgery in order to have it as a memory and in order to educate people.<sup>6</sup> She explains how she loves going back to her previous vlogs, thinking: "Oh my God, I remember how hard that was and I'm in *such* a better place right now." She therefore "can't wait to look back on this too because I know right now I have a hard time grasping [it]" (April 9, 2011). As a diary the vlog continuously produces memories, past selves, and past obstacles that one can "look back on." The camera thereby acts as a "mnemonic tool" (van Dijck 2007: 124), attesting to and securing the YouTuber a personal repository. The vlogs become sites of remembrance that enable one to reconnect with one's past, but also sites for producing future memories ("I can't wait to look back on this, too"). It is not just a registration of a present state of mind and embodiment but also a conscious "steering of [one's] future pasts," serving as "inputs for memories that have yet to be shaped" (Ibid.: 122–123). An important part of and motivation for "documenting" the present is the wish for and the anticipation of producing evidence of an evolving and growing self, a self

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<sup>6</sup> I will go into greater depth with the educational aspect of YouTube in chapter 7.

that feels better in the future. However, the communication itself of current hardships and challenges can also become a way of “grasping” how one feels or how to deal with the situation, individually and/or via response from others. I will discuss this more in depth in the next chapter by engaging with the affective dimensions of vlogging.

Michael Strangelove, in his book *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*, has included a chapter on “video diaries.” As he argues, YouTube has changed the diary process but it is yet uncertain how (Strangelove 2010: 73). He is interchangeably talking about the amateur vlogs as “diaries” and “autobiographies” without clarifying how these genres translate into or manifest themselves as video blogs. But according to Strangelove, autobiography and diary “have made an almost natural transition to the medium of video” (Ibid.: 82). He makes the following loose attempt at a definition: “I treat any YouTube video that has some confessional or self-representational quality as belonging to the autobiographical and diary genre” (Ibid.: 69). He first and foremost sees video diaries as personal confessions, closely connected to a surrounding confessional culture (Ibid.: 71). In the next chapter I will discuss and unfold why I do not find “confession” to be a suitable term when characterizing the vlogs. Some of the things noted by Strangelove are that online diaries are a new form of self-presentation (although based on an ancient practice), unprecedented in its global distribution, mass involvement, and audience interaction (Ibid.: 70). YouTube diary creation is a highly interactive process, strongly informed by its public context and audience feedback, which also results in the diarists’ internalization of the imagined gaze of the Other (Ibid.: 73–74). As he sums up his characterization:

The practice of diary [...] is moving from the domain of the private to the domain of the public and is now seen as a way to gain fame within media culture. The



video diary culture of YouTube is intensifying the experience of reflexivity as we watch ourselves being watched by others (Ibid.: 82).

### **Digital Diaries as Expressions of Haptic Visuality**

What seems to enforce the diary character of the vlogs is the form or expression itself, emanating what Laura U. Marks terms “haptic visuality.” Reflecting on what it is about the imagery, the sound and the camera, that gives one the feeling of intimacy and authenticity that I associate with the diary, Marks’s ideas come to mind. In her book with the evocative title *The Skin of the Film*, she develops the concept of haptic visuality/perception via Alois Riegl, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, and is inspired by a phenomenological understandings of embodied spectatorship. Marks (like Riegl) distinguishes between “optic visuality” and “haptic visuality,” two different modes of representation that Marks seems to suggest can coexist in the same video/film and yet one of them can be more pronounced or celebrated than the other at various times and in various genres. Her main argument is that haptic visuality is significant and predominant within so-called intercultural films (experimental cinema that cannot be confined to a single culture but are part of a postcolonial renegotiation). These films offer another way of knowing and representing the world through appealing to a multitude of senses (not just vision) (Marks 2000: 1–2). Interestingly, video here appeals to senses that it cannot technically represent: touch, smell, and taste—and I would add feelings/emotion to that list. The haptic visuality in these films engage with and attempt to “translate to an audiovisual medium the knowledges of the body, including the unrecordable memories of the senses” (Ibid.: 5). Haptic visuality is interchangeably an effect of the work itself as well as a function of the viewer’s predispositions. It is a way of responding to the image and it is a quality that a particular kind of films has. As Marks notes these intercultural films have “intrinsic haptic qualities, to which the viewer may or may not respond” (Ibid.: 170).

What is of interest to me is not just the development of the concept of haptic visuality but also the way that Marks formulates it in close contact with cinematic memories of people “who move between culture” (Ibid.: 129). Although Marks and I are focusing on different material, it seems as if we both look at more experimental films made by or that are reflective of embodied experiences of “movement” or “in-betweenness.”

Many of the qualities highlighted by Marks are automatically part of the vlog, as they are often recorded with low-grade technological equipment and yet also engendered through the mobile and intimate use of the camera. The often buzzing sound of the camera (or low-quality microphone), the poor image quality, and the often bad lighting that seems to flatten out a vlogger’s face and body points toward the technicality of the medium and disturbs an easy and frictionless absorption in the audiovisual imagery. A haptic visuality also seems to be called upon when Mason works again and again with slightly pixilated images and other filtering devices that deliberately play with obscuring and modifying what it is we are looking at, eliminating a sharp and “realistic” apprehension of himself (and other things represented). These effects might make Mason look better, as he implies, but they also disable an easy access to and visual mastery of the object on the screen. Instead the viewer is directed toward the texture just as much as toward the objects imagined (Ibid.: 162), highlighting the relative weakness of the visual image (a visual poverty) through for instance grainy imagery, or the lack of things to see (Ibid.: 153).

There is a common use of change of focus (mobile camera), graininess, under- and overexposure, and attention directed toward people and surfaces in close-up rather than in a three-dimensional illusionary space (Ibid.: 170–173). There is a refusal of “visual plenitude” in the sense of sharp and well-organized imagery and a refusal of an easy connection to (visual) narrative (Ibid.: 177), although oral storytelling prevails. The lens

is turned toward the trans vlogger's body and their immediate surroundings in blurry and grainy movements, thus the camera acts as an eye that moves across, around, and over surfaces that merge in the image plane. The handheld mobile camera whose position is continuously adjusted and moved around in order to record specific (geographical) locations or parts of the body emphasizes the YouTuber's intimate and tactile connection to what is represented. The visual inspection of these bodies and surfaces is almost too close or at least too hasty, disabling visual mastery and coherence. At times it seems as if shifting textures is all the viewer can comprehend, taking up the entire space of the screen. Skin and screen are intimately intertwined or connected, making it hard to say if it is skin becoming screen or the other way around. The texture of this skin is in focus, whether it is Wheeler's growth of hair and muscles or Elisabeth's bandaged head from surgery. The visual records themselves are indeed embodied and seem immediate. The camera is moved around—somebody is holding the camera—and as an extended/extra hand or eye they explore the transitioning body. The camera's brushing of bodily surfaces mimics James's touching of his bearded face or Elisabeth's touching of her bruised and sour post-operative face within the picture frame.

Instead of a distanced and cognitive mastering of the image through vision, it is one of mutuality where the viewer is encouraged to engage in a close interaction with the image through the close-ups and the moving of the camera across the bodily surfaces, enabling a physical presence through mediation (despite the physical absence in space and time). This kind of visuality offers "an object with which we interact rather than an illusion into which we enter"; it gives "as much significance to the physical presence of an other as to the mental operations of symbolization" (Ibid.: 190). It is an attempt to bring what is represented close, offering a way of "speaking not about, but nearby, its object: a power of approaching its

object with only the desire to caress it, not lay it bare” (Ibid.: 191). It is a multisensory viewing experience; I feel close to these vloggers as I am allowed access to their bodies, their thoughts—it feels as if they talk to me or with me—and I feel with them in their surgical pain and their obstacles. I understand why Marks associates haptic visuality with a “sensuous image” and an “affection-image,” pinpointing how these images encourage a visceral and emotional contemplation and a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image (Ibid.: 163–164). As Marks states, “Haptic images are erotic in that they construct an intersubjective relationship between beholder and image [...], capable of mutual relation of recognition” (Ibid.: 183).

Although being inspired to think alongside Marks’s ideas I also have my doubts about whether the vlogs are closely connected to a suspicion of visuality as such, as it seems more to be a matter of contested visibility—what one can or should see. Marks argues, “All the works [that I describe] are marked by a suspicion of visuality, a lack of faith in the visual archive’s ability to represent cultural memory” (Ibid.: 21). The haptic visuality played out in the vlogs are not a critique as such but more a matter of supplementing the visual mastering and proof-oriented archiving function of visuality with a more embodied form of visual communication. It is an enactment of what in the words of Amelia Jones could be labeled “the synaesthesia of vision” (see Jones 2006: 212). The vlogs are cultivating the medium’s ability to make tactile contact with, and not simply visual records of, the transitioning YouTuber. But the visual record is also an important part of vlogs. Haptic and optic seem to go hand in hand, trying to communicate and grasp the transitioning body via a tactile as well as a visual relationship. The body is however never instrumentalized by vision but “immersed in (as) the image” (Ibid.: 220).

## **Autobiographies of the Digital Age**

The vlogs can be regarded as a kind of autobiography in a sense that they are representations in the first person, focusing on the narrator's own personal life and experiences, usually told in their own voice. In that sense the vlog is utilized as "a personal media practice" and a way of "crafting an agentive self" (Lundby 2008, 3-5). The vlogs also tie into the genre of autobiography by evolving around storytelling, narrating, and connecting past and present selves, orally as well as visually. The autobiographical element of the vlog concerns the self-creation and self-narration through the vlog, the ever-present preoccupation with telling and reclaiming one's life story. The trans self in the vlogs is a visible narratable self that demonstrates/creates its uniqueness through the telling of one's story while also being in need of a supplementary Other to tell the story to, whether that is a concrete or abstracted Other or the camera itself as a stand-in for the/an Other. Identity and presence seems to be attained through the constant audiovisual storytelling, and in that sense storytelling might be understood as "the living's desire for narration, not the desire for the immortal fame of the dead" (Cavarero, quoted in Biti 2008: 34). The autobiographical storytelling is, as Prosser suggests, part of constructing trans subjectivity while also, as suggested by literary scholar Vladimir Biti (through the work of philosopher Andrea Cavarero), producing individual uniqueness in need of a relational Other.

The vlogs can be seen as autobiographies of the digital age, part of the increasing number of publications of transsexual autobiographies, starting with the autobiography by Lili Elbe in 1931 and dramatically increasing from the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> As Jay Prosser argues, written transsexual autobiographies are a well-known (and rising) genre that, like the genre of

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<sup>7</sup> As Sabine Meyer pinpoints in her reading of *Man into Woman*, it is questionable whether this is an autobiography, thus biography might be a more adequate characterization (see Meyer 2011).

autobiography itself, have a certain structure and telos (Prosser 1998: 116).

But most important, the autobiographical act is a crucial and constituting part of trans people's lives and subjectivities. As mentioned in chapter 2, in order to access transitioning technologies (and, subsequently, legal sex reassignment) trans people have to be diagnosed with "gender identity disorder" (GID).<sup>8</sup> The process of diagnosis requires that the trans person elucidate the origin and ongoing sense of gender, thus the somatic (and possible legal) change is derived from the trans person's narrative. As Prosser states, "The process of diagnosing the subject should be understood above all as narratological" (Ibid.: 104), and it acts as a "narrative filter, enabling some transsexuals to live out their story and thwarting others" (Ibid.: 107). The autobiographical act begins in the clinician's office with the telling of an oral autobiography that has to qualify as a transsexual narrative. The eventual written and published autobiography is therefore always "the transsexual autobiography a second time around" (Ibid.: 101). Prosser proposes narrative as a "second skin" that transsexual people "must weave around the body in order that this body may be 'read'" (Ibid.), thus narrative is a prerequisite for a changed embodiment at the clinician's office. As Prosser points out, the transsexual "must be a skilled narrator of his or her own life. Tell the story persuasively, and you're likely to get your hormones and surgery" (Ibid.: 108).

The potential polyvocalities of lived experience are silenced because the stories that the trans people tell the clinician must mirror or echo the diagnosis, matching the master narrative. Some stories and not others are

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the variations with respect to access to trans health care and gender reclassification are listed in chapter 2. See also Spade 2008 and Transgender Europe's Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide research project: [http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en\\_US/mapping.htm](http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en_US/mapping.htm)

recognized as transsexual narratives, containing the plots, tropes, and themes that the psycho-medical establishment has pointed out as the archetypal story of transsexuality (Ibid.: 104). The clinical diagnosis of GID is, as Judith Butler has pointed out, enforcing what it regulates—namely a binary and heteronormative model of sex and gender that functions as a test that one has to pass (Butler 2004). Human-rights advocates have also questioned the way in which access to transitioning technologies is conditioned by “protocols”—one has to tell a set story of one’s childhood that is the only acceptable one—and one is therefore at times “being forced to stereotype themselves to the extreme in their preferred gender to fit eligibility criteria” (Commissioner for Human Rights 2009: 28).

Telling autobiographical stories about one’s gender identity and the genealogy of that feeling is not necessarily something that the trans person desires but definitely something that one is required or maybe even commanded to do at various times and occasions in order to reposition oneself. The command at the clinician’s office is of course the most telling and significant example of a situation in which the trans person has to deliver a coherent and convincing explanation, but other social situations call for similar storytelling. Certain scripts seem to be available, emanating certain affects and positioning the storyteller in certain ways. On the one hand, telling the story of one’s lifelong suffering in the “wrong body” might enable recognition and empathy, but it might position one as a (pathologized) victim. On the other hand, telling the story of lifelong experimentations with suitable identity categories (making transitioning a matter of choice among others) might position one as an agentive and self-reflective subject but preclude understanding and acceptance. YouTube creates a space for communicating, telling, and negotiating different kinds of stories and their effects. While watching and listening to these numerous stories I cannot help but note how different and yet remarkably similar they are in trying to carve a space for self-expression that allows

for suffering and feelings of uncomfortability but also allows for agency and self-determination. I will discuss this balancing more in depth in chapter 6.

The fact that the first trans autobiographies often take place in the clinician's office set the standard for highly formalized narratives. The written autobiography ties into transsexuality as a particular psycho-medical narrative form and is like the genre of autobiography itself conformist and nonlinear, as Prosser argues. Like any autobiography, the transsexual autobiography is an attempt to endow a disorderly life with an order, a textual form, and a formal structure that it does not have (Prosser 1998: 115–116). Autobiography is typically written by a subject who has already lived large parts of their life and therefore “knows” the end of the story, being able to write the life as directed (Ibid.: 117). Taking into consideration the structuring effect of the genre of the written autobiography and its ability to produce identity, it seems understandable that transsexual autobiographies tend to be “a voyage into the self” with a “destined pattern of the journey,” as Prosser argues (Ibid.: 116). They assume a telic structure to transition, structured as progression, inscribing transsexuality as schematic with points of departures, destinations, beginnings, and ends (Ibid.: 116–117). Author Jonathan Ames sums up the structure of transsexual autobiographies as a three-act saga: the gender-dysphoric childhood, the move to the big city, and the transformation/the sex change (Ames 2005: xii). Kate Bornstein's semiautobiographical *Gender Outlaws* (1994) plays with and deconstructs this orderly and nonlinear structure, while her later autobiography *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* (2012) questions and challenges the teleological structure of transsexuality. However, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* still fits into the genre of the “Bildungsroman,” the coming-of-age-novel dealing with more general questions known to many people, such as “Who am I?” which



Ames sees as characteristic for the transsexual autobiography (Ames 2005: xii).

The importance and significance of autobiographies for transsexuals are, as Prosser argues, their composing, constitutive, reconciling, and integrating function. The autobiography in the clinician's office allows the trans person to begin transition, but the written autobiography allows the trans person to "produce continuity in the face of change" (Prosser 1998: 120). Rephrasing Prosser's argument, the written autobiography works in tandem with medical transition as a way to cohere the divided self. More recent transsexual autobiographies display a consciousness of their self-help function, and therefore include specific and detailed inside information, assuming the status of self-help how-to manuals, with elements of political tracts claiming trans rights, slightly distinguishing them from previous autobiographies (Ibid.: 125; Gherovici 2010: 218, 226).

The market also sets certain standards for the kind of stories told, and not least how to market transsexual autobiographies. While trans people read it for identification, the vast majority of readerships that sustain the market for these autobiographies are non-transsexuals, motivated by fascination and an interest in the transsexual as a prodigious Other (Prosser 1998: 129). As Prosser argues: "Ironically, transsexual autobiographies depend for their circulation on a certain degree of objectification of the transsexual, what we might call the tabloidization of transsexuality" (Ibid.). In their packaging, transsexual autobiographies court their readership by "advertising their own prodigious status" as "an extraordinary story" or "an amazing account of a man who became a woman" (Ibid.). This seems still to apply in many ways, even when extraordinariness is reappropriated and taken on as a badge of honor, as it is the case with Kate Bornstein's new autobiography that bears the following reading line: "The true story of a nice Jewish boy who joins the

church of scientology and leaves twelve years later to become the lovely lady she is today” (Bornstein 2012: cover). Marketing her autobiography with this claim seems to indicate the persistence of extraordinariness as a sales pitch.

The vlogs as digital autobiographies seem also to become voyages into an authentic and recognizable self. Although the vloggers in various ways object to and deny transition as a set telic structure, many of them nevertheless tend to visualize or compose it in a certain way, especially the trans male vloggers. But the sheer number of vloggers and vlogs allow for a polytonality and a complexity even within a structure that might at first seem telic or schematic. Likewise, vloggers like Mason challenge and question not only transition as a destined process (of embodiment and social recognition) but also as an (by now almost agreed-upon) audiovisual formal structure. Not only is Mason’s visual style different, as I will discuss more in depth later in this chapter, but he is also continuously abjuring/forswearing the idea of being “one of those traditional stories you see out there” (April 4, 2011), explicitly and repeatedly disidentifying with being “a true hardcore transsexual” (February 2, 2012). In the interview with Mason he also explicitly addresses having a slightly different style of vlogging:

I just wasn’t interested in making the videos about “Well, I’ve been on T for two months and I have an extra chin hair” [...] because what I found fascinating about transition has been the emotional, spiritual, interpersonal, cultural shifts (Interview: 12:15–15:25).

As Mason highlights, there is a certain predominance of “transitional vlogs,” tracking and mapping the bodily changes that his vlogs distinguish themselves from. In this sense his self-representations offer another audiovisual trans story.

Meanwhile the vlog as a genre is also not easily or frictionless encompassed in a clear linear narrative structure because of the ongoing

re-presentation, re-visioning, and re-telling of the personal story. Life cannot, or at least is not, directed and ordered in the same way as in the written autobiography. In that sense the vlogs are more like diaries that communicate “good” days and “bad” days, and archiving over time different opinions or ways of expressing oneself. In much the same way the hairstyles of the vloggers take twists and turns, so do their life paths. The trans self does not emerge or unfold within a clear-cut narrative structure but is in process. It is the telling of one’s story as one lives it. The vlogs are therefore dilating the purpose and the scope of literary autobiographies, offering a multimodal opportunity for documenting, telling, and commenting on one’s story and bodily/identity changes continually—and to get feedback from others. The multimodality of storytelling offered by digitalization is significant as it becomes possible to tell stories with sound, text, music, pictures—all at the same time, or using only a few of these semiotic resources. And importantly amateurs can “make such semiotic decisions with standard software on regular PCs or laptops” (Lundby 2008: 8). In this sense the digitalization of the storytelling practice “does matter” as digital design scholar Tone Bratteteig argues (Bratteteig, in *Ibid.*: 6). Technology is not only an important part of how people express themselves and communicate with others but it also influences the stories and the storytelling practice, making the “narrative form” much more multidimensional and nonlinear than written autobiographies. The multimodality provides the trans vloggers with the ability to reshape the (form of the) resources at all times and in relation to the needs or the interests of the vlogger (Lundby 2008: 9). Another important part of digital storytelling aside from multimodality is interactivity (*Ibid.*), which according to media and communication theorist Nick Coldry contributes to a wider democratization and a reshaping of the hierarchies of voice and agency (Coldry 2008: 51).<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> I will engage more with the questions concerning democratization and the public

trans vlogs surpass some of the barriers and institutional challenges that the written/published transsexual autobiography is subjected to. Making a vlog requires nothing more than a webcam and basic editing skills; it is off-the-shelf equipment and techniques with low-cost production. Likewise, contrary to the published transsexual autobiography, the vlogs do not have to be marketed toward a broader audience, encompassing its status as bizarre Other.

If the written transsexual autobiography has a cohering function, melding together a body narrative in pieces as suggested by Prosser, then the trans vlog can be said to be all about representing and relabeling the transsexual body, creating a realm for redefining who and how one can materialize or visualize male/female/trans—and where and when. The vlogs are first and foremost about contested intelligibility, negotiating body, (gender) identity, and visibility.

Erica's biography has been told and retold several times, as she is one of the first and most persistent trans YouTubers. In collaboration with a documentarist she has made a film about her life story and her life on YouTube, using her earlier vlogs as footage. This film was uploaded to YouTube, where it became part of a meta-reflective autobiographical vlogging practice, commenting on and simulating the form of the vlog. Her vlogs are both status updates in the here and now, telling her life story as it unfolds (the diary quality of the vlogs) and yet after a while these selfsame updates become archival material/footage that she can include in her retrospective self-reflection, which (like a autobiography) seems more narratively and aesthetically coherent and well-structured.

These retrospective autobiographical self-reflections have developed into a genre of their own that I call "commemorating collages." These commemorating collages take full advantage of the multimodality of the medium by including moving images (both past and present video

footage), photographs, written text, at times a voice-over, and music that together create a (typically heroic) narrative of overcoming great challenges and finding oneself. An early and “classical” example is the celebratory transition vlog uploaded by James in 2007. Starting with photographs of him as a child, moving on to pre-transitioning film footage, and then moving on to footage from the surgeries, photographs of him smiling bare-chested with his surgical scars, and ending with the photograph again of him as a child. These images are accompanied by Cat Stevens’s “Don’t Be Shy,” which directs the “reading” and helps to create a narrative of finding pride in one’s trans identity. It is a song encouraging self-love and love of others, which visually is echoed in a photograph taken of James’s shadow forming a heart via his arms (May 22, 2007).

What Erica shares with us in the documentary about her life online and offline is how watching other trans people’s stories (on the Internet) enabled her own realization process and the recognition of her own biography as a trans narrative (February 11, 2009). As she states in one of her early vlogs:

The second I found out that there were people like that and that it was something I could do, everything clicked; also I knew what I had been feeling for the last twenty years had been this and that this was how I could express it (November 14, 2006).

Before that she did not know that trans was a possible and legitimate identity category covering how she felt. But “I heard it and I knew that was me” (Ibid.). This exemplifies and confirms not only the importance of trans visibility (as discussed in the introduction) but also the transformative effect of trans storytelling in forming identities and changing lives. Stories do not just report past events but also “project possible futures” by emplotting trans lives, making some particular future not only plausible but also compelling (Frank 2010: 10). Trans stories do something, they

can guide one's perception and action—and they can lead one onward and conduct one (Ibid.: 9).

I would claim that making vlogs and watching other people's vlogs becomes a visual as well as narrative map for Erica (and the other trans vloggers), enabling her self-construction and self-reflection as trans. In this sense the trans stories on YouTube have the potential to animate and mobilize, they work “with people, for people and [...] on people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided” Ibid.: 3). Erica not only recounts being animated or motivated by another trans woman's story, but also explicitly uses her own vlog as a way to mobilize trans people. One example is Erica's request for more trans people to vlog:

I issue a challenge—make our own videos [...] I feel like if I can do this, anybody can do this, and if anybody can do this why not you? Imagine a world where people see more to transsexuals than just porn stars or street walkers or things like that—'cause right now that's all they see. When an average person thinks of a transsexual they don't think of someone like me or like you [looking directly into the camera aka at the viewer]—they think of what they see on TV or something they saw on Jerry Springer, which isn't who we are. If more people were out there and were open about who they are and what it's like to be who they are and basically just show the world [...] then imagine the impact that could possibly have, imagine the minds that could possibly open (March 5, 2007).

Erica encourages other trans people to start telling their stories and to be audio-visibly present as trans (“all you do is you point it [the camera] at you, and you start talking”) (Ibid.). However, it is not just a request for more trans people to start vlogging but also for more trans people to come out and claim a trans identity. Requesting that people tell their story is a way to try to mobilize a trans movement by acknowledging that stories can “breathe life not only into individuals, but also into groups that assemble telling and believing certain stories” (Frank 2010: 3).

Because of the various kinds of stigmatization and stereotyping of trans people, not least in mainstream media, Erica has an ambivalent relationship to identifying as trans (February 19, 2007). As she says: “there is such a negative stigma attached to the word ‘transsexual’ [...] it comes from the porn industry or us being objectified” (August 14, 2007). In the past she therefore objected to identifying as trans, thus not denying that she was trans. What Erica seems to suggest is the difference between accepting an identity as a matter of fact and claiming it as a chosen marker. However, making vlogs is explained as part of a reclaiming and renegotiation—and telling different stories of trans as an identity category. As she states:

Really it was just me being ashamed of who I was, who I am—it’s crazy, so silly, because I fought so hard just like so many of you guys to be the person that I am today and there is no reason I should ever be ashamed of that (Ibid.).

Through the vlogs Erica is reappropriating trans as a positively valued signifier and encouraging others to do the same. Erica notes that many people have already started vlogging because of her, which then inspires yet other people to start (April 16, 2007). It is and has been “this snowball” where the screen-birth of one trans YouTuber anticipates the screen-births of others. Vlogging has transformed Erica’s gender identity from a private fantasy or privately lived practice to a public display.

What Erica seems to suggest is the transformative power of (re-)claiming a trans identity: The vlog is not just a site for personal storytelling but also for creating, communicating, and negotiating cultural and collective stories about transsexuality. Digital autobiographies can contribute to a correction of the hidden injuries of media power (the Jerry Springer version) by providing the means to tell and distribute “important stories about oneself—to represent oneself as a social, and therefore potentially political, agent—in a way that is registered in the public

domain” (Coldry 2008: 54). Through vlogging Erica is reinventing (her) transsexuality from being something extraordinary (“something [...] on Jerry Springer”) to something ordinary and then back into the extraordinary, albeit a completely different and chosen kind of extraordinary because of the massive attention she has received via her vlogs.

### **The Vlog as a Site for Artistic Creation and Intervention**

Many of the vlogs have artistic affinities, but especially Mason and Diamond seem to cultivate the vlogs as artistic expressions. Mason is working with the mixing of images (from his own repository as well as from the broader cultural repository of film and media), coloring and modifying the moving images and editing where and how to place these images. He is including a rich photographic material, written text, and authored texts read aloud with different kinds of voice-overs, and not least a pronounced soundtrack, which sets the ambiance for what he is trying to communicate through the vlogs.

Transitioning has for Mason sparked an interest in documentation and visual arts. As he states in one of his vlogs:

I became obsessed with documenting my transition. I was taking photographs of myself every week, sometimes every day. I was martyring my face in the mirror to see if there was any new hair on my chin. I was taking recordings of my voice—it was all focused on documenting myself (September 19, 2010m).

In the interview I conducted with him, he presents this zest for documentation as a practice that “any other trans person does” and yet he got “hooked” and “fell in love with photography and video.” As he explains: “I started using video-making as a way of expressing my transition. So it became a creative thing for me as well” (Interview: 09:55–11:11). Not long into his transition he moved to a new city to seek an offline transgender community and there he started taking a lot of photographs, which he



explains as “a way of rediscovering myself and a new landscape and that new landscape included my own body” (May 6, 2011). He explains how the vlog made it possible for him to combine his interests in photography, film, music, and writing with this urge to represent his transitioning self. Transition was, however, the triggering factor that initiated a more full-time engagement with artistic creation. As he points out to me in the interview:

I think transition definitely brought about my artistic . . . It helped me to accept that I have a strong artistic bit and it has helped me come into that in a fairly backdoor way because I don't think that I would ever have given up a high-powered career and said, “Hey, I wanna devote a lot of time to photography and writing and movie making”—I don't think I would have had the courage—I think I had to do something like this to turn my life upside down (Interview: 13:50–15:28).

Transitioning sparked an artistic interest and directed him toward a new career and lifestyle that includes traveling as part of seeking (new) locations and people to photograph. Vlogging encouraged and supported this process and is a platform for artistic experimentation and public broadcasting. Mason explains to me how his job as a psychologist left him empty and incapable of understanding the transition he was going through, which made him turn to art. As he states:

I felt like psychological paradigms fell short of explaining human experience, especially trans experience, because trans experience is pathologized, so I was looking for different ways of expressing myself and explaining what I was going through [...] I think it [art] does a better job of creating meaning around transition than psychology or sociology (Interview: 16:00–16:44).

Talking with Mason makes me wonder whether transition itself can be thought of as a creative process, or at least become a creative process through visualization/representation. Mason seems to discover his life as a work of art through transition and through documenting it—and as

Michel Foucault asks, “Couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?” (Foucault 1991: 350). What Foucault suggests is the idea that one can take one’s own life or body as the material for a work of art. It is a refunctioning of aesthetics that can include the aesthetics of the self, which is also an essential part of artistic avant-garde endeavors. Aestheticism here concerns a transfiguration of existence, not a renunciation of life. What is entailed is an art of living in line with Foucault’s notions of “the care of the self” and his elaborations on “the technologies of the self” as the specific exercises and techniques through which it may be possible to fashion oneself or give style to one’s life. It is a matter of having a certain attitude toward the self, working on and showing an interest in the self as a work of art. As Foucault notes, “This transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?” (Foucault 1990: 14). Artistic practice is as Foucault insinuates quintessentially a matter of transforming the self. As he notes, an aesthetics of existence entails

those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria (Foucault, quoted in O’Leary 2002: 37).

For Mason, transitioning life seems to be an art form to explore in the vlogs, which then again helps him develop an artistic view of life in general. He has in his own words developed a “different kind of sensibility and eye” because of the constant documentation, which makes him look at things “the way I would look at them through the camera lens, or I am thinking about things I can write about later” (September 19, 2010m). This interest in self-representation has now extended into what he coins “a

global project” where he travels around the world to take photographs of “queer and gender-variant people,” trying to create “some kind of archive” (November 6, 2011).

Mason has made several vlogs highlighting transition as an overwhelming, extraordinary, and life-altering experience and as a (bodily) feeling that can only be represented artistically. Imagery, words, and music go hand in hand to communicate feelings and raise questions rather than offer explanatory answers. As poetically written across the screen in one of Mason’s vlogs accompanied by old photographs and a melancholic soundtrack:

Since starting transitioning, I’ve felt somewhere between life and death. Sometimes, I feel as if I’ve entered a portal. And it’s like a waking dream. And I worry that I will get caught here, in this cocoon of my own making [...] I don’t know how to make it to the other side (September 19, 2010e).

Later in the vlog he compares transitioning with riding in a speeding car without any driver. Mason is insinuating that transitioning, like a self-propelled car, takes you on a dangerous ride where you neither control the speed nor the destination but occupy the position of a powerless passenger who just has to hope for the best. The transformative effect of testosterone is repeatedly expressed as a life-altering experience that gives rise to not only disorientation but also loss. As he states:

I sometimes experience transition as a centripetal force. My body, brain, buzzing from the motion. One person frozen in time. I will never look this way again. One person, multiple lives. Each one a new beginning and a letting-go (November 21, 2010).

He says these words in a voice-over to the imagery of himself holding the camera while spinning around and around, transporting the dizzy feeling described by words into imagery and onto the viewer. The imagery of Mason is rather blurry, double images of him blending in with his

environments and then older photographs of him, beginning with childhood photos that slowly divide into two while he himself in a voice-over states: “What part do I hold on to? Am I bigger than the sum of my parts?” (Ibid.). Transition is communicated as a dizzy feeling of being in motion, closely connected to the change in visual appearance, as he will “never look this way again.” Transition is expressed as the continuous production of new beginnings, which evidently also implies letting go of older versions of self (“the loss of my past life, and feeling divided in two”).

Diamond is also cultivating the vlog as a platform for artistic interventions that include a variety of expressions. Her vlogs are composed of clearly modified and edited imagery, text, and music, but first and foremost it is Diamond’s performance in front of the camera that is the artistic expression. Diamond is a stand-up artist, a news or talk show hostess, a model, and a singer. As she states herself in my interview with her: “I don’t like to be pigeonholed—I never wanted to be the trans vlogger—I wanted to be a vlogger that also happened to be trans” (Interview tape 1: 09:05–10:20).

She acts as a sharp, humorous reporter/reviewer who always has a sparkle in her eye and an incisive remark ready. She knows how to work and play with the camera and she is an eloquent storyteller who uses her clothing, appearance, voice, and facial expressions as important cues in creating dramatic effects. She wears a wide variety of accessories, including ever-changing earrings and different pieces of jewelry and glasses, that complete her appearance as a media persona. She is always dressed up and prepared for the camera. This is reinforced and supported by the dramaturgy and quality of the vlog.

Aside from the first vlogs most of her vlogs have a high quality of image, sound, and not least lighting, and they are often recorded with a neutral background, which gives them a kind of studio effect, instead of “at-home-talking-to-the-camera” kind of touch. Contrary to many of the

other trans vloggers, there is typically no contextualizing background in Diamond's vlogs; the focus is exclusively on her appearance and performance, on how she dramatizes the story told. She occasionally creates intros and exits and works extensively with lighting and coloring the imagery. Different topics or types of vlogs are marked by a specific visual style or form—for example, the series of vlogs where she discloses her childhood memories and experiences are kept in black and white as if colors would disturb the stories told. This kind of vlog has an intro and an exit with modeling photos/moving images of her. The intro is sped-up abstracted moving images rendered in flaming colors of her shaking her head as if in despair or as if she needs to get some thoughts out of her head, marking that this is where she goes into psychological self-reflection or self-disclosure. The stand-up/news reporter vlogs are very colorful, typically shot with her standing or sitting in front of the camera, visible from the waist up. Still-modeling images of her follow the vlogs with her newly composed songs and then there is the reportage “live” footage of her interviewing various kinds of people in town, which are kept in a more raw style.

When I interviewed Diamond, she told me that she usually plans and scripts her vlogs far ahead before shooting them. She is investing a lot of time, energy, and money in her vlogging practice, now being the owner of “a thousand-dollar camera” and a “Mac editing program.” When she started, she had a very bad camera and no editing software. “So I just uploaded it,” she tells me. The change happened “once I saw that this could be something,” then she “started investing money” and now other people are investing in her (“I didn't even pay for this stuff myself; it was invested by other people”) (Interview tape 1: 19:23–21:31). She explains to me how she is ambitious about her vlogging and sees opportunities she is not really sure where they are going:

I want it to be more professional. I want the quality to continue to go up. I'm more conscious of the quality—the camera quality, the editing quality, the topic quality [...] Whereas before I would just sit in front of a camera blah, blah, blah, and here you go [...] My professionalism has moved up (Interview tape 2: 27:15–28:31).

She is continuously highlighting that her vlogging is a “vessel” to “promote a trans voice” and yet she is very upfront with me about also taking advantage of the economic and career opportunities that vlogging enables. With her rising popularity she discovers that vlogging “could be something,” that “this could be a business,” which is also cemented with her YouTube partnership. I am not sure how much money she collects from this partnership, but her increasing productivity and vlog postings seem to be partly encouraged by this partnership. When I ask her directly if she is also using the vlog as a career move, she answers, “Somewhat” (Interview tape 2: 06:16–08:02). As she explains, vlogging has given her

opportunities that I never had before [...] and I was just being me [...] so if people like it then let me just create a brand that is personality-based and get the trans story out there. And once that happened I started researching branding and research what I needed to do to become a brand and that's what I started to do (Interview tape 1:15:00–18:00).

Diamond seems to be one of these social media users who manages to harness the full potential of the so-called participatory media revolution, crafting herself as a popular voice and a marketable image, creating awareness about trans/racial issues and partly making a living out of it. It therefore came as no surprise that she specifically asked me to list her under the name she goes by in her vlogs. Contrary to many of the other vloggers, this is not a semi-private archive or an outreach for a community but marketable self-expression, explicitly directed toward and planned for an audience.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I will discuss and analyze the reformulation of and renegotiation between private/public in more depth in chapter 7.

## **“Trans”-formations**

What I have argued in this chapter is that the trans vlogs have a transformative potential as screen-births, closely connecting and interweaving fleshly transitioning bodies and information technology. The vlogs seem to engender the ongoing process of “becoming” man/woman/trans by (re)learning, testing, evaluating in front of the camera the act of gender. The vlog hereby assists in the dismantling of certain gendered signifiers and the creation of Others. This also includes using the vlog as an extended mirror, inscribing the vlogger in multiple and intersubjective reflections, being visible to themselves and others as an image—an image that they can narcissistically engage with and/or that others can support and confirm. The coproduction of trans identity in/through the vlog takes the shape of a diary, offering regular check-ins, enabling what appears to be intimate access to the vloggers’ physical and emotional whereabouts. Or the vlogger engages in what can be considered a digital autobiographical act, taking advantage of the multimodality of the media to tell stories of trans that can animate and motivate others to dare to be visible or claim an identity as trans. No matter the style of the trans vlogs, one could argue that they have certain artistic elements, being a site for memory preservation as well as for experiential identity communication and negotiation. And yet, some vloggers become particularly invested in artistic explorations and communications—either as part of visualizing transition as a mind-expanding experience or as part of taking full advantage of the potentials of participatory media culture, and branding oneself as a special and creative voice worth noticing.

## Chapter 6

### YouTube Is My Hood: Creating an Online Trans Community

This chapter draws on, redevelops, and brings together the growing but still sparse research on trans community building online as well as more general attempts to theorize YouTube as a community. What I intend to rethink and develop further is on the one hand what the potentials of web 2.0 can enable with respect to connecting and mobilizing trans people online and on the other hand how a sense of community is created and expressed among the trans vloggers as a specific group of people. I explore how notions of a YouTube trans community circulate, and how this is designated meaning among the trans vloggers. How is the online trans community established and maintained? What are the multiple roles of the vloggers within this community—and what mechanism of inclusion and exclusion are at play?

#### Virtual Communities

Howard Rheingold was one of the first researchers to work with computer-mediated communication as providing a community in its own right. He coined the term “virtual community” (see Rheingold 2000 [1993]), which has become widely discussed within the field of Internet studies and applied to many different modes of online social collectivities. His study of WELL shows a committed group of people who offer one another support and advice as well as intense discussion.<sup>1</sup> As he suggests, community relies on shared practices and do not require temporal and physical/geographical proximity. As he famously states, “Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when

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<sup>1</sup> WELL (Whole Earth “Lectronic Link”) is a conferencing system that enables people around the world to carry on public conversations and exchange private electronic mail.



enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Ibid.: xx). Rheingold has been one of the most prominent and highlighted agitators in establishing virtual connections as being just as valuable, emotionally stimulating, and authentic as offline relations. As he argues, “For many people, this new medium is a way of breaking out of the virtual world they already live in (Rheingold, quoted in Song 2009: 13). The term “virtual community” has, since its conception in 1993, been contested as well as rethought, often parting the seas between enthusiastic theorists who suggest that online communities are just as fulfilling and meaningful in people’s lives as face-to-face communities and skeptical theorists claiming that online communities are poor imitations of the real thing, lacking mutual obligations and accountability and promoting shallow conceptions of relationship and community (Song 2009: 25). Various developers and marketers have also used the term as a description of their site, hoping to reap the benefits of the term’s warm connotations, not least YouTube (Baym 2010: 73–74). The term “virtual community” has not only attracted very opinionated pro and con arguments but one might also argue that the term has become so widely used that it seems almost empty and meaningless (Song 2009: 32). As José van Dijck critically remarks:

“Communities,” in relation to media, thus refers to a large range of user groups, some of which resemble grassroots movements, but the overwhelming majority coincide with consumer groups or entertainment platforms (van Dijck 2009: 45).

And yet it (still) provides a resonant handle for developers, analysts, marketers, theorists, and users (Baym 2010: 75)—not least the YouTube trans users, which is exactly why I find it useful as a characterization of the “belonging” created in or through the vlogs.

The studies of, for example, Patricia Lange; Dana Rotman and

Jennifer Preece; Michael Strangelove; and Jean Burgess and Joshua Green theorize YouTube as a community, outlining some of the overall mechanism of community building on or through YouTube. The work of Patricia Lange offers an ethnographic study, arguing among other things that creating and circulating videos enacts a social relationship between those who make and those who view videos (Lange 2007: 368). Likewise Dana Rotman and Jennifer Preece argue that YouTube users seek to form friendship and find a sense of companionship through shared interests; thus, to many users, contact with their peers is the most important foundation of the community (Rotman and Preece 2010: 325). Overall I see the trans YouTube community functioning within the criteria suggested by Rotman and Preece as well as by Nancy Baym. Rotman and Preece work with a definition of online community as based on a shared purpose or common interests, participants' interaction, user-generated content, the existence of clear boundaries that define the purpose and practices of the community, and a unique communal content (Ibid.: 320). Nancy Baym outlines similar characteristics: the sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities, and interpersonal relationships (Baym 2010: 75). Building on this line of research, I am interested in offering an analysis of perceptions and constructions of community and community building among the trans vloggers. I see these vloggers as one among many subcultures/subcommunities on YouTube. In that sense I do not approach YouTube as *one* community but comprised of many communities that share some commonalities but that also have group-specific characteristics. However, YouTube is also a site for archiving and circulating material from broadcast and mass media as well as for publishing self-made video works, none of which (necessarily) involves or engage a community as such. As discussed in chapter 1, YouTube is both a "place" for communication among persons and a "space" for cultural

production and publication. Within recent years media celebrities and their parent corporations have increasingly started using YouTube, which some users consider an exploitation of the overall YouTube community (Strangelove 2010: 113).

### **Forming Trans Identity and Community Online**

Many researchers argue that the growth of home computer use in the 1990s was crucial in the development of trans communities. The increase in trans visibility and awareness is, as several researchers point out, made possible by especially the Internet (see Whittle 1998, 2006: xii; Shapiro 2004; Cromwell 1999: 15). Transgender law scholar and advocate Steven Whittle highlights cyberspace as important for trans political activism, enabling the creation and promotion of a new self-identification category, “transgender” (Whittle 1998: 390). Likewise, Susan Stryker notes that the term “transgender” seems to have increased exponentially around 1995, fueled in part by the expansion of the World Wide Web (Stryker 2006a: 6).

The importance of the Internet for trans people is also highlighted by Eva Shapiro, who bases her research on interviews conducted with ten US transgender activists. Shapiro emphasizes the political potentials of the Internet, helping trans people educate themselves, organize community and protests, and challenge the pathologization of trans identities. As she argues: “The Internet has developed into more than a tactic or tool social movements employ; it has become a space—albeit a virtual one—within which organizing and activism can happen” (Shapiro 2004: 172). The Internet has in many ways become a “new public space” (Ibid.: 177). It is also an invaluable resource for recruiting new members, as it bridges geographical boundaries, is accessible at all hours and does not require simultaneous presence for communication (Ibid.: 173). The increased use of the Internet by trans people and communities has, according to Shapiro, fostered a “third wave of transgender activism” that blossomed in the mid-

to the late 1990s (Ibid.: 169). She considers the Internet to be central in the empowerment of trans subjects: “prior to the Internet, it was possible for trans people to have no knowledge of anyone else like themselves” and they were therefore “reliant on the medical profession and the few trans support organizations for information” (Ibid.: 170).

Darryl B. Hill has a similar conclusion in his Canadian study on the importance of the Internet in the lives of trans people through life-story interviews with twenty-eight members of Toronto’s trans community, collecting data from 1996 to 2001 (Hill 2005: 35). His conclusion is that the majority of the respondents relied on technology to come to terms with their gender, connect with others like themselves, and develop a more sophisticated sense of issues facing trans as an individual and collective identity category. Ultimately, technology reduced their alienation and isolation and facilitated connections (Ibid.: 49). Hill notes that it seems as if “we come to know ourselves by seeing our selves reflected back to us through information and communication technology in a way never available before” (Ibid.: 28). The Internet offers 24/7 access, in a relatively anonymous environment, encouraging a sense of freedom and willingness to experiment (Ibid.). One is able to explore an undeveloped aspect of one’s identity online, which can pave the way for an integration of that dimension into one’s offline self, reducing shame for less accepted gendered or sexual desires (Ibid.).

Sociologists DeAnn Gauthier and Nancy Chaudoir offer an analysis of trans male self-representation, collected from websites, chat rooms, message boards, web rings, and private chat groups (Gauthier and Chaudoir 2004: 381). Gauthier and Chaudoir pinpoint, among other things, how trans men self-educate through the use of the Internet and they argue that the Internet becomes a crucial instrument in the “struggle to achieve manhood” (Ibid.: 380–381, 383).

In a recent ethnographic survey study highlighting the lives of a

wide variety of trans people in the United States, Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin also emphasize the importance of the Internet. Not only do trans people have a dramatically increased access to information with the Internet, but it also enables one to have contact with other trans people at a much earlier age. As they highlight, growing up before the advent of the Internet and before there was a more extensive trans representation, trans people “typically had little or no understanding of their feelings—often thinking there was something wrong with them or that they were ‘the only one’” (Beemyn and Rankin 2011: 54). The Internet has not only supplied trans people with information but also a growing visibility and awareness about the diversity of trans identities (Ibid.: 59). Many of the respondents used the Internet to meet and develop friendships with other trans people (Ibid.). Many of these meetings are initially and at times primarily taking place online (Ibid.: 44–45). This raises important questions (that Beemyn and Rankin do not raise or address)—namely, what notions and visualizations of trans circulate online, and what does it mean that these first experiences/meetings with other trans people typically take place in or through the Internet?

Beemyn and Rankin’s recent study reconfirms some of the arguments put forth by Steven Whittle back in 1998. As he argues, cyberspace offers a realm where “one can authenticate oneself as trans,” something that the offline world has failed to afford (Whittle 1998: 392). Using the Gender Trust, a UK self-help membership group for trans people as an example, Whittle argues that the Internet sparks a knowledge and experience sharing that results in slowly moving away from a medicalized self-definition (Ibid.: 401). As he states, “The mechanics of the new identity formation that has taken place in the community could not have existed outside of cyberspace” (Ibid.: 405). Whittle stresses the importance of establishing cyber-communities (“a family of invisible friends”), enabling trans people to mobilize, organize, and participate in national and

international gender politics (Ibid.: 402, 393). This was very effective in creating awareness about, for example, Brandon Teenas's murder, resulting in trans people traveling to the Courthouse as the trial of the killer John Lotter opened, demonstrating with local authorities, and with extensive television coverage. As Whittle argues: "Prior to the development of cyberspace and a trans community, such an event would not have happened, and Brandon Teena's death would have disappeared into a void" (Ibid.: 394). Writing in 1998, Whittle bases his arguments on Usenet groups and public lists, thus a primarily text-based Internet where "the body can be escaped," as he highlights (Ibid.: 399). According to Whittle, some of the most liberating aspects of the Internet are the non-visibility of the body, thus one can "talk freely about their experiences" without presenting or worrying about their (failed) body image (Ibid.: 400). Whittle argues: "Cyberspace has presented a safe area where body image and presentation are not among the initial aspects of personal judgment and social hierarchy within the transgender community" (Ibid.). His argument is in line with much of the Internet research in the '90s that profiled the disembodiment of computer communication, and the room this leaves for gender experimentation, expression, and play (see, for example, Stone 1996; Turkle 1997; Wakeford 2002). The disembodiment enables, as visual sociologist Nina Wakeford states back in 1997, a "queering of the electronic texts" (Wakeford 2002: 409). Likewise, the existing research on trans people's use of the Internet conducted by Shapiro, Hill, Gauthier and Chaudoir, and Whittle is directed toward a text-based Internet and what kind of possibilities it enables in connection with trans politics and community building. They are all commenting on and analyzing trans visibility and community formation through listservs, e-mail, message boards, and websites. To my knowledge no studies have been conducted on the importance of web 2.0 in claiming and asserting a trans identity. Building on and yet also extending this line of research I will

look into what difference the audiovisuality makes for trans mobilization and for creating a sense of community.

### **The Affordances of the Medium**

YouTube as a platform and the vlog as a medium have certain technological affordances that influence (but do not determine) the communication and the social connections that become possible. YouTube as a platform enables communication and social connections through the search system and the featuring of related videos. The communication itself can take the shape of videos, text comments, and inbox messages, which all of the vloggers in this study engage in actively to various degrees. They answer questions in the vlogs received either via written messages, comments, or video responses, which becomes ways of establishing interaction and conversation. The function of the “personal channel page” is to enable the vlogger to keep track of members to whom the YouTuber subscribes, friends, and subscribers. After Google acquired YouTube, its search system changed, thus YouTube users are steered toward particular videos by means of coded mechanisms that rely on promotion and ranking tactics. Although the site’s users influence the promotion and ranking tactics by rating and commenting on videos, these rankings and ratings are processed with the help of algorithms whereby the technical details remain undisclosed (van Dijck 2009: 45). Both Erica and Elisabeth express that it has become far more difficult to discover what Erica describes as “low-key videos.” The trans vloggers have to be more strategic (through tagging, having people link to one’s video, and making video responses) in order to become known to the community, thus it takes a lot more than it used to, to be “on the top of the search” or to appear at all, and commercial news clips from ABC tend to pop up before user-created content when searching for “transgender” (Interview tape 1 with Erica: 18:52–30:08). This suggests an increasing capitalization of

YouTube, listing mass media and corporately sponsored videos ahead of those that were user-created. It also suggests that YouTube has become far more hierarchical, as users who already have a certain number of views and subscribers are branded and shown much more often in the news feed or related videos than new users or users with only a small number of views/followers. New or fairly unknown vloggers are more likely than ever to stay unnoticed.

The vlog as a medium enables an audiovisual presence that breaks with the online anonymity and disembodiment that was pointed out as a particularly noteworthy signifier in the research on the text-based Internet communication of the 1990s and early 2000s as mentioned earlier. In the interview I conducted with Erica, she touches upon what this audiovisual presence adds to the notion and sense of community. As she states:

I guess what really sets it [YouTube] apart from other social media is that you can see it—you can actually watch somebody as they talk about their transition—and if a picture is worth a thousand words, then how much is a video worth? [...] I think it provides a very intimate connection because you are actually watching (Interview tape 1:41:12–43:12).

As Erica suggests, it may help create “intimate connections,” thus it enables another level of recognition and social presence that seems to strengthen the personal connections between community members, adding what one might argue is a stronger emotional affinity. It is, as Diamond states, “easy access to people’s lives” (Interview tape 2: 8:56–9:00), suggesting that the vlogs offer a glimpse of someone’s life. Or as James says, “It puts a human face to it” (Interview: 1:37:44–1:40:47), highlighting how vlogging connects trans as an identity category to a human image and to a person.

Video enables one to express oneself verbally while also utilizing



visual cues, contributing to the richness of the message conveyed (Rotman and Preece 2010: 329). The affordances of the vlog can be said to be the communication of multiple cues: social cues (hear the voice and see reactions) and nonverbal cues (facial expression, direction of gaze, posture, dress, physical appearance, and bodily orientation) (Baym 2010: 50–52). These cues convey meaning in a way that’s different from a text-based Internet and seem to offer another level of personal interrelatedness that one might argue can help increase a sense of community. One can get a feeling of “knowing” a vlogger not just through what is being said but also through the visual way that they present themselves, as well as the tone and sound of their voice, which then again is connectable to a bodily image.

### **The Conversational Aspects of Vlogging**

The trans vlogs can, in the words of Patricia Lange, be regarded as “videos of affinity” (Lange 2009). As Lange argues, this term encompasses a range of user-created YouTube videos, attempting to establish communicative connections with other people, giving “viewers a feeling of being connected not to a video but to a person who shares mutual beliefs or interests” (Lange 2009: 83). These videos can be targeted or read as containing material for a general audience but they often address a delineated group of people who wish to participate and be connected socially in some way to the video maker (Lange 2009: 73).

What I will attend to in the following is to outline how the trans vlogs establish communicative connections. One of the most pronounced ways of amplifying and encouraging connections between self and others is, as I will argue, through cultivating and engaging with the vlogs as a medium of conversation. This is done in several ways, but first and foremost through the persistent hailing of potentially interested parties. The trans vloggers begin their vlogs with greetings like “Hey, guys” (Erica,

James, Carolyn, Tony); “Hey, everyone” (James, Elisabeth); “Hi, darlings” (Mason); “Hey, what’s up” (Diamond); or just “Hey” (Wheeler), looking directly into the camera as if they are talking to an unspecified somebody, nevertheless an Other. The attention is most often directed toward a social network of individuals, trans and/or sympathetic others who are assumed to be about to go through or are going through the same process or have similar experiences. The titles of the vlogs (“Just to update you guys,” “Where have I been,” or “still alive,” and so forth) also frame them as oriented toward human connections, marking the vlogs as attempts to create or maintain connection and as a way to “keep in touch.”

There is a pronounced conversational engagement in/through the vlogs, pointing to and relying on exchange and interaction. As Elisabeth states at the end of a vlog, “Talk to you all soon,” leaning forward to kiss the camera screen good-bye (October 20, 2007). Elisabeth here in words as well as action anticipates and embraces others behind or on the other side of the screen. Or, as Erica states:

I am literally sitting in my room talking to a camera that I am holding in my hand, but that’s not what it feels like to me—what it feels like is I’m sitting here having a conversation with 468 people [the number of subscribers she had to that date]—you guys are here and I’m talking to you [...] it’s really wonderful what YouTube can do and what it can do for people (March 22, 2007).

What Erica stresses is the vlog as a vehicle of communication and social connection. The camera is positioned as the point of connection as well as a stand-in for the interlocutors, enabling her to have a “conversation” with dispersed others.

A conversation or interaction is also what is encouraged when the trans vloggers in this study constantly invite feedback and discussion. They typically ask for other vloggers/viewers opinions on a discussed topic, ask for other people’s experiences or advice on a personal dilemma, or ask what topics to engage with in their next vlog. However, vloggers like

Erica also offer themselves as that “somebody” whom others can ask for advice or who can provide information: “If there is anything you’d like to know, just ask me,” Erica continuously states (January 16, 2009).

Encouraging interaction indicates a desire and a need for conversation and exchange, helping to establish feelings of connection with people whom one does not (necessarily) meet in time and space. However, asking for feedback also seems to have become an integrated part of YouTube vlogging culture, something that one has to encourage if one wants to be recognizable as a vlogger and as part of a YouTube vlogging community.

Erica, Elisabeth, Diamond, Mason, James, and Tony continually comment on or direct attention toward other (trans) people’s vlogs and talk about topics that they have found inspirational or disturbing in other (trans) vlogs. As Mason states, “What people are saying on YouTube is really challenging me intellectually and emotionally—it’s making me feel connected in a way I haven’t really felt in a long time” (September 19, 2010j). Watching videos and/or reading people’s messages or comments is here pointed out as an intellectually and emotionally stimulating act, which makes Mason feel connected, as if he were having a (group) conversation with others.

Although the encouragement of interactivity typically involves various kinds of virtual response, it can also engender a more explicit merging of online and offline life. Erica has made several of these requests, encouraging people to design a cover for a music album that she has recorded. The winner will get a knitted hat that she has made herself (March 7, 2008). In the following vlogs the designed covers are displayed and up for vote. Skills and material artifacts are exchanged, mediated, and facilitated by YouTube. After having launched her website with specially designed merchandise with her logo on it, using YouTube as a platform for branding it, Erica requests for people to come to a particular bar for Pride wearing a T-shirt with her logo. She offers to buy everybody a drink who

wears the T-shirt or to approach her, enabling a “YouTube trans fest, gay pride or something” (June 16, 2009). Erica here acts as the facilitator and the brand that brings people together. And YouTube becomes the platform from which to mobilize people.

### **Mobilizing Through the Vlogs**

The vloggers seem to “talk” with or about one another—and there is a cross-referencing that happens between the trans vlogs. Some vloggers also appear audiovisually in one another’s vlogs either as part of a staged group discussion or as a collaborative project where they typically develop a script together and then each makes footage that they can edit into one vlog. James and Diamond have facilitated some of these discussion groups but not with each other, and Erica and Mason have made collaborative video projects but again not with each other. They do, however, “come together” in a vlog by Mason, where he associates the mobilization among trans vloggers on YouTube with the mobilization that happened in the American gay movement in the 1970s (portrayed in the movie *Milk* that he has just watched). As he states, “It has occurred to me recently that we’re in the middle of that now—trans people are in the middle of a very similar movement but it’s just a very different animal because we are connecting in large parts through technology” (September 19, 2010j). The vlog ends to the tones of the Verve’s pompous “Bitter Sweet Symphony” and then the written text: “If you are watching this video, you are part of a movement.” Then follows video clips from prominent trans activist/academics and then clips from different trans vlogs; among those are the vlogs by Erica and James (Ibid.). YouTube is here pointed out as a site for connection and mobilization of trans people. Vloggers like Erica and James are highlighted as Internet activists, and the viewer is addressed as “part of a movement.” The addressed “you” watching is assumed to be installed as part of a trans movement, and watching is highlighted as an activist act in and of itself.

Vlogging is here appointed a key role as an important aspect of creating awareness/advocacy on the web—as well as being what disseminates information about transition and trans identity. Vlogging is what endows trans people with a voice and, not least, an image as suggested by Mason. As Diamond also notes, “It makes us relatable and not this mysterious, far-off, alienated thing that people should be afraid of” (Interview tape 2: 31:00–31:40).

The visual medium is highly important as it makes visible an identity than many people only have knowledge of in fictionalized form and that is often otherwise invisible because one is not detectable or noticeable as trans, either because one is too recognizable as one’s assigned sex or too recognizable as one’s self-identified sex. Previously, many trans people were reluctant to be visible as trans because they feared stigmatization and wished to “pass” (Green 2006), but that seems to be changing with these vlogs.

Computer technology becomes a powerful tool that gives trans people access to political visibility and a possibility to challenge their under- or misrepresentation in traditional print and broadcast media. As Kate O’Riordan argues:

Trans identity has not traditionally appeared in national broadcast and print media as a self-determined identity, but as subject of medical and technical discourses [...] The internet has become relevant in constituting and enhancing an active political subject position in transgender mobilisation (O’Riordan 2005b: 184).

In this vein the vlogs can be read as online global activism and mobilization, assisting in challenging the image of transsexuals as passive and pathologized subjects.

An essential part of mobilizing through vlogging is the continuous verbalization of and directing attention toward a “we” or “us” among the trans vloggers in this study, implicitly referring to trans people whether as

viewers or as producers. As Erica states, it “is incredible what *we* are doing,” thus “it is *us—we* all know each other on here—*we* all comment on each other” [emphasis mine] (March 26, 2007). Statements like these can be said to both create and express a sense of community, anticipating and assuming an imagined “we.” This imagined “we” helps create trans not just as an individual identity but also as a collective and political identity. Likewise, the vloggers in this study talk about or refer to “our community” as a matter of fact. The common use of “we” and “us” also (potentially) instills confidence and inspires action. When Erica says, “We’re gonna show them—we’re gonna change the world” (Ibid.)—she is communicating a collective “we,” a collective identity and (potentially) offering encouragement for trans people who might be scattered around America and around the globe, feeling alone and isolated. The “we” and “us” is not given any geographical specificity but relies on a self-assumed identity category, which implies that YouTube is addressed and constructed as a potentially global online trans community, connecting individuals across geographical divides, challenging spatial borders, and opening up the construction of transnational communities or transnational interconnectedness.

### **In Lack of Offline Support and Communities**

Many of the vloggers express both a strong connection and an obligation to the YouTube trans community. When I interviewed the vloggers, most of them listed a lack of community and a need for support as a motivating factor for starting to vlog. In that sense the YouTube trans community functions as a means of responding to a sense of loneliness and lack of meaning in the offline world, expressing “an interest *in* the community itself as a shared project: a shared longing to belong” (Ferreday 2009: 36). Erica started vlogging specifically for a sense of community because:

I just had all these things on my mind about transition stuff. I didn't have any other transgender friends [...] I just didn't have anyone to talk to about things that I was going through related to my transition (Interview tape 1: 02:59–08:40).

However, there was not a trans community as such when she started, and she explains how she had tried to search for “transgender” on YouTube and nothing came up. But she started anyway hoping to find community. When Mason goes online a couple of years later to seek support, he anticipates finding community in another way than Erica did. As Mason explains, he started vlogging because he worked with trans people as a psychologist and therefore could not participate in the offline support groups and resources available in his area where he would meet colleagues and clients. Thus he became “isolated in a time when I needed support.” He quickly “got hooked on the community online because I needed a support system” (Interview: 9:55–11:11).

YouTube becomes a forum removed from the YouTubers' immediate physical locality and constructed as an alternative and somewhat utopian “place,” a networked communion that satisfies the desire to belong.<sup>2</sup> Connecting with the YouTube community can take place at all hours of the day, thus it is both the first thing the vloggers do when they wake up and the last thing they do before they fall asleep. Mason, Wheeler, and Erica vlog late at night when they cannot sleep and often explicitly highlight that they're trying to keep their voice down not to wake up family members or partners. Elisabeth has made several vlogs after coming home from clubbing and supposedly needs somebody to talk to, somebody to discuss the night out with. She is, as she states in one of these vlogs, “lonely” when coming home, and vlogging has therefore become “a ritual.” She talks about how nice it is to have her cat to come home to, and always being greeted with happiness and affection (August 19, 2007). I

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<sup>2</sup> Exploring what kind of emotional support the online community provides will be the center of chapter 7.

wonder whether the vlog and the sociality that it promises works similarly as this “somebody” she can come home to.

### **Establishing Friendship Online**

Erica, Elisabeth, Carolyn, James, and Mason express having established offline friendships through YouTube, thus they use YouTube as a platform to create *new* social relations. This distinguishes the use of YouTube from the way that most SNS (social network sites) are predominantly used, namely as a way to maintain preestablished relations (Boyd and Ellison 2008). The vlog becomes a site for establishing, developing, and maintaining these friendships. At times online friends appear in the vlogs as well, which for instance is the case in some of Erica’s vlogs, dedicated to document the first offline meeting with friends made online (for example April 22, 2007; December 15, 2007). Likewise, James makes several vlogs with people he has met through YouTube. In one of these vlogs he escorts a younger trans guy to the gender clinic to get his first shot of testosterone. When the nurse asks them how they know each other James replies: “From YouTube—that’s how we all meet each other!” (March 7, 2009).

When I interviewed Erica and asked her about transporting friends back and forth between offline and online life she said: “It kind of goes one way—or it kind of did for me.” As she explains to me, she was living her offline life as stealth and therefore did not want to engage the people online but wanted to create new relations with people whom she could share and discuss transitioning (Interview: 45:47–47:10). James also explains to me how his offline friends do not follow his vlogs; only online friends potentially cross the online/offline divide (Interview: 01:19:00–01:19:52). Wheeler does not seem to cultivate YouTube as a place for making new friends to the same degree as Erica, Elisabeth, James, and Mason because of “the stranger danger,” as he puts it. But he has offline friends who “stay updated” by watching his vlog on YouTube (Interview:



33:04–35:19). Mason highlights having created a lot of friendships through vlogging, which for him is a good and beneficial way to make friends. As he explains to me, “There is a certain ease and convenience in it [creating friendships through YouTube] because at the time people have been watching my videos for a year or two they *do* know a lot about me” (Interview: 26:17–29:14). What Mason here pinpoints is the vlogs as containers for personal information, allowing peers/viewers a certain amount of knowledge of and idea about him as a person that otherwise would take a while to gain if one was a new friend without prior knowledge of him.

### **Negotiating Different Roles**

Entering the YouTube community and becoming an established vlogger also entails having, or at least feeling that one has, a social responsibility. Erica, Elisabeth, Wheeler, and James seem to feel the need to update regularly and to answer questions and comments. They talk about being overwhelmed by all the messages they receive and keep promising to try to give everyone a proper answer, however, as they explain, they have difficulties finding the time to do so because of work/school and their busy everyday offline life. The vloggers find it necessary to apologize continuously, as if vlogging demands frequent updates and frequent personal interaction and that they feel responsible to do so. As Avery Dame suggests in his unpublished master’s thesis on the role of the trans male vloggers: “This sense of responsibility would seem to suggest they understand turn-taking as an expectation, even if there is no clear sense of turn allocation” (Dame 2012: 8).<sup>3</sup> Again, many of the trans YouTubers engage to some degree in vlogging as if it were a kind of conversation.

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<sup>3</sup> The American scholar Avery Dame has conducted one of the only studies that I know of on trans vlogging on YouTube. His master’s thesis study is focused on what he coins the “trans expert” within the trans male vlogging community on YouTube. His study concerns an analysis of the vlogger’s speech, identifying specific features of expert

However, I also interpret the sense of responsibility as an integral part of the different roles that the vloggers take on and negotiate within the community, which neither can be characterized as a classical TV star nor as a close friend but can occupy a range of positions in-between. These roles vary from vlog to vlog as well as over time, making it difficult to position the vloggers as exclusively one thing or the other. However, certain types of roles with overlapping characteristics seem to dominate: acting as expert, educator, role model, micro-celebrity, and yet “just like you.” What seems to be an important part of obtaining expert status is the phenomenological experience of transitioning, and in that sense the number of procedures and the time that one has been (medically) transitioning does seem to matter, but must be combined with having researched the topic and being willing to share and engage with other (trans) vloggers. Contrary to the medical expert, the trans vlogging expert does not diagnose but offers advice, often by disclosing one’s own “path,” feelings, and procedures. These vloggers’ expertness are different from the expert status that trans people are/were allowed by mainstream media—for example, talk shows where trans people typically are presented as experts on their own subjective condition or feelings of being trans but not on its origin, cause, and political context (Gamson 1998; Namaste 2005). Being an expert overlaps with being an educator, but as an educator the focus is on lending oneself to communicating knowledge/information and offering advice and answering questions. As an educator, one typically perceives one’s role as a matter of helping other trans people and helping to create visibility for trans people. The vlogger also seems to take on and/or is appointed the status of being a role model, which results in a certain kind of responsibility in connection with availability, online presence, and how one copes with one’s life situation. Being a microcelebrity is a role one is appointed by others, and it implies that one

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speech. The unpublished master’s thesis is titled: “I’m Your Hero? Like Me?: The Role of ‘Expert’ in the Trans Male Vlogs,” 2012.

has a certain number of followers and, to a certain degree, is able to incarnate all of the characteristics mentioned above. Being positioned in any or all of these roles is often experienced as a paradoxical and complex negotiation as the trans vloggers typically perceive themselves as “just one of you.” Having a special status in the trans YouTube community is therefore both embraced as well as disavowed.

### **Being a Micro-Celebrity or “Internet Famous”**

Erica, Elisabeth, Diamond, Wheeler, and James can, in the words of Internet scholar Theresa Senft, be characterized as a “micro-celebrity” (Senft 2008), known by people within a (online) trans or queer community. When I interviewed James, he talked extensively about being positioned as a celebrity whom many viewers/vloggers approach with awe, reverence, and admiration—a role that he was surprised to be given and that he felt uncomfortable with. As he states, “People expect me to be that celebrity personality” (Interview: 48:42–48:55). Erica has also become “internet famous,” as she labels it (December 18, 2009, and repeated in the interview), and like James she tells me that many people recognize her on the streets, not least within offline trans communities. She also explains how many people at her current work at a drop-in center cry out: “Oh my gosh, you’re [Erica], you do the videos!” when meeting her for the first time. As she states, “It took a lot of getting used to for me to be comfortable with that because I share so much personal stuff online” (Interview tape 1: 12:07–16:54). Both James and Erica tell me that they have received thousands of inbox messages over the years, thanking them and asking for advice.

Theresa Senft develops the concept of micro-celebrity in connection with her investigation of webcam girls, and she describes it as “a new style of online performance” (Senft 2008: 25) facilitated by actively using technologies like video, blogs, and social networking sites. The

relationship between the viewers and an online micro-celebrity is different from that of Hollywood stars. “On the Web, popularity depends upon a connection to one’s audience, rather than an enforced separation from them” (Senft 2008: 26). Whereas the traditional star has an audience that they are distanced from, the micro-celebrity has a community that they are responsive to (Senft 2008: 116). Being a micro-celebrity and sustaining one’s popularity, one has to continuously negotiate with the community what one means as a person and as a “brand.” It also means being embedded in a community and yet being celebrated as something special. As James tells me in the interview:

I guess I do see myself as one of the stronger voices, but when they put me on the celebrity pedestal that’s not the same thing [...] I try to be on the same level too, we’re all in this together [...] educator but not necessarily in a position above them (Interview: 37:00–41:49).

James expresses ambivalence about being assigned the role of a micro-celebrity, because he considers himself “an equal.” However, he feels prompted to take it on and does so because he has “more experience or expertise” (Interview: 47:00–47:27). He encourages people to relate to him as an ordinary person (“one of you”) and yet he has gained the role of being an authority and a role model.

Erica started out as a rather timid-looking vlogger making videos in the basement, looking for support and community, but she seems quite quickly to take on the role of being a trans advocate. As she initially states, “I don’t ever wanna view myself as a role model—maybe I am but I never set out to be” (February 6, 2007). She continuously emphasizes her “ordinariness” and the importance of the viewers. As she states:

There is nothing special about me, there is nothing I do that a regular person doesn’t do—I just put myself out there, and because I put myself out there, you guys watch, and because you guys watch and care I keep putting myself out

there—and I put more of myself out there, I put more of my heart into it and because I do that more of you guys watch—it's like a snowball (March 5, 2007).

What Erica suggests is that the openness and exposure is partly facilitated by the audience and their positive feedback. She is vlogging for an audience, and continued attention and interaction is what encourages her to vlog. Being a successful entrepreneur who has reached a certain stage in her transition has properly helped her become a role model, thus she is “making it,” as her viewers note when stating why they watch her videos (March 15, 2007). To make it is to be fairly passable, have a job and a girlfriend, as she explains herself. She is putting herself “out there,” and acting as a role model and yet she also continuously empathizes with other (less-known) vloggers or viewers, highlighting a kinship between them and her going through transition: “I was there too.” Or, as she states, “It’s hard to explain if you haven’t been there [...] and it can really get you down,” claiming inside knowledge and relatedness (I am/was one of you) while also encouraging people by stating an example: “It’s the hardest thing that I have ever done” but it was “worthwhile and it can be for you, too” (June 20, 2007). She generalizes her personal experiences without universalizing them as a way to encourage and mobilize.

Erica takes on the role of being an authority, but she is also very self-ironic about it, making several humoristic sketches about being a vlogger whose sudden fame has gone to their head (August 7, 2007) or being a “shameless self-promoter” (June 17, 2009). After accusations about being “a subscriber whore” she demonstratively signs the contract to become a YouTube partner (January 22, 2008) and she also turns an accusation about being a “professional female impersonator” trying to infiltrate the trans community, into a humoristic sketch (February 5, 2010). It is hard to tell whether these accusations are from other trans vloggers or “outsiders,” but it is nevertheless interesting that these kinds of accusations start to flourish once Erica gets more attention and work

more focused on branding herself as a YouTube trans voice. Part of it might be the result of cases like lonelygirl15 being exposed as a filmmaking experiment, as discussed in chapter 1. However, it also seems to suggest how impossible it is/was for many to imagine trans people being willing or able to expose themselves and create a space for themselves as trans experts/celebrities.

Wheeler has also become a micro-celebrity in the sense that he seems to be the object of many viewers' sexualized consumption. As such, he often receives written comments about how "cute" he is. He has become a kind of idol, whom many of his peers seem to look up to and desire for his positive outlook, his supportive family, his upper-middle-class lifestyle, his creative skills, his education, as well as for medically transitioning young and not least for his good looks. As he explains to me, "All of a sudden I became a TV show that they watched every other week—they expected to be entertained" (Interview: 35:44–37:13). Wheeler has become a media persona whose popularity on the one hand seems to depend upon the connection that he has to his audience (being a micro-celebrity), but on the other hand he also seems to be subjected to some of the expectations of a more traditional media star; he has to be entertaining and give a good show.

Likewise, Mason tells me that he has a couple of stalkers who have followed him for years: "It feels like I'm their reality TV and they think of me as their character and some of them think of me as kind of angelic and others think of me as terrible [...] either of those makes me really uncomfortable" (Interview: 55:03–56:02). There are certain aspects of the vlogs that have some similarities with reality television, thus both are part of what has been called the turn toward "a preoccupation with the 'everyday terms of living'" (Lewis 2008: 448). It is everyday life as a drama where the camera carefully registers the emotions and reactions of the people on-screen as they try to change their life, self, or habits. However,

the vloggers are embedded in and interact with their audience in another way, which makes it uncomfortable for many vloggers to be perceived as a reality-television spectacle or a traditional star.

### **Wanting to be a Positive Role Model**

Being appointed a role model or taking on the role calls for a certain behavior or involves having a certain responsibility as James pinpoints and reflects upon in a vlog: “I just realized, so many people look up to me, and what would it mean if I hurt myself or kill myself? You know, it would just show this whole population that yeah, this thing does beat you and its hard to get through” (April 30, 2009). To be a public figure on YouTube seems to encourage James to talk openly and honestly about his experiences as a trans man—not overlooking the bad experiences: “Ethically I am committed to the truth, I’m not gonna sit here and lie to all these viewers [...] and tell you that it’s easy to be trans all the time” (December 10, 2009). However, it also seems as if James does not want to contribute to the dominance of pathologizing and victimizing representations of trans people as inherently mentally ill or unstable. James also touches upon this in our interview, stating how “living in public” makes him hesitate to post more “depressing things,” either because it makes people “upset” or because he does not want that to be the only “image” of a trans person that people see. However, he also feels the need to address the hardships of being trans (Interview 01:03:08–01:03:27). Being a role model seems to involve balancing being open and earnest and yet being positive influence, which is a difficult task in a public forum. Elisabeth makes a vlog after a night out feeling “really depressed.” She says, “If I keep getting so depressed I need to go to someplace and get long-term professional help” (February 16, 2008). After this vlog Elisabeth has apparently received a lot of comments, messages, and phone calls from online and offline friends who wanted to check up on her, which highlights

YouTube as a community where a “depressed” vlog causes reactions from one’s peers. This makes her record another vlog thanking people for their concern and reassuring them she is OK. As she reasons:

It was hard to do that video because it’s not something I generally like to portray. Transition is a bitch—it’s overcoming a lot of fears [...] I do want to put it out there to get a little balance to transition because usually when I’m in a bad mood I don’t post it because there is enough negativity, and I guess I realized that it wasn’t negative (February 20, 2008).

There is, as she states, “enough negativity” around trans identity, which makes her reluctant to contribute to trans as an inherently miserable position and yet she realizes that expressing her emotions of hardship is not necessarily “negative” but can be a way to “take a look at yourself and deal” (Ibid.). However, she also expresses feeling overwhelmed and powerless by people asking her for help online, writing her with their problems of depression, which she is unable to solve or offer advice on. As she states, “I just don’t know how to help, quite frankly,” thus she can only redirect them to a professional psychiatrist (April 21, 2009). What Elisabeth addresses is a feeling of responsibility, having peers approach her with problems and questions that are too heavy, positioning her as a kind of expert or role model who is capable of helping or offering a qualified answer to their issues.

Wheeler also seems to struggle with negotiating these different roles after having become “so popular.” As he tells me in the interview: “I try not to be too personal” and “I never make videos when I’m really upset,” thus he is always more or less in the same “mood” when vlogging. The topics are personal, as he tells me, but he tries not to share too much of his personal life (Interview: 37:40–44:28). He is usually smiling a lot and keeping a lighthearted tone in his vlogs. It seems as if appearing depressed or sad is something that he deliberately tries to avoid. In one of his vlogs enumerating his weekly changes he states, “My arm muscles are



really big, my stomach is really hairy, and over the past few days I have been experiencing a lot of angst” (June 18, 2009). He lists these things quickly and carelessly while smiling and says, “But it’s OK, I’ll be fine.” Thus, even when talking about hardships in his life he seems overtly positive, keeping a happy face. He is also explicit about being invested in making positive vlogs: “Yeah, I’m trying to talk about happy things because I’ve been in such a funk,” he says after having discussed his bad mood due to health problems and hormonal turbulence, making it necessary to have a hysterectomy (July 24, 2011). He wants the vlog to end on a happy note and declares that he is in love with his best friend (Ibid.). Judging from the comments his videos receive, many YouTubers see him as a role model, in whom they find inspiration and support, thus he often receives compliments on his “positive outlook” (for example, “You give me a lift each week,” text comment March 2, 2010). Being positive seems to be the style of his vlogging but it also seems to be what has granted him the large number of followers and amount of attention.

### **Moving on or Starting Anew**

Erica, Elisabeth, James, and Wheeler express moving toward taking on the role of being an educator and feeling less and less a need for support. With time it becomes “for other people’s benefit,” as Elisabeth states (Interview: 12:13–15:00) or to “help other people and educate,” as Wheeler states (Interview 35:44–37:13).

Elisabeth suggests that there might be a certain type of trans people who start vlogging, whom she characterizes as:

People that are isolated [...] also people that are very expressive [...] people that really want feedback [...] it’s hard to categorize but I think there is some commonalities to the willingness to put yourself out there or at least put your work out there (Interview: 22:26–26:32).

It is, as Elisabeth suggests, trans people who are in need of community and support and/or people who enjoy being cultural producers and welcome having their image out there. Elisabeth also highlights how many people stop vlogging after having reached a certain point in their transition, and she expresses feeling tempted to do so herself because she is “burned out” (Interview: 52:51–59:00). What Elisabeth argues is that vlogging for her served a supportive role at a crucial moment in her transition but with time becomes exhausting and too time consuming for her. However, some vloggers continue, like James and Erica, which for them seems to be encouraged by a passion for and/or employment within social media as well as a continuous and persevering belief in the (identity) political effects of vlogging.<sup>4</sup> For James, vlogging seems to be both the cause and the effect of his professional interest. As he states, “My interest in vlogging spurred what I’m doing now,” which is being a self-employed consultant within the fields of Internet, social media marketing, digital media production, and web publishing (Interview: 00:11:14–00:15:00). Some of these professional competences seem to be obtained by being an active vlogger, thus vlogging has inspired him and enabled him to make a living out of social media. Vlogging has also encouraged Erica to initiate other websites and platforms, which at times has been her sole employment while looking for (other) jobs. She has most recently initiated a new online platform gathering all trans posting, whether it is on YouTube, LiveJournal, or Twitter, as well as enabling the creation of user profiles, sending private and public messages, creating and joining groups, and chatting with other trans people on the site in real time. However, as previously noted, vlogging has also paved the way for her current position as a counselor for transgender people at a drop-in center (Interview tape 2: 2:00–4:29). In that sense, vlogging has been a stepping-stone to a career as a trans advocate.

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<sup>4</sup> I will discuss this belief in political effects further in chapter 7.

Vlogging also seems to be closely connected to, and an expression of, what Elisabeth calls “entrepreneurial spirit” (Interview 06:13–07:38). This term seems to characterize most of the vloggers in this study, as they cultivate skills and talents in or through the vlogs that proliferate into (new) career opportunities or professional interests. Erica becomes a trans advocate, James a social-media marketing consultant, and Mason a photographer using his YouTube channel as a showroom. Carolyn uses her vlogs as a showcase for her guitar playing, looking for band members and promoting her upcoming heavy-metal record while also raising money for her transition through donations and selling commissioned office supplies. For Diamond and Elisabeth, the vlog seems to have sparked and encouraged awareness about their camera appeal and how to cultivate their virtual presence as an attractive and sellable commodity. For Diamond especially this has evolved into a multifaceted online persona: stand-up artist, model, fashion expert, and singer. For Elisabeth it has directed her toward webcam modeling, which she can do from home and earn good money on (May 31, 2011). In our interview Elisabeth explains to me how vlogging and webcam modeling for her is related. Vlogging involves a certain degree of “exhibitionism that lends itself to webcam modeling” (Interview: 6:13–7:38). Vlogging seems to have made her conscious about lighting, camera settings, and how to behave/pose in front of a camera—and maybe even get in contact with consumers.

### **YouTube as the Small Town that Became the Big City**

When I interviewed the vloggers they all described YouTube in various ways but all highlighted it as a community, often using spatial metaphors. In the interview I conducted with Mason, he compares the online trans community to “a small town” that has its “familiar and regular inhabitants” where “you sort of get to know people over time and you get to know their stories.” However, it also has “open boundaries, so people come and go”

(Interview: 39:37–40:41). For him vlogging is like “talking with friends,” friends he has known for years now, thus vlogging is also a way for him to say “things to them that you may not have a chance to say privately, or it’s more immediate or more relatable if you send them a video than if you sent them an e-mail” (Interview 56:39–57:12). Mason’s understanding of YouTube as a somewhat small community with friends he has known for years does not align with Erica’s—or Elisabeth’s understanding. They both put special emphasis on the changing nature of the trans YouTube community. In Erica’s description, YouTube “went from a small town to a big city.” As she explains: “In a small town you know who your neighbors are and you kind of know everybody’s business but in a big city you don’t necessarily know who’s living next door.” Although not tied to a geographical space, many users tend to think of YouTube as a shared “place” inhabited by community members that typically includes trans video producers as well as trans viewers. As discussed in chapter 1, spatial metaphors are integral to the language often used to describe the Internet, not least notions of interacting in a kind of “place.” YouTube’s present settings and search system makes it more difficult to find new trans vloggers but also supplies one with more options—for example, in terms of making a video private (which was not possible in the beginning). As Erica explains to me, “There’s more people now and more sharing” but “less of a chance of being noticed” (Interview tape 2: 11:51–14:11). Likewise, Elisabeth describes the initial trans YouTube community as “a much smaller group of tight-knit people that were rather visible if you were looking for them,” while now she says, “I think there’s a lot more independent people, individuals” (Interview: 18:16–21:59).

When asking the vloggers about the size of the YouTube trans community, they all replied “big” or “huge” without being able to put an exact number on it. In my interviews with Wheeler and James, they both described the trans community as one of the largest subcultures on

YouTube. Or, as James notes: “Definitely one of the most well-connected, built-up, and participatory cultures that is actually watching and connecting [...] People really follow each other” (Interview: 59:00–59:53). They all express the experience that YouTube is far bigger than it ever was and is continuously growing.

### **Inclusions and Exclusions**

Browsing through the vast number of trans vlogs both before and after having decided upon what vloggers to choose for my case studies I made certain observations and reflections about what characterized YouTube as a trans communal culture. This also became a point of discussion when interviewing the vloggers. In what follows I will address mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion: What new structures and conditions does the trans communal culture on YouTube enable and what relations of power does it assume and strengthen?

Erica, Elisabeth, Wheeler, and James pinpoint how their knowledge is highly informed by belonging primarily to either a trans male or a trans female YouTube community, highlighting that trans women tend to only or primarily subscribe to trans women and vice versa for trans men (Interview with Elisabeth: 35:04–41:49). Neither Erica, Elisabeth, James, or Wheeler describe this as being a matter of disagreement between the two but it mimics what often is a common offline pattern as well, namely what Erica describes as a “disconnect between trans women and trans men,” which she explains as a matter of being “drawn to what they [trans men and trans women] can relate to” (Interview tape 1: 29:30–38:00). Nevertheless, Diamond presents YouTube as a community that is not as “cliquey” as many other offline communities. As she explains to me: “It’s just a place where anybody can come and feast at the table—it’s not about who you know.” She also pinpoints the online community as “more individualistic” (Interview: 8:56–16:58). Likewise, Wheeler states:

“YouTube is like a salad bowl; anybody who wants to do anything can go and do it on YouTube” (Interview: 18:31–24:00). Tony, however, talks about the hierarchies within the trans male YouTube community. There are the “big dogs at the top,” who are “the iconic trans people that everybody watches” and who have been “on T forever” and have “at least one surgery.” This makes it “really hard to get on the ladder,” which he explains as a necessity in order to be able to help people and have one’s help and advice valued. As he states, “It took me a long time to get to a point where people were asking me for help” (October 28, 2009). What Tony brings forth is the notion that the trans male vlogging community is characterized by a hierarchy of testosterone and surgery that allocates the long-time medically transitioned vloggers a certain status. In order to be granted the role of an expert or an educator one typically has to have the phenomenological experience of medically transitioning, and authority is especially given to those who have years of experience. Being asked for advice helps install one as an expert or a role model and can therefore be something that one aspires to. One might, as Tony does, wish to be one of those ubiquitous YouTube trans experts whom “everybody” asks for help, because it gives one a certain position within the community and validates one’s voice.

There seem to be other kinds of negotiations and/or struggles taking place aside from the distribution of voice and power. One of these other points of contestation is the YouTube trans community as a site of gender expression and negotiation. Elisabeth addresses what she sees as an unfortunate tendency to push one’s own agenda onto other people, judging whether they are trans (enough) or not (September 3, 2007). Caroline also recounts receiving a lot of comments about not acting or behaving feminine enough, having the feeling that her gender identity is being policed (September 6, 2011) and feeling pressured by other vloggers to “go full-time” (October 14, 2010). This suggests that YouTube indeed is

a site for evaluation of how one presents one's gender and where the categories of "female" and "male" as well as "trans" are constantly being guarded and negotiated.

When discussing the typical trans vlogger with Elisabeth, she says, "I see much less genderqueer people," highlighting how YouTube tends to be a platform for trans people who identify with and express a more normatively recognizable identity and attractiveness (Interview: 27:20–33:44). Likewise, Wheeler observes how the majority of trans men on YouTube identify as "heterosexual or pansexual," while most of the trans men he knows offline have "at least somewhat of an attraction towards males" (Interview: 27:00–30:00). He sees YouTube as an important part of representing the diversity within the trans identification spectrum, as YouTube "for the most part [...] helps break down the stereotypes." Trans no longer equals drag queen, thus if "you YouTube it [transgender] you find your neighbor next door" (Interview: 01:10:14–01:11:28). However, he notes how a younger generation of trans men claims a trans identity on YouTube through a lifelong desire directed toward women and a masculine self-identity. As Wheeler argues, this gives the impression that all trans men like women and are masculine in one capacity or another. James also notes in the interview that more feminine or "femme" FTMs are underrepresented on YouTube (ibid.). In that sense YouTube "helps breaks down the stereotype but at the same time it also kind of enhances it [...] or at least changes stereotypes" as Wheeler states (Interview: 53:48–57:59).

On the one hand Mason, James, Wheeler, Erica, Elisabeth, and Diamond emphasize YouTube as a more diverse trans representation than what is offered in mainstream media. But on the other hand Tony, Mason, James, Wheeler, Carolyn, and Diamond also highlight the dominance of certain trans identities within the YouTube community. As Wheeler states, "I don't see as much diversity as I would like to" (Interview: 27:00–30:00).

## Assumed Whiteness

*Who is the 'you' in YouTube? (van Dijck 2009: 41).*

YouTube's perceived lack of diversity includes race, as white (Anglo-) American trans people often get more exposed and viewed. As Diamond told me in our interview, one of her motivating factors for starting to vlog was the lack of trans women of color on YouTube: "I found all these [trans] girls vlogging about their story and I was like, I don't see any black girls!" (Interview tape 1: 15:00–18:00). Not only did she note a lack of visibility on YouTube for trans women of color but she also felt that trans female representation on YouTube failed to address what were her, and other African American trans women's, experiences. As she said: "That's not my experience—I've been a woman since I was thirteen and most of the African American girls that I know, that's how they used to start—they start off young [...] So I wanted to share my story" (Ibid.). What Diamond pinpoints is the predominance of white trans female vloggers telling their stories of (medically) transitioning later in life, whereas she started self-medicating very young. Being an active vlogger on YouTube, Diamond also expresses facing a different kind of hate speech from the other (white) trans vloggers: "I've been racially harassed on my channel, called nigger and all kinds of crazy stuff like that" (June 21, 2010). Diamond also explicitly discusses questions of race and marginalization in the transgender community, which were initially questions posed to another vlogger, which in itself is an example of how she is marginalized, as she states while laughing, "because she [a white trans female vlogger] gets all the juicy, good, wholesome questions because she is sweet and white la-la-la, I get all the hard-core, hip-hop 'How big is your cock' questions because I'm good old angry black woman" (January 3, 2010). She is not just harassed for being trans but also for being of color, and she is subjected to another kind of ridicule and another set of expectations as a trans woman



of color voice. As she suggests, she is not asked for advice on or assumed to be an expert on more intellectually challenging topics, which points to a recirculation of racism within a participatory media culture that is often celebrated for its democratic potentials. As media scholar Henry Jenkins and telecommunication scholar Mark Deuze argue, this democratization of media use:

signals a broadening of opportunities for individuals and grassroots communities to tell stories and access stories others are telling, to present arguments and listen to arguments made elsewhere, to share information and learn more about the world from a multitude of other perspectives (Jenkins and Deuze 2008: 6).

YouTube as a platform enables potentially everybody to express themselves and yet YouTube might not present as much of a “multitude of other perspectives” as the notion of “free” access to representation promises. Furthermore, the stories told might be subjected to hate speech that reinforces rather than challenges established power hierarchies. As noted by sexuality and media scholar Jonathan Alexander as well as Henry Jenkins there is a distinct lack of class, racial, and ethnic diversity online (Alexander 2002b: 101; Jenkins 2009: 124). Regarding the issue of class, one might say that online participation ties into broader socio-economic parameters, where social exclusion is not just a function of lack of access to the Internet but also a matter of being an “already better equipped (virtual?) middle class” that is “able to understand and engage with the technology in ways that advantage them even further” (Burrows, Loader, and Muncer 2000: 118). Discussing socio-economic divides in connection with seeking and finding health-care information online, Roger Burrows et al argue:

Like traditional forms of welfare, wired welfare may tend to advantage a middle class who have the time, the reflexivity, inclination and resources to best exploit it, and in so doing gain systematic advantage (Burrows et al. 2000: 118).

In this sense YouTube is no “Netopia” but is a site like any other where potential problems and issues become even more striking, not least in terms of race and ethnicity. As Tony highlights, the “big dogs at the top” whom peers tend to ask for advice are typically US vloggers, which also James confirms. James notes how he has “a lot of international followers” and how “they come to Americans for the community and support.” As he states, US vloggers tend to be those whom others want to “hook up with” (Interview: 1:15:00–1:18:55). James, Wheeler, Mason, Erica, Carolyn, and Diamond note the predominance of US trans vloggers, and when asking where their viewers predominantly come from they also put the United States on the top of the list, followed by Canada and Europe. This might come as no surprise, considering that YouTube is a US website that initially only featured an English interface. As Nancy Baym also notes, the Internet was created in the English-speaking world and English is still the most common language used online (Baym 2010: 69).<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green note that YouTube is a website that is “US-dominated demographically” and whose common culture “feels culturally US-dominated out of all proportion” (Burgess and Green 2009a: 82).

When it comes to racial diversity, a simple search for “transgender” profiles primarily white trans vloggers, thus the reality envisioned and performed is, as mentioned in chapter 4, invariably a white one, with little crossing of the racial divide so present offline (cf. Alexander 2002b: 101). In *Digitizing Race: Visual Culture and the Internet* (2008) digital media and race scholar Lisa Nakamura highlights how the popular Internet in the early 1990s was a nascent media with default whiteness and maleness as the results of serious digital divides resulting in primarily male and white

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<sup>5</sup> YouTube is now available in fifty-four different languages; see <http://www.youtube.com/>. Although most of the trans vlogs appearing at the top of a simple search for “transgender” are with native US English-speaking vloggers, that does not necessarily mean that a trans YouTube community can not be growing elsewhere and in different languages.

users. However, she also notes how the Internet is much more diverse in its present state but still far from racially balanced (Nakamura 2008: 13–14). Eva Shapiro also pinpoints the continued dynamics of race, class, and national divisions, which affects who has access to the Internet. As she states: “The Internet is not removed from the race and class divisions within the trans community and may indeed reinforce them” (Shapiro 2004: 175). Finding out exactly how racially diverse YouTube is or what the racial demographics are in connection with viewership is difficult, as it is not a category that YouTube statistics covers. As Diamond sarcastically told me when we were discussing her audience, race is not included “because race is not important” (Interview tape 2: 00:10–04:36).<sup>6</sup> I interpret Diamond’s sarcastic remark as containing an annoyance with the way that race is bypassed as of no significance, maybe not least in the supposedly global village of participatory media culture where everybody is assumed to be able to have a voice and interact, when racial inequalities and marginalization is still very real and present for many people of color, not least in the United States (see, for example, the Apollon 2011 study on the claim of the United States as “post-racial”).

The underrepresentation of trans women of color on YouTube mirrors that of trans men of color. As James explains to me when we discuss digital divides: “I do see the racial divide too, where the black guys, they are definitely a minority, they all stick together, comment on each other, and call each other; they are almost their own subculture” (Interview: 01:15:00–01:18:55).<sup>7</sup> Trans men of color are a “minority,” as James states, and they “stick together,” suggesting that the offline US racial segregation spills over into YouTube. He explains to me how “I’ll be the only white person they follow, all of their people are black” which makes

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<sup>6</sup> YouTube breaks each YouTuber’s viewership down into different categories, enabling the YouTuber to see, for example, the age, the gender, and the nationality of the viewers.

<sup>7</sup> “Digital divide” is a term used to highlight different groups of people’s lack of access to, knowledge about, and use of information and communication technologies.

him “wonder if they find me culturally sensitive” (Ibid.). A racial divide is created between “black guys” who isolate themselves with “their people” and the rest (supposedly white trans men), thus the “black guys” become a racially marked group whereas the rest becomes unmarked. Having trans men of color subscribe to his vlogs makes him “feel good [...] and I’m thinking, ‘Oh you think I’m OK, that I’m not some asshole white guy.’” He tells me how he always tries to search for trans men of color himself “because it’s a totally different experience,” acknowledging that he as a white trans man has white privilege (Ibid.). Several things seem to be at stake here, thus the mere fact that James notices these trans men as “black guys” and that he is puzzled by being on their subscriber list highlights YouTube as a “sea of whiteness” and it tells me something about what is already in place when trans people of color enter YouTube. White trans bodies disappear into YouTube’s sea of whiteness, whereas trans bodies of color become “exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space” (Ahmed 2007: 157). It also tells me that white trans men and trans men of color do not seem to interact, otherwise James would not be so surprised to be on somebody’s subscriber list and he would not have to look specifically for trans men of color. Furthermore, if and when interaction is invited, James as a white (trans) man seems to be either afraid of being perceived as an upholder of white supremacy (“asshole white guy”) or take it as a compliment of being “culturally sensitive.” Interacting with a trans vlogger of color seems here to require certain cultural competences that differ from interacting with other (possibly white) trans vloggers. Anticipations of being assumed to uphold white supremacy and/or to be culturally sensitive also seems to bear witness to a long and continuously unresolved history of racial tensions in the United States.

Mason also notes how the online trans community is “overwhelmingly Caucasian, people from United States and Canada” (Interview: 46:15–47:32), comprised of the kind of vlogger who “tends to

be middle class or upper middle class; they have computers so they are computer literate and most of them are English-speaking on YouTube so it's a really narrow subset of the community" (Interview: 40:58–41:46).

However, not all the vloggers perceive the trans YouTube community as a culturally and racially divided site. When I asked Erica specifically about her perception of cultural and racial divides, she states: "It's so mixed!" and then she explains to me how she through her YouTube statistical breakdown can see that she has viewers in the United States, the UK, Australia, Japan, South America, and "even Africa and Iran." She also receives a lot of messages from many different places in the world, thus "there is definitely a back and forth with people from all over" (Interview tape 1: 29:30–38:00). When Erica pinpoints how "mixed" YouTube is, it centers on the diversity of her viewers and not the producers of the vlogs—and it becomes a matter of nationality. Race seems to be ascribed to nationality and perhaps becomes partly invisible because of the overwhelming whiteness of YouTube. YouTube allows her to interact with people from different places and, for better and for worse, she is the anchor; she is visibly present as a trans advocate and role model, making people approach her and not the other way around.

At the end of the interview we discuss Erica's current job at the drop-in center where the majority of trans people have "much higher needs" and, to my knowledge (and experience), are predominantly trans people of color. Many of the people frequenting the center do not have a computer, as Erica tells me, but they can access the Internet through the computers at the center "so a lot of people did know about me, coming here" (Interview tape 2: 33:30–35:30). When explaining to me how her vlogging relates to her offline work at the center, she states, "It is really interesting to take the work from kind of a theoretical level where online I can talk about ideology and stuff like that and then take it to an actual real-world situation and implement it, so it was a really big change for me"

(Ibid.). As Erica highlights, there is a big difference between the trans people whom she typically meets online through her vlogging practice and those she meets offline in her work as a counselor. What she also suggests is that vlogging is a forum for the exchange of “theoretical” ideas, whereas her offline work confronts her with other kinds of lived experiences of economic and racial disparities—people and experiences she rarely comes across among producers on YouTube. As Eva Shapiro also warns, the Internet creates a false sense of movement size, and safety, potentially fostering an inflated sense of social change and acceptance (Shapiro 2004: 175).

As discussed in chapter 2, trans continues to be a highly pathologized and restricted identity category where especially economically unprivileged and trans people of color tend to be subjected to the highest level of discrimination and inability to self-determine. As pointed out by researchers like Spade (2008, 2011), Beemyn and Rankin (2011), and Grant et al. (2011), trans people of color are statistically more likely to be enrolled in the negative “feedback loop,” facing a higher level of discrimination and poorer health compared to the population as a whole as well as compared to other trans people. The Internet and capitalist interests enables certain trans people to take on the role of being an active health-care consumer, actively engaging in a process of self-definition through representing themselves online and through being able to afford medical transition and changing legal gender-classification documents. But this is still limited to trans people who have the resources, time, reflexivity, inclination, and means to do so. As Erica states in our interview, the users of the resources at the drop-in center where she works are *watching* the vlogs, taking advantage of the computer access available at the center, however they rarely become the *producers* of the vlogs.

White trans women like Erica, Elisabeth, and Carolyn and white trans men like James, Wheeler, Tony, and Mason become associated with

and visible as prominent trans voices on YouTube, paving the way for creating awareness about trans issues but nevertheless reinforcing whiteness as a referent for trans subjectivity.

### **Building Community**

To sum up, the multimodality of YouTube allows for an audiovisual trans body that breaks with the online anonymity and disembodiment of the text-based Internet and affords peers/viewers with multiple cues to enrich what is communicated. This adds another sense of presence, intimacy, and familiarity with the trans vlogger.

Social interaction is not only one of the prime motives for joining YouTube but is also continuously encouraged by the vloggers. The vlog itself is profiled as a site for “conversation,” enabling social connections and discussions that many trans vloggers are cut off from in their offline life. The interaction that takes place can be said to create a communal culture, where the well-known vloggers are appointed the status of being an authority/celebrity and yet also figure as “just” a community member, nevertheless expecting or feeling the need to actively engage with peers and share life experiences. Like many other communities, the trans YouTube community is characterized by a certain degree of openness and yet a lack of class-based, cultural, and racialized diversity.

## Chapter 7

### DIY Therapy: Exploring the Trans Video Blogs as Affective Self-Representations

*I thought this would be the best way to get it out, because I don't feel that I am able to cry on my own. I have to be able to break down to somebody and it turns out that lucky person would be you [looking directly into the camera]. And I want to be able to look back on this and say I have come a long way (Tony: April 19, 2009).*

This is a statement from Tony in one of his early video blogs, recorded in his room at his parents' house. It is three o'clock in the morning, but he seems unable to sleep. He speaks straight into the camera with a rather timid and sad look on his face, thus he gives the impression that he is depressed and frustrated. The lighting and the sound is low-key, and the vlog is possibly recorded and uploaded in one take. The buzzing sound of the camera seems distracting, directing attention away from Tony's monologue, and yet the serious look on his face makes me listen carefully, trying to disregard the disturbing noise. In this quote Tony seems to use the vlog as a site for documenting and communicating his thoughts and inner dialogue. The camera is positioned as a kind of trustworthy interlocutor, a companion to whom he can tell everything. The camera becomes "the eye that sees and the ear that listens powerfully but without judgment and reprisal" (Renov, quoted in Matthews 2007: 443). As he states, it serves as that "somebody" he can "break down to." Tony suggests that the vlog works as a therapeutic tool that enables him to locate and release powerful emotional energy in ways that are not possible off-screen. The vlog has a performative function—it can enable or call forth the "cry" that he needs. And yet, he also emphasizes the documenting function of the vlog, archiving how depressed and sad he feels in the present moment but already anticipating that he will feel differently in the future. The medium will enable him "to look back on this" and secure or



remind himself that he has “come a long way.” He is now struggling with his social transition and not being able to access hormones to visibly change his body but he expects to feel better in the future once his medical transition has progressed.

This chapter takes the quote by Tony as a starting point for exploring how trans people’s virtual presence and free flow of self-speak on YouTube can enable new possibilities for self-representation, challenging and renegotiating existing tropes of representation within mainstream film and media. And compensating for the marginalization and invisibility that many trans people experience both within and outside of various LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) movements. As Wheeler explained to me in the interview, there is little trans-related information and few experiences available in/among these offline LGBT communities (Interview: 9:30–14:14).

My investigation takes its point of departure in the widespread claim that contemporary Western media culture is oriented toward confession. I interpret the trans vloggers as rejecting the confessional modus by using interconnected practices such as (self-)disclosure, coming out, and testimony as tools in ongoing self-representation and community building. My focus is directed toward different ways this affect is created and re-created within the trans vlogs through these practices. I turn to the term “affect” despite its diverse and slippery use, as it offers me a point of reference from which to recognize the self-speak as something more than banal narcissism and/or confessional self-submission.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the vlog becomes an “archive of feelings,” a way of coping with stigmatization and a trauma that is not supported by the dominant culture (Cvetkovich

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<sup>1</sup> In the anthology *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg offer a much-needed introduction to the different and complex vectors of affect studies. They outline no fewer than eight different angles onto affect’s theorization. However, the two dominant vectors of affect study in the humanities is Silvan Tomkins’s psychobiology of different affects (taken up by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) and Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze’s Spinozist ethology of bodily capacities (taken up by Brian Massumi) (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 5–9).

2003: 81–82). Not only does the vlog disclose the affective dimensions of oppression, the everydayness of cissexism and compulsory heterosexuality that indeed is its affectiveness, wrapped up as it is with moments of ceremony that include as well as exclude certain people (see, for example, Ahmed 2004a: 147). But the vlog also creates a different “pedagogy of feeling” (Gould 2009: 69), encouraging trans people to come to terms with and enjoy their modified body and trans identity. The subtext is, however, shame, as trans people are “straddling of a line between being accepted and being rejected” (Gould 2009: 74) and it generates, at least occasionally, ambivalent feelings about oneself and the (cissexist and heteronormative) society.

The overall scope of this chapter is to explore the relation between new media and affect. What is the interplay between the vlog as a medium and affect as a transformative force? I want to suggest that new media technologies create new possibilities for the visualization and communication of affect. As sociology and communication scholar Mike Featherstone optimistically suggests:

[W]e need to consider the ways in which the new media technologies themselves reveal the centrality of affect in the process of perception and also enable viewers to become accustomed to seeing and enjoying a new register of affect previously undetected in the flow of facial and bodily movements (Featherstone, 2010: 211).

In line with Featherstone, I suggest through my reading of the trans vlogs that new information technologies offer greater possibilities for these affective intensities to be transmitted and experienced (Featherstone 2010: 210). Such a reading goes against the writing of thinkers like Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Paul Virilio, who have all written extensively on the loss of emotional life and the “waning effect of affect” (Jameson 1991: 10) with the emergence of new electronic technologies. As cultural critic Steven Shaviro polemically summarizes, the dystopian

attitude that not only characterizes Jameson, Baudrillard, and Virilio also runs through Sherry Turkle's new book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011):

The argument goes something like this. Thanks to the new electronic technologies, the world has become a single global marketplace. Universal commodity fetishism has colonized lived experience. The real has been murdered by its representation. Every object has been absorbed into its own image. There is no longer (if there ever was) any such thing as a single, stable self (Shaviro 2004: 126).

Rather than destroying “real” emotions and “real” presence altogether, Web 2.0 enables a strong “telepresence”—that is, a presence in absence through a set of technologies. As one might argue, networked information machines “enable individuals to transmit or move a sensory experience of self-presence “elsewhere” across virtual space” (Hillis 2009: 2). The web becomes an ersatz space where one can reach out, touch, and fetishize other individuals (Hillis 2009: 15–16). In this vein, I will attend to the importance of the trans vlogs as mediated affective expressions of disclosure, coming out, and testimony. What difference does it make that the “revelation” of intimate matters is a self-representation offered to a virtual viewer—and how does the mediation and the public broadcasting aspect color the different affective expressions?

### **Challenging Confession**

Confession, disclosure, coming out, and testimony are often used interchangeably when theorists try to characterize the impulse toward speaking out that have proliferated during the 1990s across a variety of media platforms, not least reality-TV programming and digital media (see Jon Dovey's elaboration in Dovey, 2000: 103–132). Cultural critic Hal Niedzviecki labels this increasing transmission of the real lives of ordinary others (not yet famous) a Peep Culture that encompasses reality TV,

YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, MySpace and Facebook. Thus, “Peep is the backbone of web 2.0” (Niedzviecki 2009: 2), characterized by oversharing and encouraging confession and revelation as a form of entertainment (Ibid.: 3, 11). In Niedzviecki’s thinking as well as in many others’ there is a widespread claim that contemporary Western media culture is oriented toward confession (Shattuck 1997, White 1992, Mathews 2007, Dovey 2000). Many media theorists draw on Michel Foucault’s concept of confession, introduced in *The History of Sexuality*, supporting his claim that “Western man has become a confessing animal,” thus “confession has spread its effects far and wide” (Foucault 1978: 59). In *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*, Michael Strangelove labels the genre of video diaries as “confessional videos,” part of a broader “mass outpouring of confessional discourse” (Strangelove 2010: 68). As he states, “YouTube has become a giant virtual confession booth” (Ibid.: 72). A virtual confession booth, where the YouTube audience acts as a partner, generating a powerful impulse to confess. Or, as documentary and LGBT studies scholar Roger Hallas warns: “Behind the promise of cultural visibility and voice for any marginalized group hovers the potential threat that its publicized bodies merely become a confessional spectacle” (Hallas 2009: 11).

While critics have lamented the ways in which the private permeates the public sphere in the so-called confessional culture (Mathews 2007: 435), feminism, queer theory, and transgender studies have contributed extensively to “a reconsideration of conventional distinctions between political and emotional life as well as between political and therapeutic cultures” (Cvetkovich, 2003: 10). While fighting for political recognition of what has been historically confined to the private sphere, queer theorists such as Lauren Berlant have also warned against how mass culture works to depoliticize the social by privatizing the public sphere. According to Berlant, the political public sphere—our

arena of citizenship's enactment—has been displaced in favor of an intimate public sphere, individualizing experiences of social hierarchy and threatening to turn pain into banality (Berlant 1997: 3–4).

The trans vlogs enter into this contentious intimate public by pinpointing the nation as a space of struggle and specifying the juridical, social, and psychological obstacles that this particular group of people is confronted with. The vlogs tap into a mainstream Western media culture filled with affective personal stories, but they do so in order to debate how “the personal is political” much like the second-wave feminists of the 1960s and '70s. In this way, they open up a space for reconsidering the notion of “confession.”

Foucault's critique of the practice of confession is related to his skeptical approach to the understanding of emotional expressions as telling the truth of the self and therefore it being innately liberating. Even as it seems impossible to avoid Foucault's notion of confession when discussing dominant tendencies within contemporary mainstream media culture, I do not see the trans vlogs as part of a “confessional culture” in the Foucauldian sense. Foucault discusses confession in a context where it is posed to another, who is not simply an interlocutor but an authority who has the power to prescribe it and to punish or forgive (Foucault 1978: 61-62). In these instances confession requires submission to authority, divine or secular—it implies a measurement against a norm and admissions to deviations from that norm (Matthews 2007: 440).

In order to access medical and juridical transition, most trans people living in an Anglo American context are, as mentioned in chapter 2, bound to go through a practice of confession described by Foucault, comprised of lengthy processes of psychological, psychiatric, and physical tests. The interaction is one-way, as the therapist acts first and foremost as a gatekeeper. In the vlogs, however, the biographical self-exposure is part of a continuous self-naming and retelling one's story at one's own request.

Instead of being posed to one licensed authority of “normality,” these self-statements address multiple publics, thus they are not being demanded to speak but are themselves finding/constructing audiences. I therefore interpret the self-speak and self-representation in these vlogs as a rejection of the assigned role as non-authority and as an objection to the imperative to confess to deviation from a norm. It becomes a resilient collective effort to intervene in and negotiate dominant public discourses on trans identity that often victimize and/or pathologize the trans person. They seem to deliberately and persistently try to “talk” their way out of pathologization, resisting and renegotiating the offered subject positions.

### **The Talking Cure: The Vlogs as Acts of (Self-)Disclosure**

*So what's up everyone [...] I haven't really updated anything since I have been on the East Coast—it's been rough—and good [...] coming to my past where people don't really see me as me and all the work that I have done for a year and a half [...] just seems to be poof! out the door, and I am just the same old person to everyone. I am not validly male [...] and I deal with it better, it doesn't hurt as bad, but it hurts, a lot [...] And I have also been dealing with this heavy situation, my uncle just passed away [...] Thank you for all your support, I really appreciate it all (James: August 17, 2010)*

James slides into the picture on a rolling office chair, which sets the tone for a slightly humoristic vlog. But as he places himself in front of the camera and starts talking with a rather agonized look on his face, it becomes clear that the vlog is far from lighthearted. He is in a hotel room, preparing himself for his uncle's funeral and meeting his family. Toward the end, he directly addresses the viewers—“you guys”—while he gesticulates, waves, and moves the camera around the room for us to see the view from his window, updating us not only on his emotional but also his physical, geographic whereabouts. James shares his painful experience of nonrecognition as a man and the ambivalent feelings this creates about both self and family, such as sadness, frustration, and despair, thus tapping

into feelings of anxiety about social rejection. However, James also expresses gratitude toward the trans YouTube community that supports him. As he states, they leave “nice comments” and make him feel as if sharing his experiences resonates with others, enabling reciprocal recognition (Ibid.).

James’s vlog is—as are trans vlogs in general as previously discussed—predominantly structured around a “talking torso” speaking straight-to-camera. The speaking subject, in this case James, seems absorbed in a free flow of talk, dealing with affect and socio-psychological issues around transition. The notion of or need to self-disclose originates in Sigmund Freud’s concept of “the talking cure,” encouraging free association and the individual to say whatever comes to mind in order to break down social constraints (Shattuc 1997: 113–114). The first step in the recovery process was, for Freud, the confession of intimate secrets that have initially been rejected or imprisoned in the unconscious mind. But it also had the quality of accusation, of naming the abuse and the abuser, as part of a process of reclaiming and rebuilding selfhood (Dovey 2000: 111). In the Freudian model it is only the analyst who has access to the patient’s unconscious and therefore to the ability to “cure” the patient (Shattuc 1997: 114). In that sense, confession and (self-)disclosure are interconnected practices that are based on the uneven power distribution between the listener/expert and the speaker/patient.<sup>2</sup>

James’s virtual (self-)disclosure is not taking place within a Freudian power distribution, and it does not seem to assume the emergence of drive-related intrapsychic issues. However, it does seem to tie into a US self-help therapy and the idea that good mental health

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<sup>2</sup> The Freudian concept of the subject differs from the Foucauldian, and in that sense they have radically different ideas about what the effects of these practices are. In a Freudian understanding of self-disclosure, therapy is a way to reveal a hidden but true self, which per se is what makes healing possible. The Foucauldian understanding of confession is built on the notion that subjectivity is not something we have but something that is manifested through our intimate storytelling. Through confession we come to see ourselves as thinking subjects, as the subject of confession.

requires public disclosure, thus one needs to reveal in order to heal (Farber 2006: 8–9). It is a kind of reinvention of oneself through self-disclosure. This seems to proliferate across a variety of institutions, media platforms, and not least media genres, with the talk show as maybe the quintessential example. Public self-disclosure, meaning the incitement to talk about oneself and one's story to others and to analyze oneself, is an integral part of American culture (Berlant 1997). As communication and cultural studies scholar Norman Denzin bluntly writes: "We cannot imagine America without its self-help groups. And, we cannot imagine an America that is not in love with technology. Cyberspace and the recovery movement were meant for each other" (Denzin quoted in Burrows et al. 2000: 100). However, the growth of media formats cultivating public self-disclosures and the spreading of blogging culture is a global phenomenon that might have strong roots in US culture but which breeds and takes new shapes when entering the global village of the Internet. Developing the notion of US media culture as therapeutic in *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television*, media theory and history scholar Mimi White argues:

Freud's legacy is [...] implicated in everyday life and cultural knowledge. The modes of therapeutic discourse constructed through television (and other media) have an important status, producing social and cultural identities [...] In fact, I would suggest that the profusion of the therapeutic in everyday and popular media culture might be seen as one manifestation of a larger cultural interest that is paralleled in the academic sphere in psychoanalytic and psychological discourse (White 1992: 20).

These therapeutic discourses serve, according to White, new forms of power, namely dominant networks of postmodern entertainment (Ibid.: 22–23). Similar arguments have been launched in connection with the massive wave of media genres like reality television. As noted by a predominance of theorists writing especially about shows that focus on facilitating a personal and bodily makeover, a narrative of empowerment



is produced through normalization (see, for instance, Andrejevic 2004; Weber 2009; Tait 2007; Deery 2004; Heyes 2007). In makeover programs such as *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*, for example, salvation goes through submission, not unlike the Foucauldian notion of confession and the Freudian notion of self-disclosure. These makeover programs cultivate a mediated affective economy where “miserable subjects trade stories of abjection for the beauty promised through televisual benevolence” (Weber 2009: 20).

I would suggest that the trans vlogs become an arena for a “personal truth telling” and personal empowerment, but without being confessional or being linked to a Freudian notion of an “inner self.” I am here inspired by the work of sociologist and philosopher Marianne Valverde on personal truth telling in Alcoholics Anonymous. Valverde argues that AA meetings allow people to work on themselves “by taking up a position anywhere between the deep level of ‘conversion’ to a new master identity, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the practical level of ‘handy tips for staying sober’” (Valverde 2004: 72). There is no demand for deeply personal confessions beyond the simple declaration “I am an alcoholic,” and the encouragement is to make pragmatic use of ideas and techniques picked up at meetings or while reading AA texts (Ibid.: 72–73). I would argue that the trans vlogs work in a similar way, although trans is not a “problem” in the same way alcoholism is. Entering the trans YouTube community requires nothing but a declaration of the vlogger’s trans identity. A lot of different kinds of truth telling about being trans are allowed, and their reach into the soul is something that only the speaker defines. As Mason states in our interview:

The self-disclosure stuff is, I think, about justifying one’s existence if you feel different and it’s also about finding others who are the same way. It’s about connecting, too. It’s a really effective means of connecting to like-minded people, just to announce who you are (Interview: 49:35–50:04).

As suggested by Mason, it is a self-disclosure that works in the service of intimacy and identity, as ways to better connect with others—within the YouTube community—and to better understand the self. As Professor of Psychology and Education Barry A. Farber argues:

In short, we disclose in order to feel closer to another, to feel validated by another, to understand and strengthen the core aspects of our identity, to explore and accept multiple aspects of ourselves, to feel more genuine in the world, and to relieve the burden of unexpressed pain (Farber 2006: 13).

Disclosing can therefore have a therapeutic effect, which many of the vloggers also highlight. In one of Elisabeth's vlogs, made after coming home from clubbing, she says, "Hopefully I get more subscribers—more people to talk to—it's therapeutic. YouTube is very therapeutic to me and making these vlogs is very therapeutic, it helps me a lot" (August 19, 2007). Erica, Wheeler, James, Diamond, and Elisabeth also independently and without being prompted specifically used the term "therapeutic" and "therapy" when describing to me what vlogging enabled for them personally. As Wheeler states, it is "therapeutic for me just to talk and talk and talk" (Interview: 35:44–37:13), and yet as described in chapter 6 he is more reluctant than, for instance, Tony to vlog when feeling depressed or upset, thus he refrains from expressing "negative" emotions. Likewise, Erica emphasizes how the vlog is therapeutic in the sense that it enables "a relief" by offering "a way to talk about your feelings" (Interview tape 1: 17:00–18:29). Thus, the vloggers seem to find therapeutic potential or relief in talking to the camera acting as an attentive Other. Some share feelings of hardship like Tony, Mason, James, Elisabeth, Erica, and Carolyn, which at times includes crying in front of the camera, while others like Wheeler and Diamond share their feelings of transitioning or being trans on a deliberately more positive note, predominantly showing a happy face.

## **Online Support Groups Within a Private Public**

The trans vlogs share affinities with the move toward self-help in American therapy and the belief in self-actualization and enhancement. The vlogs include techniques from feminist therapy practice, dating back to US radical white feminism of the 1970s: sharing, group discussions, and assertiveness training (Shattuc 1997: 123), enabling the vlogger to get things “off their chest,” to “process things,” while also being a device that enables community building. Thus the vlog has strong similarities with offline support and consciousness-raising groups, where cognitive-oriented discussions go hand in hand with personal, emotional sharing. As Mason explicates, “It’s like this weird support group that a lot of people have on YouTube” (September 19, 2010f). When I interviewed him he repeated the conceptualization of YouTube as a forum for support, as he states, “It is a community space for me—it is an international support group” (Interview: 24:12–25:40). He emphasizes how the trans vloggers support one another, offering emotional comfort and practical help. As he states:

I’ve watched people come online and be very raw and they were in crisis, they’re either suicidal or they’ve lost their family or they’ve lost their job and to see the support rally around and hold them up, it’s just—it’s still very moving to me (Interview: 39:37–40:41).

Elisabeth expresses being more comfortable with using YouTube as a support group than using offline resources. As she states: “If I ever do go to my [offline] support group—’cause I haven’t gone—I’m, like, scared to talk. I’m really coy and be like, ‘Oh, I’ll just read a book’” (October 15, 2007). As Elisabeth suggests, she is less “coy” online than offline, which enables her to share and discuss things that she would be too shy to do offline.

The public availability and access is both what enables the support function (especially if one lives in a dispersed area without an offline trans community) but the publicness of the (private) self-disclosure is also what

makes YouTube different from other support and consciousness-raising groups. Although he embraces the online support function, Mason finds it scary that he does not know who is watching and in that sense “it’s not a normal community” (September 19, 2010f). Or as Wheeler observes, it is not “a safe space” (Interview: 30:40–32:14). The derogatory comments that Diamond recounts having received regarding racial hatred, or Carolyn and Elisabeth regarding trans-misogyny are all examples of the nonsafety of the space.

In some respects, the vlog seems to simulate face-to-face communication by the vloggers talking straight to the camera and the option for video responses. As noted by Elisabeth, “It really provides a level of interaction that I think is as close to real-life interaction as possible” (Interview: 42:20–46:26). And yet, the trans vlogs are something more than just a substitute for offline face-to-face relations, as they have “the capacity to record, capture and slow down the body moving-image” (Featherstone 2010: 199). Vlogs can offer a personal repository of a body in transition, which initially was Wheeler’s purpose for vlogging as he told me in our interview. It can be a way to “get an idea of what my life has been like over the last five years,” as Erica states, including expressions of and reflections on how she felt about her life at the time (Interview tape 1: 12:07–13:44). In that sense the vlog enables an audiovisual affective registration not only through what is being said but also through the way it’s being said, through facial expressions and through added layers of editing, style of imagery, and music. It is a multilayered audiovisual affective communication that enables and requests feedback from an infinite number of viewers, typically positioned or addressed as what I would call intimate strangers. The trans vloggers are, as mentioned, primarily talking to a supposedly sympathetic audience of imagined trans or trans-curious others. Intimate strangers who either have (or anticipate having) firsthand experiences with the (bodily) processes, dilemmas, and

issues or are willing to learn and understand. The media's ability to communicate and transmit emotions through various kinds of cues seems to enhance the feeling of a support group and yet there are also certain privacy-threatening aspects of YouTube as a social-network site that conflicts with a traditional or offline (face-to-face) understanding of support groups. These are, as characterized and summed up by dana boyd as: persistence, searchability, exact copyability, and invisible audiences (boyd 2007: 2). YouTube makes these "self-disclosures" available to a broad and invisible audience and enables a circulation that the individual vlogger cannot possibly keep track of. YouTube is therefore a complex "space" that could be characterized as a private public. Although all the vloggers included in this study express awareness about the availability and searchability of their vlogs, many of them have concerns about not just the use of their vlogs but also the audience. As Erica, Elisabeth, James, Mason, and Wheeler explicitly state, they object to having their vlog used to prove that transsexuality is wrong or to be used for a laugh. When it comes to a possible or desired audience they have various and different reservations. As Carolyn points out in one of her vlogs after having received inappropriate questions and comments:

I just want people to understand that I'm not making these for random people to watch—it's not meant to be funny, it's hard to explain [...] these videos are to reach out to other girls or boys who feel that they are not right, that their body does not match what their brains are telling them (December 1, 2010).

Carolyn expresses a wish to speak to and with a specific audience, thus her vlogs are "to reach out," which (only) becomes possible through entering the public domain of YouTube, making her discard any reservations that she might have with privacy and/or interaction. Thus, YouTube is to some extent perceived as a "parochial space," presumed to be known and self-regulating by trans vloggers but also open to intervention by social forces beyond the control of its members (O'Riordan and Bassett 2002: 9).

Others, like James, feel differently about vlogging. For him vlogging is “very public” or, as he pragmatically pinpoints: “For me there is no way it can become a private thing,” considering the large number of followers, subscribers, and viewers (Interview: 01:22:5901:27:05).

## **DIY Therapy and Sharing**

*I was hoping to use my video blog and YouTube as a way of collecting my own information on it [labiaplasty] and sharing it with people so that if anyone else is considering going in for a second-stage procedure for a labiaplasty or has questions about that sort of thing they can find it on here (Erica: January 5, 2012).<sup>3</sup>*

Erica offers extensive information on surgical procedures, communicating in words and images what they involve. Especially her genital-reassignment surgery is documented at length, showing and explaining in detail the procedure itself at its various stages and what her experiences and feelings are. This series of vlogs not only archives her course, but offers educational information to others considering or waiting to go through with the same procedure. When she needs to go in for a second procedure, a labiaplasty surgery, she expresses having difficulties finding sufficient and updated information about it, which encourages her “to collect my own information” and to “share” it with others. The educational function of this series continues in her post-surgery vlogs, where she explains how she has to “dilate” (using a specially designed device) in order to maintain the width and length of her vagina. She carefully demonstrates the appearance and size of the different dilating models and explains how and when she has to use each one of them (May 19, 2011). She is filming the supposedly first time she is in the act of dilating, thus the image cuts her off at the waist disabling the viewer from actually seeing her inserting the dilator. But she openly shares her experiences with her

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<sup>3</sup> Labiaplasty is a plastic surgery procedure for altering and/or creating the labia minora and the labia majora, the paired tissue structures bounding the vestibule of the vulva.

new embodiment in connection with sensitivity, appearance, and sexual sensation. As she states: “Hopefully we can demystify this whole GRS procedure together and learn and build as a community” (Ibid.). What is striking about this series of vlogs that might at first seem very self-exposing is that they work as a site for education and knowledge sharing. They can potentially assist in demystifying the process and prepare others for what to expect, told by an embodied “expert” who has a firsthand experience with the procedure. As Elisabeth also highlights in our interview, these informative and audiovisual vlogs on procedures adds something else and more than “a simple textbook explanation,” most importantly it adds “personal experience” (Interview: 42:20–46:26). However, these vlogs can also help reinforce a surgical hierarchy, communicating that medical transition and sex-reassignment surgery is an integral part of a successful trans identity.

Not just Erica but all of the vloggers in my study generously share a vast variety of trans-related knowledge. It seems as if the vloggers try to accumulate as much diverse information as possible, often through sharing their own process and thoughts, compensating for the shortage of visibility and in-depth information elsewhere. James dedicates several of his vlogs to sharing and recommending trans-related cultural products (books, films), while Diamond keeps people updated on trans news. Erica, Wheeler, and James share knowledge of juridical questions (how to get a name or gender change on official documents), while Elisabeth, Erica, James, Wheeler, and Diamond address trans health (educational information on the intake and amount of hormones, what kinds of surgery to get and where, and what psychologists to choose). Tony and James offer extensive advice on (making a) “packer,” “STP” and “binding,” while Elisabeth offers tips on voice training, Carolyn on weight and training, and Diamond on makeup and fashion. All of the vloggers in this study reflect on and offer advice on coping with everyday life as trans, including issues like

low self-esteem, bodily (un)comfortability and dissatisfaction, friendship and relationships, family, and social interaction in general. Dilemmas and feelings are disclosed and ideas are discussed. As Mason states, “There is so much intelligence and compassion and a gathering of resources” (September 19, 2010j). Likewise, Wheeler notes that documenting and uploading his transition on YouTube has enabled him to meet “all these people,” thus if he had not been vlogging he would not “be as well-educated” as he is now (November 29, 2010a). As suggested by Mason and Wheeler, the vlogs are sites for reflection and education or, as Elisabeth told me in our interview, “It causes you to analyze every aspect of yourself” (Interview: 01:20:06–01:21:00). There is, as she pinpoints, a critical mass of trans vloggers online who challenge one’s preconceived ideas and notions of what it means to be trans, offering stimulating and thought-provoking discussions. In this sense the vlogs are important sources of knowledge and audiovisual how-to manuals, with the trans vloggers acting as their own experts. One can describe the vlog as a DIY tool that enables a supposedly introvert cathartic release (“getting things off your chest”) as well as extrovert support and assistance, often through “hands-on” advice. I am referring to DIY as the activist, collective way of working, criticizing authorities and capitalist logics. The trans vlogs are filled with information on how and where to access various kinds of inexpensive and good-quality body-modifying products and procedures or how to make one’s own prosthesis out of cheap material. Products and procedures are being researched, tested, and evaluated, thus the vlogs function as self-help how-to manuals that can make life easier and less expensive for trans people.

Psychological labels and diagnostic processes are constantly being discussed, questioned, and challenged, especially trans itself as a pathologized category. As Diamond states, “Those words like ‘gender identity disorder,’ ‘gender dysphoria’—those conditions make me feel like



motherfuckers are telling me I am crazy for being what I am, like I have a mental problem. I don't like that. My mind is sane!" (August 24, 2010). Diamond is not just objecting to having her feeling of identity pathologized and categorized as a mental illness but she also offers a different frame for understanding her dedication to body modification. She is "a work in progress," as she labels herself, thus getting breasts is "making an adjustment." Using the car as a metaphor for her body, she states: "I love my car [...] but I want to jazz it up" (Ibid.). Diamond here profiles medical transition as an existential choice or aspiration, highlighting the access to modifying procedures as a matter of personal dignity and a right to self-determination. Mason also characterizes the present diagnostic system (in the United States) as "infantilizing" the trans person, thus accessing transitioning technologies should be a matter of "informed consent" (September 19, 2010b).

However, the mere audiovisual presence of the trans vloggers, highlighting and visualizing their transitioning/transitioned bodies is also an important part (if not the most important part) of challenging trans pathologization and stigmatization. Trans is openly claimed as an identity, and the body-altering procedures/products are laid out for visual consumption and inspiration. The trans vloggers are creating a unique culture through shared interest/experiences and through the employment or development of common terms like "T," "SRS," "FFS," "trans fag," "femme FTM," "butch MTF," and so on that are not necessarily invented online but certainly become widely known and used categories through their online circulation. They share what Nancy Baym terms "an insider lingo," which becomes a marker of insider status and helps forge group identity (Baym 2010: 77–78). As Mason notes in the interview I conducted with him:

One of the things I noticed in my first year of vlogging was that the people who were watching each other's vlogs started using the same language. They would

create a new vocabulary—we were creating a new vocabulary for being trans, new words [...] It didn't feel to me like group thinking, there was no voice out there describing us, so we were creating a language (Interview: 35:36–39:24).

He calls the development of a new vocabulary, new words and an insider lingo as “grassroots activism” (Ibid.). In this vein I would suggest that the trans vloggers are developing a counter-discourse through self-disclosure and sharing. And as media scholar Jane Shattuc points out:

“Consciousness-raising groups have always been a hybrid: part therapy and part political activism” (Shattuc, 1997: 128). I see the vlogs as therapeutic in the sense that they offer recognition—recognition of self and recognition via building community.

In conclusion, the DIY aspect of the trans vlogs involves sharing experiences and giving and taking advice about how to cope with your life situation as trans. The key words here are “collective learning,” “building,” and “sharing” as tools in self-and group empowerment. The primary authority being contested is the psychomedical establishment and the pathologization of trans as an identity category. Thus, the trans vloggers are speaking on their own behalf and being experts on their own “condition” and of various body-altering techniques and products. They seem to find therapeutic relief in talking to the camera, but the power relation is different from Freud’s “talking cure,” and not least from the sessions taking place at the clinician’s office as part of the diagnostic process in order to access transitioning technologies. On YouTube, the authority of the (psychomedical) expert is dispersed amongst the trans vloggers through mutual and supportive disclosure. Or, more correctly, the power relations are more blurred, the “feedback loops” take many forms, and positions are fluid and reciprocal. The vloggers occupy several subject positions: being the “patient” talking as well as the “analyst” listening and interpreting their own or others’ recorded words. It seems as if the trans vloggers use their own as well as each other’s videos and comments as

therapeutic resources that can help with “trans processing.” Thus, the vlogs become a kind of communal self-therapy and self-treatment.

## Coming Out

*You come out once when you decide that you want to transition [...] and then you basically have to continuously come out [...] But for me I am confused because I am not visually transgendered and I am dating a girl [...] so I don't need to out myself in the dating world [...] But not many people here know, and I worry that I am hiding it from them or that if I came out to them that's what they would have thought all along or that they are gonna think about me differently [...] But the fact of the matter is if I don't tell them who I started out as, are they ever gonna find out, are they gonna care, are they gonna think of me differently for no reason at all? [...] I think it's an important part of who I am, but I don't think that it's an important thing for everybody to know about [...] Part of me really wants to identify as transgender, I wanna be out there [...] represent the community [...] but at the same time, the reason I do this is because I want people to know that I am male, I don't want them to think that I am somewhere in between, because I wanna be fully male (Wheeler: February 23, 2010)*

Wheeler is vlogging in his room and he smiles at us while he talks about what it means for him to be trans. “Coming out” is, as Wheeler suggests, a ubiquitous issue in trans people’s lives. As Wheeler states, coming out seems to be an advantage before you pass, because it enables people to recognize and approach you as your chosen gender, while it can be a disadvantage or complicate things when you do pass, because people might not fully accept you as male if they know that you are “missing” certain body parts and/or have a different history. In an earlier vlog he talks about coming out as trans in high school and being requested to “say it out loud in group,” something he expresses having ambivalent feelings about. Saying it out loud in class “felt liberating at the same time I also felt trapped by it” (March 25, 2009). Later Wheeler returns to the dilemmas of coming out as trans, stating that he feels as though not telling people “is like hiding a big wound inside of me,” while telling people is characterized as “open[ing] a can of worms” (October 21, 2009).

“Coming out” regularly references the image of the closet and originates in and is strongly tied to the question of homosexuality, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has remarked. Sedgwick has written extensively about the “epistemology of the closet,” which she argues is the shaping and oppressing presence in the lives of homosexual identities. In accord with Michel Foucault (Foucault 1998), Sedgwick argues that modern Western culture has placed sexuality in an increasingly distinctively privileged relation to constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge (Sedgwick 1990: 3). Or, as queer studies scholar Melissa Jane Hardie states, “The closet continues to signify, even as it is elaborately exposed” (Hardie 2010: 57). The closet revolves around secrecy or disclosure; it is “an excruciating system of double binds” (Sedgwick 1990: 70) where it becomes almost impossible to decide when one discloses too much or not enough. What Sedgwick points out is the way the closet centers on a certain aspect of one’s identity that is not quite visible, making the metaphor of the closet indicative for homophobia in a way it cannot be for other oppressions. But one could argue that the question of how discriminatory acts relate to visibility is more nuanced and complex than Sedgwick’s argument seems to suggest. As Wheeler reminds us, the closet is a vibrant and shaping presence also for trans people (regardless if they identify as homosexuals or not).

The oppression works in analagous ways due to the fact that the closet, as far as I perceive it, is an effect of what Judith Butler calls the heterosexual matrix. The closet is an effect of a naturalized and compulsory heterosexuality that requires and produces stable and coherent gendered beings (both in connection to sex/gender and during a lifetime) and heterosexuality as the natural sexual desire and practice thus constitutes everything else as a secret that you have to confess. As Wheeler makes clear, the question is not just whether to tell or not, but also how to tell and how to escape the most violating aspects of the closet.

As Butler puts it: “being ‘out’ always depends to some extent on being ‘in’; it gains its meaning only within that polarity.” (Butler, 1993b: 309).

But the epistemology of the closet can also be said to work differently for a trans person than for a homosexual (regardless of how the trans person identifies sexuality-wise) because it revolves around and is much more directly connected to issues of “passing.” As Wheeler indicates, the trans person is subjected to a kind of cross-pressure, caught between the anticipation of binary gender coherence (passing) and of self-disclosure (coming out). But passing is, to a certain extent, to be closeted, and to out oneself is, to a certain extent, not to pass.

### **Passing**

Passing is a concept and a practice of recognition that is widely used and discussed on YouTube as well as within race and gender theory. Passing also occasionally intersects with or is used interchangeably with the concept of “going stealth.” All the vloggers in my study continually debate with themselves and their YouTube audiences when and how they pass and what that entails. It typically expresses itself as an anxiety about how, when, or what one is recognized as. For Mason, this seems to be continuously unresolved, thus passing or finding recognition within a category is a privilege that not everybody is allowed/granted. One might for various reasons be unable to pass; for example, when having a reluctance toward or the economic inability to medically transition or simply being unable to be granted recognition because of one’s appearance or because there is not a gender category that one can be appointed and find recognition within. There may not be a need or even a desire to head toward a recognizable sex. To Wheeler, Erica, and Diamond, passing seems, however, to be closely followed by or connected to doubts about if or when to disclose one’s trans status/story, not least in relation to dating. In that sense the intersection of passing and coming out is, as

Erica states, “something that is a really unique topic to our community; it’s something that really only trans face; when do you come out, how do you come out” (February 7, 2012). YouTube becomes a forum for sharing one’s personal experiences with passing and disclosure and for offering advice. But no easy solutions seem possible, which is Diamond’s conclusion in a vlog where she shares her dating experiences, explaining how she “tried a new tactic” and waited for “the man of my dreams” to get to know her before disclosing her trans status but ended up losing him and having her heart broken (May 11, 2012).

As cultural and literary historian Sander Gilman has demonstrated, the discourse of passing comes out of the racialization of nineteenth-century culture and is the wellspring of aesthetic surgery (Gilman 1999: 25). Thus, passing was initially the nineteenth century’s “pejorative term for the act of disguising one’s “real” (racial) self” (Gilman 1999: 20). Investigating the history of aesthetic surgery Gilman argues that passing is the basic motivation for any form of cosmetic surgery, whether it is the alteration of racialized facial features (for example, the so-called Jewish nose) or gendered body markers. Surgery enables the patient to pass as a member of the desired group—moving into and becoming invisible within a desired group (Gilman 1999: 22).

Within certain parts of critical queer and transgender studies, passing as a concept, an encouragement, and as a practice has become target of critique. In my own thinking I am first and foremost inspired by Julia Serano’s critique of and reluctance toward passing as a concept. I have therefore as far as possible tried to avoid using the word, although it circulates widely among the trans vloggers. My own reservations are closely connected to Serano’s critique that pinpoints the concept and not least its use as reflecting an inherent cissexism. As Serano notes, passing (in connection with gender) is used exclusively in connection with trans people and not non-trans people, implying that “the trans person is getting

away with something” (Serano 2007: 176). There is an element of scamming or acting (not being “authentic” or “real”) at play here that ties into conceptions of, for instance, a trans woman as not really a woman but a man masquerading as a woman. As Serano notes, when a non-trans woman is addressed as “sir,” nobody would say that she passes as a man or that she failed to pass as a woman but instead that she is a woman, mistaken for a man (Serano 2007: 176). Likewise a non-trans woman wearing a lot of makeup or a non-trans man lifting weights would not be characterized as trying to pass by achieving a more feminine or masculine appearance. However, a trans woman or trans man engaged in the selfsame activities would. As Serano shares, no matter how little concern she invests in her appearance, if she walks down the street and is recognized by others as female, she can “still be dismissed as ‘passing’ as a woman” (Serano 2007: 176). What Serano highlights is the way that the concept of passing implicitly “dismisses” the womanhood or manhood of the trans person, displacing it as an act. When passing is only applied to trans people, it naturalizes non-trans gender identifications while always potentially denaturalizing or making suspect trans identifications. Furthermore, using passing as an active verb gives the false impression that there is only one active participant in the scenario, a trans person acting as male or female and getting away with it or not, thereby putting the focus on the trans person’s motives and acts. However, the reverse is more often the case, thus the public is the primary active participant “by virtue of their incessant need to gender every person they see as either female or male” (Serano 2007: 177). As Serano argues, most non-trans people are “absolutely obsessed about whether transsexuals ‘pass’ or not,” thus almost all representations of trans from medical and academic accounts to TV, movies, and magazine articles indulge in “the fascination regarding what transsexuals ‘do’ [...] in order to ‘pass’ as our identified sex” (Serano 2007: 178).

Passing is also as problematized by Sandy Stone and Jamison Green the criteria for psycho-medical treatment, a treatment that seeks to “normalize” the trans person, programming one to disappear (Stone 2006: 230). As Green states, “To be a good—or successful—transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all” (Green 1999: 120).

Anthropologist and transgender scholar Elijah Adiv Edelman pinpoints a tendency within prevailing academic and socio-political discourses to regard passing and “stealth-identifying” as a matter of being ashamed or in denial about one’s trans history (Edelman 2009: 164). The non-disclosing trans person becomes negatively framed as not being open and proud about their identity, reinforcing heteronormative/cissexist oppression. Similar streams of thought run through the work of certain queer trans scholars and activists. For example, Kate Bornstein talks about passing as silence, invisibility, and lie (Bornstein 1994: 125), while Leslie Feinberg highlights passing as “having to hide your identity” and as “a product of oppression” (Feinberg 1996: 89). Not passing becomes an element in a broader project of disruption of the binary gender system and becomes affiliated with subversion, often associated with the identity of the “genderqueer” (Sycamore, ed. 2006; Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins, eds. 2002). The work of artist Del LaGrace Volcano, and Kate Bornstein and Leslie Feinberg is all about challenging passing as the desirable end point of transition by contributing to a more general “gender fucking” that argues for an inclusive trans politics, questioning binary gender categories and recognizing trans as a multiple and diverse identity. As Jay Prosser writes in critical dialog with Bornstein and Feinberg: “If passing is intrinsic to transsexuality, in the transgender movement passing has become a marker of cultural abjection” (Prosser p. 173–174). What Prosser and Edelman critically pinpoint is the way that passing has become demonized within certain parts of the trans movement and academic discourse as assimilation and giving in to an oppressive system. Passing, or, in



Edelman's words, stealth, has become positioned as "categorical denial," which he argues is a gross oversimplification and decontextualization of trans experiences (Edelman 2009:164–165).

The discussions among the trans vloggers complicate in a similar fashion a simplified notion of what function passing serves, thus passing is here pointed out as a dynamic practice of contextual disclosures and non-disclosures in line with the work of Edelman (Edelman 2009: 165). Being audio-visibly present as trans on YouTube adds several layers and complexities to the questions of passing, going stealth, and coming out.

## **Out Online**

*There is a very stark difference between being online and being in real life. In my everyday life I don't go around talking about being transgender or what it's like. I have several friends who I see regularly and still don't know. But online I am out about being trans and I am very open about it and I talk about my hormones or my family or different issues that I come to face with being trans that I wouldn't necessarily talk about in my everyday life (Erica: February 18, 2009).*

Erica is "out" and open about her life as trans online. In fact, she argues that she is more open about her trans status online than offline. Many trans vloggers, like Erica, are mostly "out" online, as it diminishes the emotional and physical risks and avoids the alienation that being "out" in their everyday material life would entail. Many of the vloggers disclose their trans status online before disclosing it to friends or family members, or they vlog about how and when to tell their significant others. In the following I will reflect on how and why online presence allows another kind of "openness" about one's trans status and the complex negotiations that take place among the trans vloggers about YouTube as a public forum. As the quote by Erica suggests the vlog allows trans people to perform a certain degree of public visibility that she expresses is frequently denied in a cissexist or heteronormative offline everyday life or public setting. One

might argue that the vlogs can become a way for trans people to publicly stand up for themselves in a semi-private/public way. As Erica, Carolyn, and Mason note, it seems more “safe” to expose oneself in front of the camera than in front of another live person. And maybe “one need not be all that out in real life if an emblematic trace of one’s self can connect through digital networks to other digitally queered hybrid identities” (Hillis 2009: 233). But having a vlog also exacerbates some of the issues pertaining to the closet because of the uncertainty of the receivers of these coming-outs, thus it is impossible to keep track of who knows what about you. Vloggers like Erica, Elisabeth, Wheeler, and James explicitly address their off-screen family, partners, and friends (who might also appear in the vlogs), knowing that they are watching, while others express great concern about someone from their offline life following their online activity, especially their family. Mason, for instance, has taken down several personal YouTube channel pages after his clients and “very conservative Christian family” discovered his vlogs. In the interview I conducted with him, he tells me how his family found his vlogs after he had been vlogging for a couple of years, which made him feel very uncomfortable: “I felt intruded upon, like they had walked into my community space, my queer safe space, and were judging me about it” (Interview: 24:12–25:40). Mason articulates YouTube as a “community space” and a “queer safe space,” thus as a kind of semi-private “place” where he is allowed a certain degree of safety or anonymity. The sheer number of videos available on YouTube is supposedly assumed to grant him invisibility within this hypervisibility. His vlogs are positioned as a niche within the broader field of YouTube that “outsiders,” and especially not his “very conservative Christian family,” are supposed to know about or come across. Thus, Mason’s statement shows how YouTube is a contradictory “place” for many trans vloggers, a private public forum. Wheeler shares similar experiences with me in the interview I conducted with him. On his first

day in college a girl in his class approached him and started talking out loud about having seen his transitioning videos on YouTube, which he felt very awkward about. As he tells me: “I post on YouTube but I don’t consider YouTube to crossover into my day-to-day life.” In Wheeler’s case it is not a matter of feeling intruded upon as such, as he explains to me, but that he does not like people from his offline life finding out this way and that he appreciates discretion about “outing” him (Interview: 45:50–48:49).

For Elisabeth, the vlogs are a way to communicate how she feels and what it means to be trans, hoping that her friends and family will watch them. The vlogs enable her to communicate her emotions “in ways I couldn’t have described, or explained to them or expressed at all.” As she notes, it has already improved her relationship with her mother and brought them closer together that her mother has watched the vlogs, thus, as Elisabeth states, “She finally gets me” (September 1, 2007). Like Tony, Elisabeth perceives the vlog as a device that enables her to express feelings and communicate a sense of self that she has difficulties explaining offline, thus the vlog can (potentially) occasion closer connections and understandings between her and her significant others.

When Erica discusses in a vlog how she has just discovered that her family watches her vlogs (after she has talked extensively about the dysfunctional relationship she has with them in previous vlogs), she does not seem freaked out or intruded upon, quite the contrary; she says it might improve their relationship (February 13, 2007). However, in the interview I conducted with her she tells me about an incident where someone had recognized her workplace from a vlog and came in person at her job, asking the manager to speak with her. Like Wheeler, Erica was unprepared for and felt uncomfortable about this kind of intersection between online and offline life that is not asked for or arranged by herself. As she states:

There were a couple of lessons I had to learn [...] I needed to be much more careful about what I say. It's not that I'm sharing less—I still share emotionally, but actual details about like where I'm working or where I live [...] have to be much more secretive [...] I would never show the outside of my house (Interview tape 2: 04:36–06:28).

What Erica expresses is the feeling that offline meetings and sharing with people whom one does not know personally feels far more intimate and risky than online emotional sharing. In that sense there is a perceived distance and safety within online intimacy, something that might in and of itself encourage one to share more than one usually would offline. Or, as Sherry Turkle negatively interprets the increasing online presence, or growing up “tethered” as she calls it, people “take comfort in being in touch with a lot of people whom they also keep at bay” (Turkle 2011: 15).

On the one hand, the vlogs are directed towards “insiders” with whom they can share experiences and feelings and get support. These intimate strangers being addressed online are positioned as supportive connections rather than actual friends, thus Wheeler, Erica, Elisabeth, and James operate with a clear although occasional blurred divide between a life online and a life offline. They seem most comfortable with monitoring how and when these two “lives” should interact. On the other hand, the vlogs are open to a wider public, often as a way either to reach out to trans-people-to-be or to “educate” outsiders about trans issues. The vlogs seem hereby to straddle the fine line between offering information and support for insiders as well as educating outsiders.

In this sense, one can describe vlogging as quintessentially “coming out” to a public of intimate strangers: rhetorically by claiming and conveying a trans identity, and audiovisually by displaying your changing voice and your bodily becoming to the camera. Coming-out videos have, as Jonathan Alexander and digital culture scholar Elizabeth Losh argue, become a distinctive YouTube form as LGBT people are asserting their

place in related and often contentious networked publics (Alexander and Losh 2010: 38). For some of the new trans vloggers these coming-out videos seem to serve as a testing ground for first steps in coming out in offline life. For Carolyn, being on YouTube is for a long time one of the few places where she identifies and presents as exclusively female. Elsewhere she is “not full-time yet” (September 23, 2010). YouTube seems to offer her positive “attention” and support (October 14, 2010) but she also continuously reports encountering “haters” and people who are very opinionated about her way of expressing womanhood, accusing her of not being feminine enough (December 1, 2010; September 6, 2011). The vlogs seem to enable the trans vloggers to enter a more private “space” (a safe testing ground), while also being a more public “space” (making oneself vulnerable to judgment and scorn).

### **Vlogging as a Trans Political Act**

Erica, Mason, and Diamond explicitly highlight “coming out” online as a political act. As mentioned in chapter 5, Erica encourages other trans people to put themselves “out there” (March 5, 2007) and Mason celebrates and articulates trans vlogging as digital activism, mobilizing a global trans movement (September 19, 2010j). Diamond also profiles her vlogging as a site for broadcasting things “that you wouldn’t hear about on the news or that the mainstream wouldn’t think is important [...] all the things that’s important to us [...] to trans lifestyle.” She mentions silicon pumping, HIV, escorting, getting a job, being comfortable with one’s body, and the lack of acceptance from one’s family as examples (Interview tape 2: 00:10–04:36).<sup>4</sup> Rethinking the identity-political potentials of gay/queer men’s webcam culture, media and technology scholar Ken Hillis states:

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<sup>4</sup> Silicone pumping is the injection of liquid silicone to create a more feminine silhouette, typically done by unlicensed cosmeticians. Many of the pumpers use industrial-grade silicone, sometimes diluted with adulterants like motor oil to make the product cheaper. When liquid silicone is injected directly into tissues it can stiffen and spread through the body causing pain, disfigurement, scarring, and sometimes lethal blood clots. For many

The rise of gay/queer webcam practices, [...] allowed participant-operators and their fans to ritually enact ways of making their lives more visible and thereby, given the ongoing heteronormative reluctance to extend full recognition to these men as subjects, to stake an ontology through spatially ironic political claim to exist in the here and the now (Hillis 2009: 208).

One could argue that the trans vlogs in a similar way are offering audiovisual presence (“we are here”) and with it a sense of empowerment. Coming out as trans on YouTube can potentially serve an extrovert identity-political aim by helping to create awareness about trans identities as well as serving a more introvert identity-political aim by eliciting pride and self-acceptance as trans. Vlogging seems for Erica, Mason, and Diamond to be encouraged by a wish to counteract the sensationalized portrayal of especially trans women in mainstream media. However, there is a belief in the political potential of vlogging that proliferates across and beyond these three vloggers. In all of the interviews I conducted, the subjects expressed a belief in and/or the hope for the identity political effects of the vlogs, creating greater awareness, acceptance, and knowledge as well as offering support for trans people feeling alone and alienated. The act of vlogging seemed in many cases to be sustained by the hope that it made a difference for trans people individually as well as benefitted the trans cause collectively. Some vloggers continued vlogging, even when it meant personal harassment and risking one’s privacy. As Erica states:

I at some point had to decide [...] do I want to keep making videos or do I want to stop [...] And what really kept me going back was the amount of people that I had been able to help. I had to weight if personally is it worth for me to have myself out there and have people finding out things about me, attacking me personally, doing all this malicious stuff—is that worth the positive impact that I

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trans women, pumping can seem like a relatively cheap and easy shortcut, and the practice is therefore commonplace, especially among immigrant and poor women. See, for example: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/nyregion/some-transgender-women-pay-a-high-price-to-look-more-feminine.html>

think it will have on people—and for me it was. But it was definitely a hard decision (Interview tape 2: 06:37–10:25).

As Erica suggests, being visible as trans is of great political importance, which Sandy Stone already pinpointed in her famous “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” from the beginning of the 1990s. Here Stone requests that more trans people break the silence and dare to be visible as trans identities (Stone 2006: 232). Read in the light of Stone’s request, the trans vloggers are visible as embodied voices rearticulating “their lives not as a series of erasures [...] but as a political action begun by reappropriating difference and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinscribed body” (Stone 2006: 232). Other trans writers and advocates, such as Jamison Green, also agitate for the political importance of making trans visible as a group and making it a legitimate position to uphold. As he argues:

By using our own bodies and experience as references for our standards, rather than the bodies and experience of non-transsexuals (and non-transgendered people), we can grant our own legitimacy, as have all other groups that have been oppressed because of personal characteristics (Green 1999: 123).

Being visibly present on YouTube might serve a greater political cause but, as Elisabeth pinpoints, the individual vlogger can never foresee “what potential impact it has on your life,” being out online. When one has been vlogging for a while it is not enough just to delete one’s YouTube account “something is going to be out there” (Interview: 47:05–52:25). Likewise, Wheeler admits that “it will properly be a problem sometime in the future” (Interview: 37:40–44:28). Erica tells me that a simple search for her name on the Internet results in numerous hits directly related to her vlogging, thus, as she states, “Basically I can never go stealth again because of my videos, because there is all that recognition [...] So that was the personal consequence of the recognition that I was getting (Interview tape 2:

06:37–10:25). For many of the trans YouTubers, vlogging has made it difficult if not impossible to “go stealth” or be “closeted” if they should ever want to.

## **Testimonies**

*It is important to pass things on, like what gets to us and what affects us and in what ways (Tony: May 18, 2009).*

Tony frames the vlogs as ways to communicate “what affects us and in what ways,” connecting vlogging to practices of bearing witness. I would argue that the vlogs become a digital archiving of trans testimonies that satisfies the individual need for witnessing as well as compensating for the historical lack of trans witnessing. Thus, I perceive the vlogs as tying into notions of testimony and trauma.

One of the leading researchers within the field of trauma, Dori Laub, frames testimony as knowledge production that exceeds a simple factual given, thus what matters is “not simply the information, the establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of living through testimony, of giving testimony” (Laub 1992b: 85). Laub develops his notion in connection with Holocaust testimonies and highlights the difficulty/impossibility at the time of stepping outside of the coercive, totalitarian frame of reference and the experience that there was not another to whom one could turn in the hope of being heard or being recognized as a subject (Laub 1992b: 81). Testimony is, therefore, not only the act of reporting on the oppression that one has been/is subjected to but also an act of resistance under repressive regimes (Laub 1992a: 62; Strejilevich 2006: 707). Testimony is the process by which the narrator reclaims his/her position as a witness, repossesses his/her life story, and reconstitutes the internal “thou,” which in itself is a form of action and of change (Laub 1992b: 85). Laub’s notion of testimony and trauma can, to a certain extent, be applied to the online



communication of trans experiences, especially combined with and seen through the lens of queer studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich's thinking, which specifically connects trauma to gender and sexuality vis-à-vis queer theory. I turn to Cvetkovich's inquiry in order to read these vlogs as explorations of "insidious or everyday forms of trauma [...] emerging from systematic forms of oppression," thus moving "beyond the expectation that trauma will be a catastrophic event" (Cvetkovich 2003: 33). As Susan Stryker describes, gender attribution is a kind of "cultural rape of all flesh" (Stryker 2006b: 254). Stryker describes the ambivalent feelings she has toward the gendering of her and her female partner's child, reflecting on how the utterance "It's a girl" recalls all the anguish of her own struggles with gender:

A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity. Having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one's personhood cognizable. I stood for a moment between the pains of two violations, the mark of gender and the unlivability of its absence. Could I say which one was worse? Or could I say which one I felt could best be survived (Stryker 2006b: 253).

Stryker's writing shows with great strength how the "regulatory norms" of sex and gender at times exclude and alienate trans people. Recent studies within the field of transgender mental health have also started to recognize "the chronic societal traumas encountered by transgender individuals" and recommend that the psychiatric treatment should be limited to recovery from these societal traumas instead of regarding transsexualism in itself as a specific disease entity (Tarver 2002: 104). The writing of Judith Butler also deals with the normalization of sex and gender identities, which could be seen as "a form of insidious trauma, which is effectively precisely because it often leaves no sign of a problem" (Cvetkovich 2003: 46). As Butler states:

“Sex” is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms (Butler 1993a: 1-2).

Thus, heteronormativity and cissexism has a certain delusional quality, as it installs in the outsiders “the feeling of belonging to a ‘secret order’ that is sworn to silence” (Laub 1992b: 82). Trans people are “programmed to disappear,” as Sandy Stone states:

The highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase him/herself, to fade into the “normal” population as soon as possible. Part of this process is known as constructing a plausible history—learning to lie effectively about one’s past. What is gained is acceptability in society. What is lost is the ability to authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience (Stone 2006: 230).

This makes it difficult to generate a counterdiscourse, as Stone points out, because as “‘subhumans’ [...] contaminated by the ‘secret order,’ they have no right to speak up or protest” (Laub 1992b: 82). Large parts of the psycho-medical discourse around trans people also seems to produce feelings of wrongness or perversion in the trans person. As Jason Cromwell states, “The language I read in the medico-psychological discourse shamed me into hating myself, as it does many other trans people” (Cromwell 1999: 4).

Many trans vloggers recount being alone with the feeling that there was something wrong with them, since they did not identify with their gender attribution, resulting in secretiveness. Erica also talks about growing up and feeling very different from the other children, wanting to exchange clothes with the girl next door that she played with and all through her youth having women’s clothes hidden in her room that she stole because it would be too embarrassing and impossible to buy it. She calls it “my darkest secret ever.” She felt guilty about wanting to be a girl and about secretly having and wearing women’s clothes because she

discovered that it was not considered “normal,” so she threw the clothes away from time to time. As she states: “I felt really guilty for a long time about that.” Growing up in a very religious family she felt and was told in church that she was wrong and sinful. The father discovered her clothes twice and called it a “fetish,” which made her disappointed and unrecognized because to her it was far more deeply felt (January 26, 2007). Carolyn also recounts childhood memories of secretly dressing as a girl and feeling like “a freak and weird” (June 5, 2010). Identifying and dressing as a girl was surrounded by feelings of shame and disgust, which to a certain extent proliferates into her current life, although in new ways. As Carolyn states in one of her early vlogs, “I’m just always disgusted with myself,” referring to her discomfort with her current embodiment (May 13, 2010). As she also explicates, she is not able to talk to anybody about those feelings, thus YouTube seems to partly become that “somebody” to discuss and share these powerful feelings with. And yet the trans vlogs also seem to be the result of an active decision to overcome that selfsame shame, guilt, and inhibition (see also Shattuc 1997: 116). Or vlogging can become a way to work through or let go of some of the shame as suggested by Mason in the interview I conducted with him: “Being more public online has enabled me to let go of some shame that I had around being trans and being queer and being kinky and being sexual so that has crossed over into my physical world” (Interview: 51:20–54:47).

The importance of the feelings of shame and guilt in trans people’s lives has also been pointed out by psychological therapists Leah Cahan Schaefer and Connie Christine Wheeler: “Since the emotion [of being differently gendered than what one is assigned] emanates internally, the child can blame no one but itself: ‘It must be me. I must have done something bad, or wrong, or sinful to be so different from others’” (Schaefer and Wheeler, 2004: 119). It might therefore be useful to think of shame as a traumatic experience of rejection and humiliation that is

connected to certain identity formations, for example, trans identity formations (Sedgwick, 1993: 13; Cvetkovich, 2003: 47). As Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick argues: “at least for certain (‘queer’) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities” (Sedgwick 1993: 14). What Sedgwick is implying is that shame is inevitable for “queer” people in a cissexist, heteronormative society, but that it can be put to creative, performative work and have political efficacy. In a similar vein, anger and rage have been posited as important responses to shame or being situated as an outcast, and yet these affective responses can form a basis for self-affirmation, intellectual inquiry, and political action (Bornstein 2006: 240–241; Stryker 2006b). This is also suggested by Cvetkovich, who opens up possibilities for understanding “traumatic feelings not as a medical problem in search of a cure” but as experiences that can be used for mobilizing cultures and publics (Cvetkovich 2003: 47).

I would argue that a wide variety of affects such as shame, anger, and rage have solidified into a visible counterpublic with the trans vlogs. The vlogs can be regarded as polyphonic testimonies of what it is like to be trans in a contemporary Anglo-American society. The vloggers describe the everyday negotiation of stigma and they unpack its psychological dynamics, explaining how it comes to be internalized by those affected (see also Hallas, 2009: 56). The articulation of experiences and emotions—often of excitement about the bodily changes or frustration about the discrimination by state institutions or people around them—becomes a form of embodied knowledge communicated to a supposed emphatic listener. The audiovisual form of the vlogs adds the important somatic dimension to bearing witness, creating a strong sense of bodily presence and expressing a sense of “I’m here, I count, and so do my feelings.” The mode of expression (the often low-grade aesthetic expression of the

computer camera, the speaking straight into the camera, the private *mise-en-scène*, and the occasional handheld camerawork with its jerky movement) contributes to the effect of authenticity and embodied immediacy. It is images that assume and emphasize the indexical capacities. And as Laura U. Marks states: “I would like to suggest that the indexical capacities of an image or an object are very important for those who have few sources of evidence, few witnesses to their story” (Marks 2000: 93).

### **Exposing the Wound to Others**

The vlogs prioritize a “witnessing impulse” over the “memorialising function” that defines conventional autobiography (see Hallas 2009: 117), as the vlogs are less devoted to a retrospective construction through memory than in bearing witness to transitioning processes and technologies in the present. However, a special mode of expression has developed in the form of commemorating collages. In Wheelers’s vlog commemorating his “one-year post-op” the moving images include earlier and present footage in order to bear witness to his bodily becoming. The vlog enters with quiet but evocative piano music by the band Sigur Rós, and it accompanies the moving image of Wheeler who winces while opening his hooded sweatshirt to show his newly operated chest. “Right, so two days ago I was cut open” he tells us while a big bandage, drains, and tubes of blood is revealed. He initiates us into the procedure and the function of the tubes and then a new video clip appears with a change of scenery and Wheeler showing off his chest, now only covered by big patches. Yet another clip replaces the other and as if in fast-forward we witness the healing process. In one clip after another Wheeler poses, turns around, and flexes the muscles in his upper body while bending a little in order to look into the camera and get a glimpse of what we are seeing. The camera functions as a fellow social actor, implicating the viewer in the

transformation and making him/her a co-witness in the process. Wheeler offers insights into how the healing progresses and what it feels like at the different stages, and tells us that he is trying out some “silicon scar strips” that “a really awesome guy mailed” to him who used them himself and whose “results were incredible.” “Thank you so much for sending them to me,” Wheeler says, looking into the camera and smiling, holding up his sweater for us to see the strips and the chest. The vlog ends with the actual one-year update where he shares with us the name of the surgeon and that he is “definitely happy with the results.” The music gets louder and the vlog ends with a still-photo collage of close-ups of his chest.

Wheeler’s vlog works as testimony—a testimony of a body in the act of becoming. The vlog produces a documentation of a body that materially is taking a more recognizable male shape through hormones and surgery. This partially nude body typically does not enter the screen until after the top-surgery, where it becomes exposed in various ways and at various times as a visual proof or marker of masculinity. But one might ask what purpose a testimonial vlog like this one serves. Sara Ahmed suggests that “testimonies [...] are not just calls for recognition; they are also forms of recognition, in and of themselves” (Ahmed 2004a: 200). Wheeler’s vlog is constructed as a source of recognition that inscribes and manifests him as a (trans) man. However, testimonies also have a communal, didactic, and therapeutic purpose—it is a reciprocal process where you tell or represent your story for the sake of yourself as well as for the sake of others, thus as a way to change your own life by affecting the lives of others (Frank 1995: 17–18). Testimony is a way to heal oneself as well as others with similar experiences; in Ahmed’s words, “Healing does not cover over, but exposes the wound to others: the recovery is a form of exposure” (Ahmed, 2004: 200).

Scarring and healing play a key role in this vlog as well as in many other trans vlogs. On the one hand the vloggers bear witness before the

camera to the “scars” left in/on the trans person as an effect of misrecognition, stigmatization, and discrimination, while on the other hand the vloggers willingly exhibit their physical scars or proudly present their reconfigured chest to the camera. The surgical scar seems to work as an umbilical cord that “indicates a reminder or remainder of gender transition,” thus the scars become “sources of pride that link bodily past and present” (Bloodsworth-Lugo 2007: 63, 88). The flat chest is fetishized as one of the prime markers of masculinity, while the scar is celebrated as the marker of overcoming physical and psychological distress. The scar signals a rite of passage, an inscription of masculinity in/on the body.

I would argue that the vlogs present witnesses who are able to speak within both discourses of subjectivity, on the one hand witnessing inside an “event” (being the victim who “suffers” and overcomes) and on the other hand witnessing outside it (being a self-educated expert with medical and psychological knowledge of the “condition”) (see Hallas 2009: 101). The trans vloggers are relating embodied experiences to scientific knowledge within the field. Like the activist AIDS videos analyzed by Roger Hallas, the vlogs work as sites of resistance through visualizing and addressing shamed bodily processes that do not appear in mainstream media.

### **Exit: The Trans Vloggers as an Affective Counterpublic**

I read the trans vlogs as an archive of feelings, a repository of feelings experienced by individuals in transition. They are privatized, affective responses as well as collective or political ones (Cvetkovich 2003: 10). An affect-theoretical perspective enables me both to recognize the self-speak as something more than banal narcissism and/or confessional self-submission, and to rethink the digital or the mediation as something else than a waning of “real” emotions, presence, and community. Notions that, as mentioned, run through the writings of many theorists and

commentators on new media. Mason addresses this notion explicitly, stating, “For a while I just dismissed what I was doing here [vlogging on YouTube] as a kind of technological narcissism” (September 19, 2010j). He repeats this downgrading of online communication when I interviewed him:

At first I really dismissed—I thought my vlogging was really self-indulgent and silly and irresponsible [...] It is almost like there is this idea that online communities aren’t legitimate, but since I’ve been here for a couple of years I almost do think of it as a physical space—it is a community space for me—it is an international support group [...] It is just as important as a physical space (Interview: 24:12–25:40).

YouTube does seem to offer a kind of interaffectivity, offering a feedback loop where “subjectivity and affect work reciprocally to constitute the formation of self in constant interaction with others” (van Dijck 2007: 60). A consistent pitching of virtual communication against face-to-face communication seems misleading and unproductive, as it creates a dichotomy between the technological and the real that no longer can be regarded as clear-cut, if ever it was, constantly spilling into each other. Social psychology and media scholar Sonia Livingston also argues that it may appear as if vlogging is “all about me, me, me,” but “this need not imply a narcissistic self-absorption” but “reveals the self embedded in the peer group as known to and represented by others, rather than the private ‘I’ known best by oneself” (Livingston, quoted in Lundby 2008: 5).

Along these lines I perceive the trans vloggers as an affective counterpublic: a loosely self-organized entity/network that uses and to a certain extent is enabled by the tools and framework provided by YouTube. They establish themselves through the activity of vlogging about being trans and through the continuous hailing of themselves as a counterpublic.<sup>5</sup> As queer and social theorist Michael Warner points out, a

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of a counterpublic is developed in response to Jürgen Habermas’s



counterpublic is “defined by their tension with a larger public” and it maintains at some level “an awareness of its subordinate status” (Warner 2002: 56). The cultural horizon against which it marks itself “is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one” (Warner 2002: 119). The trans vloggers offer an alternative horizon of opinion and exchange that has a critical relation to power. The (self-)disclosing aspect of the vlogs seem to be an effect of but also a response to the heavily pathologized and shamed discourses around trans identity. The vlog becomes a therapeutic tool where one individually as well as collectively tries to make sense of what is happening bodily, psychologically, and socially when transitioning. Coming out as trans online is a prerequisite for entering what I call an affective counterpublic, but it also ties into conflictual modes of publicness. Thus, the vloggers seek to increase the amount and circulation of the “archives of feelings” but no one is unaware of the risk and conflict involved.

I perceive the vlogs as enacting a kind of “biodigital” politics, and I hereby stress the potential political dimension of publicizing these “living” trans bodies and disclosing on-screen the feelings attached to this body. The trans bodies on-screen are biodigital in the sense that they appear and circulate digitally as well as are partly enabled by the vlog as a digital technology of transformation as discussed in chapter 5. However, there is

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conception of the public sphere as the space where private people can come together as a public and in turn critique the activities of the state. They did this in physical arenas like salons and coffeehouses and in media like newspapers and academic journals (Habermas 1989). Political philosopher Nancy Fraser criticizes Habermas’s conception of the public sphere, because “the problem is not only that Habermas idealizes the liberal public sphere but also that he fails to examine other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres” (Fraser 1990: 60–61). She argues that marginalized groups (women, non-whites, and so on) are excluded from a universal public sphere, and therefore they form their own public spheres, the so-called alternative publics. As Fraser states: “I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Ibid.: 67). However, I am primarily inspired by Michael Warner’s conceptualizations because he develops his notion of public and counterpublic vis-à-vis queer theory and explicitly refers to different queer counterpublics.

also a biodigital political dimension as the disclosure of the trans vloggers' bodies and intimate feelings suggests that being trans is not something (deeply private) you should be ashamed of or hide. In that sense the vloggers' audiovisual presence and requests for other trans people to start vlogging can be regarded as an attempt to transform not just policy but the space of public life itself (Warner 2002: 124). Challenging and transforming what should be "public" and what should be kept (or hidden in) "private." One might say that these trans vlogs hereby pinpoint how privacy is publicly constructed, closely connected to and inscribed in dominating norms, allowing some bodies and sexual practices a level of visibility and legitimacy but not others. I would suggest that the public display has the aim of transformation, testing and reevaluating styles of embodiment and the affects of shame and disgust that surround them (see Warner 2002: 62). Thus, the trans vloggers need YouTube as a public platform in order for these actions to count in a public way and thus be transformative, changing attitudes and discourses around trans.

The vlogs are also devoted more specifically to issues of "coming out" as trans and how that relates to passing/going stealth. The testimonial dimension of the vlog is to object to and voice one's discrimination and the affects (shame, rage) that it plants in you. The public display can be said to be invested with the hope of transformation, testifying to overcoming/surviving distress and creating alternative audiovisual trajectories that commemorate trans identities and bodies, which contributes to a reconfiguration of the discursive space within which one can speak of and be visible as trans.

## **Concluding Remarks: Digital Trans Activism**

### **YouTube: Community and Commerce**

YouTube is one of the most visited cultural archives of moving images (Juhasz 2009: 146). Although it includes a “tsunami of amateur video” (Strangelove 2010: 6), it also is ripe with profit-oriented material.

YouTube is, in short, a bundle of contradictions. On the one hand it is a “top-down” platform for distribution of popular and corporate culture. On the other hand it functions as a “bottom-up” platform for vernacular creativity and citizen participation (Burgess and Green 2009a: 6). It is an arena where big business as well as civic engagement unfolds side by side through an architecture defined and operated by the American multinational cooperation Google Inc. Professional and amateur production as well as commercial and community practices coexist (Ibid.: 57).

The trans vloggers I have discussed in this study highlight how the paradoxical nature of a site like YouTube troubles binaries between commercial and activist cultural engagement. The trans vloggers develop technical and aesthetic skills through vlogging in order to produce low-key as well as aesthetically and intellectually stimulating videos. They show how YouTube can become a site for self-revelation as much as self-creation; community building but also a business enterprise—an enterprise often centered on raising money for medical transition. Community and commerce go hand in hand. While self-promotion typically serves the purpose of becoming a visible trans advocate, it also creates career opportunities.

YouTube is often presented as the “epicenter of today’s participatory culture.” But it is hardly the origin point, as it is merely part of broader shifts in the power relation between media industries and their users that has allowed more extensive citizen participation and has

enabled these selfsame citizens to reach a larger audience (Jenkins 2009: 110, 113). As Henry Jenkins suggests, the most appropriate way of defining YouTube might be as a “convergence culture” with “complex interactions and collaborations between corporate and grassroots media” (Ibid.: 113). And yet researchers have been very opinionated about YouTube as a platform. Michael Strangelove, for instance, sees YouTube as an important new space for cultural production and consumption, a “battlefield,” where amateurs try to influence how events are interpreted and represented (Strangelove 2010: 3-4). Documentary videomaker and media scholar Alexandra Juhasz, on the other hand, is highly critical of the supposed democratic potentials of the platform, and complains of the prevalence of “formulaic videos” that refer to “personal pain/pleasure” (Juhasz in Jenkins 2008: 1). Having primarily studied activist media of nonconformists before investigating YouTube, Juhasz is concerned that the rhetoric of DIY in discussions of web 2.0 trivializes the critical or political impulse behind this activist concept (Ibid.: 3): “The banal videos I regularly saw there did not align with the ethics underpinning the revolutionary discourses I study, nor those heralding the new powers of online social networking” (Juhasz 2009: 145–146). For Juhasz, YouTube limits the truly revolutionary potential of Internet technology, as it functions as nothing but a “postmodern television set facilitating the isolated, aimless viewing practices of individuals while expertly delivering eyeballs to advertisers” (Ibid.: 146-147). In contrast to Juhasz’s sweeping critique of YouTube, my investigation of trans vlogging on this site demonstrates that this platform might also give space for video practices with a transformative potential, individually as well as collectively. Activism is more than street protest, riots, protest songs, town hall meetings, demonstrations, voluntary campaigning, or letter writing to Congress. A discussion of activism today must also include “the toolbox of the social Web,” as social media scholar Trebor Scholz argues in the article

“Where the Activism Is” (Scholz 2008: 355). And this includes trans vlogs on YouTube, as I will discuss in the following.

### **Digital Activism**

Computers have from the 1960s and onward been enrolled in dystopian as well as utopian tales concerning their social potentials and political effects. In discussions of the computer’s social potential and political effects, computers have either been seen as tools of oppression that enable increased control and managing of people from a distance, or they have been singled out as tools for liberation and socialization that challenge the hierarchical and top-down structure of state politics and mainstream media. In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* communication scholar Fred Turner makes clear how people in the 1960s, including the Free Speech Movement in the United States, saw computers as a technology of dehumanization that contributed to the centralization of bureaucracy in the rationalization of social life. Meanwhile, in the 1990s, the same machines emerged as the symbols of its transformation, promising to bring to life the countercultural dream of empowered individualism, collaborative community, and spiritual communion (Turner 2006: 2). These dystopian tales have not disappeared, and the understanding of technology as dehumanizing social relations still surface in contemporary debates, where the technology is said to alienate people from themselves and others (Turkle 2011). Author and columnist Nicholas Carr’s argument about how technology is changing the way our brain works and retrieves information is a case in point. As he makes clear in *The Shallows: What the Internet Does to Our Brains*: “Whether I’m online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski” (Carr 2011: 6–7). Carr suggests that the Net discourages sustained attention, and weakens a more

in-depth concentration and processing. If the dystopian views are still present, so are the utopian tales that celebrate how computers and the Internet contribute to a wider democratization by giving voice to new constituencies and encouraging civic engagement in ways that reshape the hierarchies of agency. The celebration of how social media spurred the Egyptian Revolution in the spring of 2011 is but one example—an event that often has been referred to as “The Twitter Revolution.”

Even though I do not want to succumb to any straightforward “digital utopianism,” my analyses in this study have emphasized the potentials and possibilities of Internet culture, as I have suggested the value of a counterpublic conception of digital democracy that stresses the political potentials of trans vlogs. In my readings the vlogs have a political potential regardless of whether they explicitly address strictly “political” topics such as trans legislation and policy. The vlogs are political in the sense that they enable trans people to tell their stories and be visible as trans in a globally accessible forum, and thereby “publicly” disseminate and contest information about what it means to be trans and contest boundaries of what is considered legitimate communication in the public sphere. YouTube is one among other digital media platforms that enable a counterpublic like the trans vloggers to emerge. Introducing the conceptualization of the vloggers as an affective counterpublic I stress the trans vlogs as political in the sense that they outline the affective fabrics of oppression and discrimination. I suggest that the vlogs can help us rethink the connection between political and emotional life as well as between political and therapeutic cultures. The question is what purpose these trans vlogs might serve or what effects they might have within a broader public. Do the trans vlogs drown in the tsunami of videos on YouTube, becoming nothing but a “NicheTube” (Juhasz 2009: 147)—a “subculture” that many people would not come across unless they specifically were searching for it? Minority content certainly circulates on YouTube, and

reaches niche publics, but as Henry Jenkins states, “There’s little or no chance that such content will reach a larger viewership because of the scale on which YouTube operates” (Jenkins 2009: 124). The possible effects might be limited, cut off from broader media and broader audiences and not imbued with any broader social and cultural authority and respect. These vlogs might be a niche of audiovisual storytelling that possibly is wanted by some vloggers trying to uphold a kind of private-public sphere but resulting in subcultural isolation, unable to encourage wider social change. And yet, I would argue that they have a political effect by strengthening the voice of trans as a marginalized and oppressed group, and helping trans people educate themselves, organize community, and represent themselves to a broader public. As social media scholar Megan Boler argues in the introduction to *Digital Media and Digital Democracy*: “While the impact of interventions cannot always be easily measured, this does not mean they are only or merely absorbed into a model of communicative capitalism” (Boler 2008: 25). One cannot determine who comes across these videos or how they circulate in other platforms and the possible effects this might have in a broader public.

As I argue, the vlogs facilitate audiovisual storytelling/representation that negotiates and challenges dominant discourses around trans, whether it is the sensationalized, victimizing, and stigmatizing mainstream trans representations (discussed in the introduction) or the psycho-medical pathologizations (discussed in chapter 2). My readings have paid special attention to the uniqueness of each individual audiovisual story, highlighting on the one hand how trans is articulated as a set of embodied experiences and identifications and on the other hand the intersection between identity and technology, arguing that the vlog has political and therapeutic potentials that often go hand in hand. I have argued that the trans vlog works as a mirror, a diary, an autobiography, and as a platform for community building. The vlogs

hereby become sites for the communication and production of trans identity, enabling self-creation and self-labeling, as well as for (positive) feedback, interaction, and support. Vlogging can work both as an individual act of self-validation and as a social act of recognition and encouragement. I have throughout this dissertation stressed the trans vlogs as sites of potential creative resistance, through a reading that brings forth the feminist claim that the personal is political, highlighting how the ephemeral everydayness of the vlogs speak within a larger political framework and through profiling the vlogs as countercultural interventions with explicit critical or political impulses. I have argued that the vloggers draw on such interconnected storytelling practices as (self-)disclosure, coming out and testimony as part of an ongoing self-representation and community building. Although a loosely self-organized entity/network, I nevertheless perceive the trans vloggers as an affective counterpublic, defined by their tension with a larger public and offering an alternative horizon of opinion and exchange, which encourages self-validation as trans and claims trans as a positive and legitimate subjectivity. And yet my predominantly “optimistic” reading of the countercultural potentials of the trans vlogs has also been concerned with a lack of especially cultural, racial, and class diversity among the high-profile trans vloggers. The majority of the trans vloggers are white (Anglo-)Americans of a certain socio-economic class who have the means to buy a computer and a camera, have access to the web (preferably from home and not through public terminals), have a home/room from which to comfortably and privately record, edit, and upload the vlog and have the time, energy, and intellectual resources to become fully engaged in YouTube. In that sense the trans vlogging culture reflects broader digital divides and socio-economic structures both within and outside of offline trans movements. In conclusion, YouTube facilitates alternative identities



and voices to develop and be heard, but some trans people's narratives largely remain untold.

## Author's Note

An earlier and shorter version of chapter 3 has been published under the title “Mand nok? – Om kropsliggørelser og maskulinitetsfortællinger i transkønnedes video blogs på YouTube” [Man Enough? Embodiment and Narratives of Masculinity in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube]. In *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* 3–4: 24–33.

A shorter and earlier version of chapter 5 has been published under the title “Screen-births: Exploring the transformative potential in trans video blogs on YouTube”. In *GJSS: Graduate Journal of Social Science*, December 2010, <http://gjss.org/index.php/?acymailing/archive/view/7fcc14d5515f6176639c408122cca968/10.html>.

A version of chapter 7 has been published as “DIY Therapy: Exploring Affective Self-Representations in Trans Video Blogs on YouTube”. In *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion. Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, edited by A. Karatzogianni and A. Kuntsman, 165–180. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thanks to the editors for comments, feedback, and encouragement.

## **Empirical Material**

### **Vlogs:**

All the vlogs uploaded to YouTube by: James, Wheeler, Tony, Mason, Erica, Elisabeth, Carolyn and Diamond.

### **Interviews with:**

- James (appendix 1)
- Wheeler (appendix 2)
- Mason (appendix 3)
- Erica (tape 1 and 2) (appendix 4)
- Elisabeth (appendix 5)
- Diamond (tape 1 and 2) (appendix 6)

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## **Abstract**

The dissertation is a virtual ethnographic study of video blogs (vlogs) on YouTube produced, populated, and distributed by Anglo-American trans people. The study encompasses online observations, content, and visual analysis, as well as semi-structured interviews with case-study video bloggers (vloggers). There are eight case-study vloggers—four trans men and four trans women—who all use the vlog as a way to discuss their encounter with and experience of transition technologies and processes. The case-study vloggers all pop up using a simple search for “transgender” on YouTube, and represent different and yet typical ways of representing oneself as trans on YouTube. The research is guided by the following research questions: How do trans vloggers narrate and visualize the encounter with and experience of transitioning processes and technologies? What opportunities does a new medium like the vlog bring about for trans people in relation to the representation of self and community building? And what (new) possibilities for the visualization and communication of affective politics are enabled by the vlog?

The dissertation is comprised of seven chapters, starting with an unfolding of my methodological premise and ethical considerations, conducting what I label “transgender studies 2.0.” Chapter 2 is divided into two parts, situating and contextualizing the vlogs. The first section outlines and analyzes the pathologization of trans as an identity category by looking at the psycho-medical diagnostic procedures and barriers of access, as well as some of the socio-economic issues pertaining to (medical) transition. The second section offers an overview and analysis of what I outline as the contestation of trans identities/narratives within gender studies, discussing how to move beyond a conceptualization of trans as gender traitors or gender revolutionaries. Chapters 3 and 4 present and analyze the trans male and trans female vloggers, focusing on

a close reading of the ways they present themselves and interact with the camera and their peers, as well as the labels, concepts, and language they use to express themselves by applying and discussing some of the theoretical concepts from chapter 2. Chapter 5 takes the notion of screen-birth as a starting point for outlining and analyzing the various ways that the trans vloggers emerge and develop online in/through the vlog as a medium, cultivating the vlog as a mirror, a diary, and an autobiography. Chapter 6 offers an exploration of how a sense of community is created and expressed among the trans vloggers and what the potentials of web 2.0 can enable with respect to connecting and mobilizing trans people online. Chapter 7 is the final chapter, looking at the vloggers as what I label an “affective counterpublic,” using the vlog and the interaction with peers as a kind of DIY therapy. This chapter takes its point of departure in the widespread claim that contemporary Western media culture is oriented toward confession. I interpret the trans vloggers as rejecting the confessional modus by using such interconnected practices as (self-)disclosure, coming out, and testimony as tools in an ongoing self-representation and community building.

The dissertation as a whole tries to describe and analyze a field of study that has not yet been subjected to in-depth scholarship. It offers cross-disciplinary analysis, investigating contemporary claims of trans identity in/through social media. The readings pay special attention to the intersection between trans identity and technology, arguing that the vlog has transformative and therapeutic potentials that can help us reframe the political potentials of the two.

## Resumé

Denne afhandling er et virtuelt etnografisk studie af video blogs på YouTube, produceret, befolket og distribueret af Angloamerikanske transkønnede. Dette studie indbefatter online observationer, indholds- og visuelle analyser, såvel som semi-strukturerede interviews med udvalgte video bloggere (vloggere). Studiet tæller otte særligt udvalgte vloggere – fire trans mænd og fire trans kvinder, som alle anvender vloggen som medie til at diskutere mødet med og oplevelsen af transitionsteknologier – og processer. De valgte vloggere er at finde ved en simpel søgning efter "transgender" på multimedieplatformen YouTube, og de repræsenterer forskellige og dog repræsentative måder, hvorpå transkønnede anvender vlog mediet og fremstiller sig selv online. Dette studie stiller følgende forskningsspørgsmål: Hvordan skildrer transkønnede vloggere deres møde med og oplevelse af transitionsteknologier –og processer? Hvilke nye muligheder tilbyder vlog mediet transkønnede i forhold til selvrepræsentation og skabelsen af kollektive fællesskaber? Samt hvilke nye muligheder for digitalt medborgerskab og affektive politikker muliggøres med vlog mediet?

Afhandlingen består af syv kapitler, begyndende med en redegørelse for de metodologiske præmisser og etiske overvejelser i forhold til det greb, jeg overordnet set betegner som trans studier 2.0. Kapitel 2 er opdelt i to større afsnit, der begge situerer og kontekstualiserer de transkønnedes vlogs. Første del optegner og analyserer patologiseringen af trans som identitetskategori ved at se nærmere på psyko-medicinske diagnostiske kriterier og procedurer såvel som nogle af de socio-økonomiske problematikker, der er forbundet med (medicinsk) transition. Anden del er en forskningsoversigt og analyse af det, jeg betegner som problematiseringen af trans identiteter/narrativer indenfor kønsstudier. Her diskuterer jeg, hvorledes det er muligt at bevæge sig væk fra et analytisk perspektiv, der hovedsagelig er orienteret

mod at begrebsliggøre trans som enten kønsforrædere eller kønsrevolutionære. Kapitel 3 og 4 præsenterer og analyserer de trans mandlige og kvindelige vloggere med særligt fokus på at nærlæse, hvordan de fremstiller sig selv og interagerer med kameraet og deres seere, hvilke mærkater, begreber og hvilket sprog de anvender til at beskrive sig selv. Her kommer nogle af de teoretiske pointer og begreber fra kapitel 2 ligeledes i spil. Kapitel 5 tager afsæt i begrebet "skærmfødsel" og anvender det til at udfolde og analysere, hvordan vloggerne repræsenterer sig selv og udvikler sig gennem vlog mediet. Jeg argumenterer for, at vloggen anvendes som et form for spejl, som en dagbog og en selvbiografi. Kapitel 6 udforsker, hvorledes en oplevelse af fællesskab opstår blandt trans vloggerne samt hvad web 2.0 har af mulige potentialer i forhold til at mobilisere transkønnede online. Kapitel 7 er det sidste kapitel, der udfolder, hvorledes trans vloggerne kan betragtes som en "affektiv modoffentlighed", der på DIY terapeutisk vis anvender og forbinder sig med andre transkønnedes gennem vloggen. Dette kapitel tager afsæt i den udbredte antagelse om, at samtidig vestlig medie kultur er orienteret mod bekendelse. Jeg argumenterer for, at trans vloggerne afviser en bekendelsesmodus og i stedet benytter sig af andre beslægtede selvrepræsentationspraksisser (selvafsløring, at springe ud, vidnesbyrd), der muliggør selv fremstilling og giver en følelse af fællesskab.

Afhandlingen forsøger overordnet set at beskrive og analysere et felt, der endnu ikke er blevet undersøgt tilbundsgående. Det er et tværfagligt studie, der udforsker hvordan transkønnede formulerer, forhandler og skaber identitet via sociale medier. I mine analyser er jeg i særdeleshed optaget af, hvordan trans identitet og teknologi forbinder og forskyder sig på nye måder. Jeg argumenterer således for, at vloggen har et transformativt og terapeutisk potentiale, der kan være med til at reformulerer, hvilke politiske agenser denne sammenvævning af trans og teknologi kan have.