

“THE URGENT NECESSITY FOR MORE ORIGINAL CREATIVE WORKS BY
TRANSGENDER AND GENDER EXPANSIVE ARTISTS” IS NOT THE TITLE OF
MY THESIS

By

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B.F.A., Spalding University, 2014

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A Thesis Approved on

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DEDICATION

Over the year and a half that I researched
and wrote this, 53 trans folks were murdered.

This is dedicated to them, and to all
the queer kids who couldn't hold on,
and most of all this is dedicated to Lucas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the following people: Dr. Calvano for guidance during my time at the University, and for sparking the idea to get a graduate degree in theatre. My cohort, Sarah Elston, Sa'id Nxttime Kelly, and Latrice Richardson, growing and learning with you has been one of the greatest honors of my life. C.M., my editor and dear friend, you make me a better thinker. Finally, thank you to my wife, Rachel Firkins. Seeing your presence and impact on everyone you meet challenges me to evolve, and your love and support makes it worth staying on this earth long enough to do that evolving. You are the wind beneath my wings. #SorryNotSorry.

ABSTRACT

“THE VITAL NECESSITY FOR TRANS AND GENDER EXPANSIVE ARTISTS TO
WRITE THEIR OWN WORK” IS NOT THE TITLE OF MY THESIS

Alicia B. Fireel

April 27, 2023

This thesis is a mix of personal reflection, academic research, and an examination of *The Girl Crazy Queer and Other Fairy Tales*, a play I wrote and performed in October of 2023, co-produced by The University of Louisville’s Department of Theatre Arts and Pandora Productions, a Louisville-based theatre company dedicated to Queer theatre.

This thesis and the play mirror each other; both contemplate Queer experiences, Queer histories, Queer trauma, and Queer stories. In the thesis I accomplish this through examining four subjects: myself, my play, the connection between modes of storytelling and aspects of transgender Queerness, and the perils that the Queer community faces.

Through a deep excavation of those four subjects, I argue that not only does our media culture need more representation of nonbinary Queer people to mitigate those negative effects of the perils that face the queer community, but that representation needs to be written by transgender and nonbinary artists.

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INTRODUCTION

This is where my thesis statement is supposed to go, a frustrating fact not only because starting with a thesis is, pardon the bad juxtaposition, the antithesis of the very discipline in which I create -theatre- but also because starting with a thesis is an orthodoxy that feels antithetical to the area of study and to my lived experience of queerness, about which I am attempting to write and formulate meaningful thought; and yet, *this is where my thesis statement is supposed to go*, so under protest I respectfully offer it to you now: It is vital for transgender and gender expansive artists to create original work that utilizes their lived experience in order to portray the varied emerging queer identities that are missing or misrepresented in the current theatrical, filmic, and new media canon. The research that infuses this thesis springs from and is situated around my artistic process in writing and performing my own work, a play entitled *The Girl Crazy Queer and Other Fairy Tales*. It's a play that attempts to braid several different dramatic approaches in search of understanding -and presenting it so that others might share some understanding- of my personal history and journey through life as a neurodivergent Queer. There are four structurally different narrative threads, and three main viewpoint characters, all of which I played. More on that later. My play, and the kinds of plays I write in general, are a reflection of the academic work I'm interested in writing. How do ideas, stories, allegories, and the life of the mind form the conscious and

unconscious understanding we have of ourselves, and how does that leak into our everyday lives?

As a reflection on, or of, my generative artistic process, a front loaded and sign posted way of expressing meaning, i.e., the prosaic academic thesis, is a format that tends to obscure what I see as the second half of *every* thesis statement: the reason why. Not a research-based reason why, not a "my work is a response to the work done by..." why, but the why that tells us whence the *need* to write this thesis came. The thesis behind the thesis, if you'll allow the cliché; *the shadow thesis*. There may be people out there who have only a general academic interest in their subject, completely uninfluenced by their lived experience. I believe that behind every true obsession of the mind are lived experiences, traumas, old love, lost friends, ghosts, mysteries and stories. A synthesis of those things -the area of a person's study and the things that fuel it- is what I feel compelled to write: dense critical theory mixed with autobiography, a kind of autotheory (Weigman), that is in itself an inverse, a mirror, of the fiction and theatre I feel compelled to write. The danger in my dual fascinations is that I risk becoming trapped in between the mirrors. The autotheory reflects the fiction based on my life and experiences, the fiction reflects the theory, and each reflection has less meaning to anyone outside of myself, until I become caged by *mise en abyme*, a picture within a picture within a picture. Or perhaps just paralyzed by a panopticon of one.

But the possibility -and this is what keeps me working- is that I might safely navigate the mirrors and act as cartographer for a few of those people of varied emerging queer identities that are missing or misrepresented in the current theatrical, filmic, new media -and I guess academic- canon. This work- the creation of roadmaps and the

representation of complex Queer identities, more specifically transgender, nonbinary trans, and gender expansive Queerness, is especially important at this moment in history because- Well, I suppose this is where I should define terms like “gender expansive” and “nonbinary trans.” But defining those terms is difficult because of this particular moment in history, right now, during this sentence being first drafted at 9:45AM, 2/25/2023, the definitions and even the legal existence of trans people is being argued over. While bills have been introduced and some signed into law all over America, of particular concern to me as a trans person In Louisville, Kentucky, are the bills being considered and voted on in the Kentucky legislature in early 2023. House Bill 470 would outlaw any gender affirming medical or psychological care, despite the fact that the American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association say gender affirming care saves lives. It would make it illegal for many teachers to say anything about the existence of queer gender identities or sexualities, the so-called “don’t say gay” laws (Watkins). Senate Bill 115 seeks to essentially outlaw drag performances, by defining all drag performances as “adult entertainment,” and uses wording that many LGBTQ+ advocates fear can be used to harass trans people in public places (Human Rights Campaign). Specific aspects of some of the bills muddy the difference between gender and biological sex, a tool that can be used to deny that any genders exist that don’t correspond directly to biological sex. This line from HB 470 concerning the way the Department of Juvenile Justice “classifies” detainees: “...create a new section of KRS Chapter 600 to prohibit the Department of Juvenile Justice from classifying a detainee by a sex that is inconsistent with defined sex,” (Commission, HB 470). It’s late February; these bills may be laws before I finish writing this thesis. In this

moment definitions can't be divorced from time, so throughout this thesis, I will reference events that occurred, and actions I took, within the drafting process of this work. When I do so, I will note the time and date. An example might be: "On Thursday, February 23, 2023, at roughly 7:38 am, I realized I need to explicitly state and explain how and why I've inserted timestamps, and not just assume the reason is self-evident." These timestamps are necessary, not just as a reflection that definitions and concepts of Queerness are changing, but as an understanding that this is a specific and dangerous time for Queer Americans and most especially trans gender Americans. This is occurring in real time as I write this thesis, disrupting and resituating my research and creative work. These timestamps also acknowledge that researching and deepening my understanding of the existing literature around Queerness is changing me, and has been changing me, in real time, creating a journey just as important as the journey undertaken by the characters in the plays I write. And I think that journey, which can't be divorced from time and place, is an integral part of this thesis. This thesis cannot help but also be a chronicle, and I believe it has value beyond academia, because the entire Queer community is trying to understand and live through this moment, and I am situated at an intersection of the arts, the academy, and personal identity that makes me uniquely suited to act as chronicler. Many Queer people have come to understand our queer identities by live interactions, the mish mash of internet interactions as well regular ass internet articles that are available to people who lack either the permission or the ability to navigate the collected body of work represented by academia. The journey I'm on is one that is worth sharing.

DEFINITIONS

Okay- I promised some definitions, and here they come: You ready? Are you sure? Okay. Someone who is transgender doesn't identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. So simple! Okay, that's a just for now definition, as alluded above, there are a lot of definitions for transgender, and for gender, and they are charged with implications. I'll come back to those in a minute, for now, let's do some non-fight starting definitions. "Queer" is the phrase I use that means gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, asexual, pansexual, transgender, demisexual, and other emerging sexualities and genders. T/GE means "trans and gender expansive." It applies to people who are binary transgender as well as people who identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, genderpunk, and other emerging genders that in some way reject cisgender and binary transgender. Nonbinary is the blanket phrase I'll use to describe people who identify as trans, but do not identify as either gender -male or female- in the binary concept of gender. Assigned male at birth (AMAB) and assigned female at birth (AFAB) references the gender a person is assigned by their doctor at their birth when the doc says "Congrats, it's a-" boy or girl. Trans-ness is a blanket T/GE term that means the experience of being trans, or one's trans state of being. Often, I use T/GE to reference or juxtapose different people's trans-ness. Neurodivergent (ND), whew- that's a whole complex thing. Neurodivergent refers to people who have one or more of a wide variety of what are generally called "mental disorders" or "disabilities;" we see our difference as a natural and beautiful thing. We see the world differently. *I* see the world differently. And I'm not fucked up. The world is fucked up. No citation, not supporting quotes, *the world is fucked up*. The neurodiverse have one or more of any of the following "disorders:" bipolar disorder,

autism, attention deficit or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, borderline personality disorders, or other “disorders” that affect the way they mentally or emotionally experience the world.

DEFINITION? IT'S REALLY MORE OF A *VIEWPOINT*.

I promised more complex, and divisive, definitions of transgender, but I think it's probably more helpful to think of them as viewpoints that inform definitions.

Additionally, if the viewpoints I share below are arguing over “what” being trans is, we need to also consider *where* trans is, and *when* trans is. These viewpoints, and the context of where and when support my claim that self-generated solo work created by trans and nonbinary performers, because these differing viewpoints, even those that are trans supportive, aren't centered around our actual *lived experiences*, or our *stories*. I'll discuss the concept of “lived experience” and the focus on solo work in subsequent sections of this thesis.

I'm borrowing three definitions of gender from Nathaniel Dickson's article

Towards a Trans Epistemology:

- 1.) In its biologically determinist form, as a characteristic of a biologically fixed feature that is defined by genitals- binary, predetermined, and genetically verifiable fixed gender.
- 2.) In its dualist form, as a purely social construct that is to be juxtaposed with the biologically fixed features of sex- a social relationship between objects where the valuation is changeable but separate from its underlying, fixed biological basis.
- 3.) In its medicalist form, as a trait that is itself biologically determined but variable from genitals- the quest for neurological evidence of difference that justifies the existence of a transgender person by identifying some fixed

observable trait that simultaneously makes sense of the trans person while protecting the integrity of gender itself.

(Dickson 205)

Let's move onto the Who of trans-ness, which must stretch beyond people who identify as trans to include all the people who have feelings about transness, which seems to be just about everybody. I'll stick with three designations, mirroring the construct referenced above. Also- this is where some of you might go ahead and get off the bus, realizing that I'm going to go all in with the "super informal, pretty offensive" tone that I'm establishing here. We're seven pages in, totally bail now. First, we've got some lovely folks I like to call: Fuckheads (Fuckheads): This designation includes several groups but is largely made up of those who agree with definition number one from above. They reject transness in every form. Fuckheads can include a wide variety of people, from the Religious Right to Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminists (TERFs). In case I'm being too subtle, I don't much care for these people, and combating in one way or another the effects of their actions is a strong motivating factor in my work. Second, we have Social Construct People (SCP): Those that agree with definition two as stated above. These are the Judith Butler, let's-destroy-the-patriarchy-by-doing-drag people. These are the give me something to break, let's party like it's 1999, gender is a flat circle, there's a party in the USA. You wanna get nuts, come on, let's get nuts, people. These folks are okay in my book. I mean, I dig the vibe, and sure, gender is performance, but sometimes this makes me feel more like gender is *show choir*. Queerness is just one long episode of Glee.

The Medicalist Type (TMT): Those that agree with definition three from above. These people are also okay in my book, depending on how accepting they are of different ideas about transness, including SCPs. But I'm also kind of like, Why Bother? Because of-

My personal feeling is that there is some kind of Schrödinger's Queer Cat: Maybe gender is a construct, maybe there is some medical aspect to gender, or maybe there is a hybrid of the two that addresses the collected phenomenon that we currently refer to as "gender," but is actually some totally different thing. *And we're not going to know until the cat comes out.* My suspicion is that gender is a biopsychosocial phenomenon. I'll use this term more in Chapter Two while considering pain. The short definition is that an experience or feeling includes three components: bio, i.e. the body; psycho, i.e. the mind; and social, all the experiences outside of the self, everything that isn't body or mind. Each person's gender is made up of their own individual matrix of those three factors. Actual trans-folx also generally fit into three categories, the social construct trans (SCT), the medicalist neurological trans (TMNTs, yes that was on purpose), and those like me who either aren't sure, or kind of don't care- due to the fact that currently, we trans folk have bigger fish to fry, because of Where and When.

I live in America. While there is certainly world-wide anti-transness, my work is situated within the Good Ol' U.S. of A., and its socio-political landscape, which includes a lot of Fuckheads.

When are we? The moment of my very first draft of this paragraph is 8:27am, February 3rd, 2023, Eastern Standard Time. That is when I'm writing this sentence. Why so specific? Because every day now Fuckhead legislators introduce new anti-trans bills.

Because violence against trans people is on the rise. Because the mental health of trans people, including trans teens, is in crisis. It's now several days later, Monday, February 6th, 2023, 10:23 PM and Last Friday, the same day I wrote the first sentence in this paragraph, a trans woman named Zachee Imanitwitaho was murdered a five-minute drive from where I live (Rocío, Bríñez, and Johnson).

There is an additional Where, one that is specific to me, the rest of the Queer and neurodiverse students amongst whom I study The University of Louisville.

Look, I'm going to try to limit the amount of time I spend beating you over the head with upsetting facts, if for no other reason than whatever my thesis is, "life is pretty fucked up for queer people right now" does not in and of itself prove it. It supports the idea that something needs to be done to protect T/GE folk, but it doesn't prove that more gender expansive artists creating original work onstage is what the world needs. But it directly affects the second half of my thesis, the part that says that the events of my life, and the current state of the world in which I and the entire Queer community live, is what drives me to write a thesis that is a mix of theory and my lived experiences. Wait- hold on, I probably have to-

“YOU KEEP USING THAT WORD. I DO NOT THINK IT MEANS WHAT YOU THINK IT MEANS,” (MONTOYA).

Did I mention I’m a drug addict and an alcoholic? Relax, I have 14 years of sobriety. Much like the existing research done on “mental disability” i.e. neurodivergence, research focusing on “lived experience” has come to take on an important place in addiction and recovery research. The ways of talking about lived experience within the sciences illuminates what “lived experience” can mean in theatre better.

In the public debates about theatre, film, etc. “lived experience” has a strong connection to the discussion of appropriation, and other aspects of social inequity. Its meaning has mutated until it means something more akin to *street cred* or *permission* when it comes to creating and performing art. In the most reductive, strawman sense of this idea, an artist without lived experience of a subject isn’t *allowed* to write about it.

But in a more clinical sense, the phrase pertains to different bases or sources of knowledge, and their relative value. For a long time “professional knowledge” has been the major knowledge base used in the sciences. This knowledge comes from sources like studying a subject in books and listening to lectures from “experts” in the field. Degrees from universities represent the accrual of “professional” knowledge. But there are other bases of knowledge, and the one with which I’m most concerned is lived experience. A simple way of looking at this idea is to say that lived experience is a kind of *expertise* (King, Lloyd, Meehan 28-29). To use perhaps the largest cultural divide in America as an example: I could study Black culture for decades, I could become an expert on Black art, Black theatre ethnographic studies of Black communities. But I could never fully

know the experience of being Black. In a sense, “lived experience” represents a singular life long study of a subject. The same can be said of the experiences of transness, queerness, being a woman, being an immigrant, or a member of another marginalized population. In addiction recovery, lived experience is blended with professional knowledge to inform treatment models. Lived experience can be used to find more effective outcomes.

I care about the social justice end of this conversation, but I often choose to look at the issue in terms of outcomes: I think the expertise granted to an artist by lived experience renders better art, and I think better art also renders better representation. I return to the field of addiction recovery. *The Handbook of Psychosocial Rehabilitation* offers a very brass tacks table that compares various concepts as it might be explained using a professional base of knowledge versus an explanation gleaned from lived experience. Here are several of their comparisons, with the professional knowledge based description offered first, followed by the description based in lived experience.

“Recovery means returning to premorbid level of functioning,” versus “recovery means a forward movement often thriving beyond premorbid functioning.” “External application of treatment is valued as central to the recovery process,” versus “Internal knowledge is named as valuable in the recovery process. Requires active involvement.” “Recovery primarily involves the effort of others,” versus “Recovery requires active involvement of the person.” Imagine the same sentences applied to a protagonist, and lived experience in the three examples suggest an *active* subject that has *agency*. The lived experience offers an inherently more dramatic viewpoint. In the following juxtaposition the lived experience lends itself to artistic themes: “Spirituality and creating meaning is not

important in the recovery process,” versus “Developing meaning and purpose and utilizing spirituality is seen as an important aspect in recovery.” How about “Predetermined nature of the recovering process,” versus the “Unique and individual process of recovery.” Stories need to be unique. I’ll list one more and then move on. “Recovery is seen as a linear process where someone is improving every day,” versus “recovery values its nonlinear nature where the ups and downs contribute to the richness of the recovery process.” A person with an uncomplicated character arc is less interesting than a person with a complex character arc containing various ups and downs (King, Lloyd, Meehan 29-31).

Indigo Montoya did not write the quote I used as the heading for this section. Indigo Montoya is a fictional character who said the quote. So the proper attribution would be more like, “you keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means,” (Goldman). But that kills the pop-culture reference.

WE NOW RETURN TO THE PREVIOUSLY INTERRUPTED

“DEFINITIONS” SECTION

That part of my thesis states: From the research that is me being alive I know that if I don't create, my other option is to stand somewhere and scream and scream until Edvard Munch rises from the grave and says, “Jesus, enough already we get it.” That seems like not a great option. Luckily, artistically writing a mix of theory, thoughts, and feelings as an academic work has plenty of precedent, so I think I have a solid 70/30 chance that I can get away with it. (Wiegman). My work as an artist and an academic is rooted in social justice and revolution, an artistic practice that I share with the U of L Theatre Arts Department as a whole. We are charged to create “art in Action, to make work that is engaged and inclusive, rigorous and enjoyable, thoughtful and transformative.” Work that is *socially conscious* (Theatre Arts Department Mission).

So how can I write a thesis that is not also rooted in social justice and revolution? How can I write something that doesn't directly interact with how I feel about things that are happening right now? How do I not also write about the personal moments of discovery I've had while researching this thesis, how do I not also write that I've stood in the Ekstrom Library crying because I was reading a book full of anti-trans hate speech disguised as scholarship? I can't. I hope that works for you- because I've spent three years of my life here, and between the time that I got accepted to grad school and now there has been a pandemic, a social uprising, an attack on our nation's capital, a lot of hate crimes, cops murdering people, and marches, and I need to get the hell out of the ivory tower and get back out there.

When it comes to specific terminology, word usage, rhythm, humor, and grammars I have purposefully and politically diverged from academia when I deemed appropriate. That includes using terminology that originates online and in social media, and it includes eschewing strict rules of written English grammar. Because reasons. JK, because institutional bigotry and silencing. Or, because Language is a Place of Struggle, (hooks). However, I have strived to define diverging and emerging terminology, keep the use of terms consistent unless otherwise noted, and sought clarity in every sentence clause, and word. Rebellious diction is not *just* a petulant gesture, it is an overture and an outstretched hand reaching towards people who think reading M.F.A. thesis is not for you. Also- all those definitions and initialisms I defined a few pages back? I'll be switching back and forth between the initialisms and the terms they represent, because God hates weak repetition in prose, and so do I.

In rejecting these structures, I follow a path most famously laid by another Kentucky writer, bell hooks. Her words in *Choosing the Margin as a Radical Space of Radical Openness* spurred deep recognition in me when I read "I have been working to change the way I speak and write, to incorporate in the manner of telling a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me," (hooks 16). As a creative writer I am primarily a playwright- I seek truth in the rhythm of voices. Rejecting academia-speak returns me to the cradle of Western theatre and to the Greek roots of Western punctuation: Aristophanes of Byzantium who created the first three punctuation marks as a guide first used to help create rhythm and tell orators when to take a breath. (Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy and Culture) Even when I write in silence I can hear my words out loud, and above all else in

all my writing academic, journalistic and creative, I want my language to create a space for marginalized voices to breathe and be heard.

In my attempt to create that space, I've organized a wide swath of thoughts and ideas into five chapters, each with multiple subsections.

“Chapter One: The Play and the Process” focuses on the play *The Girl Crazy Queer, and Other Fairy Tales*, which I wrote and performed in October of 2023, co-produced by The University of Louisville's Department of Theatre Arts, and which provides the basic lens through which I view the rest of the chapters in this thesis.

This chapter begins with “The Play is a Thing,” a section that focuses on the script of the play, using excerpts of explanatory paragraphs to lay out the plot, characters, basic storytelling devices, and important themes of the play. “Mirror, Mirror” juxtaposes nonfiction and fiction, considering ways one can write dramatic work in which oneself is the subject. In “What's Solo Performance?” I examine the reasons outside of artistic self-expression or political and social motivation that I wanted to write this piece, reasons that are linked to professional development, finances, and feasibility of future productions of the play. “Co-Conspirators” is focused on my director, the other actor in the play, and how the initial performance of the play moved from the page to the stage, and points out that the best laid plans of mice and men don't always work out.

“Chapter Two: Why *new* T/GE theatre?” Addresses three main concerns. The first is my thoughts on what it means to be “nonbinary.” The second is difficulties and dangers facing the Queer which I think are mitigated by the Queer community seeing theatre. This includes statistics around mental health, discussion of my own personal experiences in the theatre that lead me to believe that previously existing plays aren't the ideal vehicle

for telling Queer stories. The third is my limited experience attempting to explore my gender onstage in existing plays from the theatrical canon by briefly sketching my performance in two plays; *(re)Fashion*, and *Twelfth Night*, and how the rehearsal and performance process was or wasn't fulfilling. I argue that my experiences formed my personal feeling that *self generated* work is key for nonbinary performers, and support that claim with writings by nonbinary theatre maker K. Woodzick, which show that my experiences are not limited to me.

Lastly, I will engage with the idea that for me, being nonbinary is not a gender per se, so much as it is a placeholder, and a term that I use to describe my feeling and understand that I do not belong to any other binary gender I have found. Nonbinary is not a static thing, it is an ongoing process, and ongoing artistic process.

Chapter Three: "How Did We Get Here" has the strongest concentration of discussions of my personal life and stories from my youth. It details the gender models I had in mass media as a child and teenager, briefly restates a period of depression and alcoholism in my 20's, and the process of "coming out" in my mid to late 30's.

My main thesis for Chapter Four: "Why Storytelling/We're All Storytellers" is that storytelling *is* queer culture. I'll begin by discussing similarities between several important cultural ideas, including trickster tales, sacred clowns, story tellers, and Satan. Please imagine a face-melting guitar riff whenever I use the name Satan.

I examine *Secretly Han Solo*, a one person show I co-created with Louisville based Drag King Vic Leon, and *The Burn it All Down Play*, which I workshopped with Louisville based Actor Mollie Murk. These two previous examples of my work, both of which were one-person shows, help to continue this paper's interrogation of *The Girl*

Crazy Queer in two ways: they illuminate my evolving understanding of the difference between storytelling and monologue, and continues the examination of the thematic underpinnings in my work that react to the juxtaposition of gender models I had growing up, including Han Solo, Princess Leia, Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf.

Having established the crucial difference between monologue and storytelling, I move to a discussion of my experiences performing in the storytelling milieu as typified by the storytelling podcast *The Moth*, which helped me craft the way I interacted with the audience and performed as the Librarian, the third main character I play in *The Girl Crazy Queer*.

In “Chapter Five: Why Theatre” I examine how theatre demands a literal performance of gender, and how that makes it a valuable tool for artistically exploring ideas of gender that focus on performance.

I consider the nature of transition, in the theatrical sense and the trans sense. I discuss two ways of understanding self, the philosophical and the personal. The philosophical will focus on the ways that theatre reflects the framework of “The Other” as a necessary foundation for understanding self. I problematize this idea, connecting it to the gender binary, but also suggest that theatre has the power to transcend or heal the damage that the binary concept of gender inflicts.

I move on to ideas about the self that reflect personal understandings I struggled to find in therapy. I reference personal work with my therapist, including ideas from the work by Bill Plotkin, whose therapeutic work formed a framework for a lot of the emotional healing I did before “coming out,” and has translated for me to a framework for looking at gender exploration. Rather than the binary of self, Plotkin identifies four

facets of self, and also the four sets of fragmented or wounded subpersonalities that form during childhood. Plotkin's complex schema allows a flexibility that speaks to the multifaceted selves that I am expressing through all of the characters in *The Girl Crazy Queer*. In particular I will discuss the character The Outside Voice, and the way he springs directly from my examination of my interior self.

The conclusion of this thesis attempts to situate the theoretical ideas alongside the real world issues facing T/GE people, problematizing the assertions of my original thesis, before attempting to formulate a cogent set of performable actions that I as an artist can take to at least continue making and helping other T/GE people make the kind of self-generated material I argued for, whether or not I can prove that creating such work will have measurable effects in our increasingly transphobic social milieu.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this paper I've tried to rely on works of queer and trans scholars. Yes, that includes Aristotle. There are already a growing number of queer and T/GE people in academia, and their work is invaluable because it brings a crucial understanding of the subject that is not possible for cis academics to obtain, no matter how diligent their struggle. While I have included ideas and quotes from many traditional examples of scholarly writing, I have also sought whenever possible to work with sources that are available to the general public. Like many aspects of this thesis, this is a purposeful political act, an attempt to counter the structurally transphobic effects of the academic institution. More traditional scholarly works aren't always available to people outside of academia, and least not without financial resources or the skill to navigate systems like interlibrary loans. This thesis is meant to help inspire and guide trans-nonbinary people to explore the creation of their own stories across a variety of performing disciplines, and I can't very well help lay people by citing shit they shall never ever see. Even though these sources are easily available outside the ivory tower of academia, they uphold their own academic rigor, carefully listing sources, though not always in a traditional academic format.

I have relied on *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, a book which exhaustively covers every aspect of trans life, and it attempts to bridge the gap between academic analysis of information and useful real-world tools that can be utilized to have a real and beneficial impact on the lives of trans people. I cried a lot when I read this book.

As said above, I have attempted whenever possible to rely on the work of Queer authors. It's helpful then that Aristotle was Queer as fuck, because his *Poetics* is

rightfully the foundation of Western thought on what we call “theatre.” I mostly make excited goofy noises when I read *The Poetics*. It’s a banger.

In *A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture (Identity, Transformation, and Performance)* performance artist Nina Arsenault draws together many ideas that are important to this thesis, including aspect of performance, transgender issues and work she describes as “self-portrait.”

I believe it is important for me to note the huge debt this work owes to Black thinkers and writers. From the works of theory by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw who first defined “intersectional,” to bell hooks challenging how academic writing can sound, to the works of theatre by Adrienne Kennedy and Michael R. Jackson, the language and landscape of intersectionality is Black. I don't want to appropriate or draw false equivalencies between their experience and mine, but as someone who stands at the convergence of Queerness, neurodivergence, and the particular queerness of nonbinarity, the complexity and difficulty of their journeys have made space for mine. The only option I see is to follow in their footsteps and strive to give as much back to the Black community as I take, despite the fact that it is likely an impossible task to ever pay off my debt in full.

And finally, if you’ll allow the metaphor, this thesis is my little Frankenstein of thought, theory, and the story of my life. I’ve combed through graveyards for all the body parts, and hopefully stitched them together with some success, but the lightning animating this thesis is Judith Butler, and her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*. I have quoted her when it’s reasonable to do so, or when a specific point needs to be made, but it should be assumed that her ideas and observation constantly feed my Frankenstein.

CHAPTER ONE: THE PLAY AND THE PRAXIS

In this chapter I approach *The Girl Crazy Queer* from four different angles. First, I offer a short breakdown of the play, with brief excerpts, and analysis of what I *intended* the play to mean and convey. Whether or not I succeeded is for the most part outside of the scope of the thesis.

In this section, “The Play is a Thing,” I offer a short breakdown of the play's plot and character, with brief excerpts and analysis of what I intended the play to mean and convey. It also ends with a shameless cliff hanger. In the second section, “Mirror, Mirror,” I look at the idea that a “self-portrait” doesn’t need to be “true” per se to be a good self-portrait. In “What’s Solo Performance?” I make the case for an independent writer-performer such as myself creating a solo performance, for artistic and somewhat more practical reasons. “Co-Conspirators” paints the rehearsal and workshop process for the play, introduces the other minds that helped me shape the work, and points out that the best laid plans of mice and themes don’t always work out.

Now, the play. *The Girl Crazy Queer*, roughly 80 minutes long, uses a braided approach to create a literal and allegorical portrait of John, a neurodivergent nonbinary high school teacher. There are four main threads in this braid. The first thread is John’s real-life experiences at the high school. The second thread is a series of monologues performed by The Outside Voice, a character who -despite addressing John in the second person- serves as a personification of John’s inner self. The third thread is set of fairy tale

versions of John's childhood memories, told by a magic storyteller named The Librarian, who gives the fairy tale version of John as a child the sobriquet "Girl Crazy." The final thread is a trio of reimagined versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" that The Librarian tells using shadow puppets. The shadows are projected on the back wall of the theatre using an old style classroom transparency projector, which creates a square of light roughly ten feet by ten feet.

These threads separate into three rough chronologies. Structurally they roughly correspond to an A plot, a B plot, and a C plot. The play's real-world plotline follows John and The Outside Voice. The Librarian's fairy tales about Girl Crazy stretch from Girl Crazy's early childhood until sometime in their teenage years. The versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" -despite being separate stories- have an iterative nature which allows the audience to see the relationship between Little Red Riding Hood and The Wolf slowly change from horrific and violent to one of family and companionship. By the end of the play, all three of the chronologies collapse into a single timeline, which I will explain below as I fill in the specifics of how the pieces intertwine.

Our archetypal storyteller opens the play, directly addressing the audience:

Many lifetime's ago, there was a young child, named Girl Crazy, who lived in a magical and dangerous place called.... Alabama in the mid 80's...Girl Crazy was not their birth name- just one of many names bestowed on them in childhood. Girl Crazy, the Bad Kid, Queer, Faggot.

(Fireel 1)

The first two paragraphs work to do several things; it introduces the Librarian, the storyteller who will directly address the audience; it uses the phrase "Many lifetimes

ago,” to invoke the beginning of a fairy tale; the setting, “a magical and dangerous place called... Alabama in the mid 80’s” informs the audience that what we would consider a real time and place will be treated as a place of magic and stories; it introduces Girl Crazy, and lets the audience know that hate speech and queer childhood trauma will be subjects of this play.

The Librarian tells a brief and archetypical fairy tale about Girl Crazy helping a magical animal and receiving a magical gift. The Librarian then introduces John.

Many lifetimes later, there was a high school English teacher, in another place... which was -absurdly- often called The Derby City. But I just can’t with that, you know? So I’m calling it Glitter Ball City, because the city is the world's largest exporter of Disco Balls. And it sounds magic.

So- In a land called Glitter Ball City, The English teacher pondered the antonymical nature of the names Girl Crazy and Queer. Yes, The English Teacher often pondered Girl Crazy’s many names, because the teacher and Girl Crazy were the same person.

(Fireel 2)

Again, there is a lot of set up in these sentences. Ostensibly most people in Louisville audiences will know the play is set in Louisville, and audiences in other places will at least know that we are situating the action outside of the cultural hubs of New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago. We -the audience- meet John, and learn his occupation, one which gives him license to have his own real world relationship with stories; we get a very clear picture of the Librarian's level of snark, sass, and willingness to manipulate our understanding of the world of the play; we are explicitly told that John

and Girl Crazy are the same person; and we get a very clear clue that we're going to need to keep track of several timelines as the play proceeds. Afterwards, the Librarian offers a few more quips, and speaks directly to at least one member of the audience and demands an answer, beginning a process of implicating the audience as active participants. This is a tool that will be used at several important moments throughout the play. This scene ends with the Librarian once again offering the phrase "Many lifetimes ago," as a school bell rings, and we enter John's world.

Until the final few scenes of the play, John's thread occurs exclusively in his classroom, and begins on the first day of school. John welcomes the audience to their first day of class, an elective literature class that focuses on fairy tales. The audience has to wait a few more scenes to get a more complete explanation of what the class will cover, but I'll condense it a tiny bit, and drop it in here.

JOHN: Okay class! Now after a month of scintillating stories, and excavation of themes, we are ready to start in on the ATU Index! The Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index, allows us to take a familiar story, Like... Little Red Riding Hood, and classify it, like a taxonomy. "Why" you say.... I'm sure I heard someone say why?

(waits until someone in the audience says "Why.")

It's so we can study how these stories originated, and how versions of the same stories spread all the way across Europe, Asia, and Africa. Or how similar stories spontaneously sprang into being. You know there are like 17 recorded versions of Little Red Riding Hood? The oldest one is actually from China. So let's look at Little Red. Now, you could go by the seven tail types first defined in

1910 by the A of ATU, Antti Aarne. He said all folk tales and Wonder Stories can be divided into- Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, Realistic Tales, Tales of the Stupid Ogre slash Giant slash Devil, Anecdotes and Jokes, Formula Tales. Using that, it's easy: Little Red is easy to sort? Animal tale right?

WRONG! It's a tale of magic. Turns out this stuff is pretty complex. That's why there are 2399 tale types. Which includes the much more specific subset 325- 399, Magical adversary... under which you'll find D-333, Little Red Riding Hood.

(FIREEL 8)

In that monologue, John is directly addressing the audience within the context of a scene, a convention also used in his first scene, so let's jump back to that first scene now, as John says, "Good morning, 1st period! and welcome to Fairy Tale Classification, the hot new humanities elective that is most assuredly neither hot nor new." The play again implicates the audience in the action so that they become a stand-in for John's classroom full of students, to the extent that John asks them questions, and expects responses.

Several other important dramatic tools are introduced which help define what reality will feel like in John's world; the sound effect of a bell starts and ends the class; using pre-recorded voice over serves as an announcement from school's headmistress over the school's intercom system, i.e. the theatre's speakers. Voice over is also used to create the illusion that an unruly student named Jared is sitting in the back of the classroom, i.e., the back of the audience. Both The Headmistress and Jared are characters created solely using pre-recorded voice over, and each only has a few lines, but they both are crucial to advancing the plot and themes of the play. Jared's line near the end of the first scene, "Hey, what was up with those pictures online... Of you. You know. Kissing those people.

and wearing that dress,” offers the audience a lot of exposition: it offers several pieces of information about John’s queerness and gender into a single line; it indicates that John is partially out at school but it wasn’t by choice; and it also pushes John to the very brink of a panic attack which in turn triggers the first appearance of the Outside Voice, who acerbically relates John’s feelings to John as John dissociates.

As class ends, we are introduced to a character portrayed by the only other live actor in the play, Carrie, or Kerr as she eventually asks to be called. Note that throughout this thesis, I will refer to this character as “Kerr,” and use the pronouns she/her to refer to them. Though Kerr is only ever briefly active onstage, which I’ll unpack artistically and structurally later, she is key to John’s real-world plot. An assigned female at birth student, she slowly alters her appearance throughout the school year and play and becomes increasingly masculine presenting. An engaged and superb student, Kerr also asks questions, makes statements, and chooses a research project all of which John takes note of and comes to suspect are coded suggestions from Kerr that she is T/GE, and looking for guidance from another queer person. John wants to support Kerr, but as suggested by Jared’s line, John has recently been outed, and has been warned by school administration that he is to keep any and all politics out of the classroom. John feels that he cannot explicitly support the student, but instead focuses a lecture on fairy tales that feature characters magically transforming and becoming their true selves, and pointing Kerr to the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. As the play and John’s timeline progress, right before Winter Break begins, Kerr attempts to explicitly come out to John after class, but John stops her before she says it out loud: “I know. I know. Just we can’t (talk about it) I’m the only openly queer teacher here. I have to be so careful.”

-It's 12:18 on March 14th, 2023. Today I've been working on writing up the actual plot and characters of *The Girl Crazy Queer*. Through nothing other than sheer cruel coincidence, Kentucky House Bill 470 (Commission, HB470) passed in the Senate Committee about 21 minutes ago. The bill includes provisions that are commonly referred to as the "don't say gay," laws. They would make it illegal for a teacher like John to tell his queer students anything about queer culture. Last summer I remember thinking, "Is this plot realistic? Are teachers actually in any kind of real danger for talking about queer issues with their students?" So- obviously today I'm crying and snorting all over my face and am completely unable to write cogently. But- I mean John literally asks Kerr not to say gay. This is way too real for me right now. I'm going to talk about the Fairy Tales for a while now if that's okay? I'm having a hard time writing about the real world.

As noted at the top of the chapter, both threads grounded in fairy tale and storytelling are narrated by an archetypal storyteller, The Librarian. This character directly addresses the audience, and through the course of the play tells four sequential stories of John when he was young, but altering them so that they resemble fairy tales chronicling the exploits of a youth named Girl Crazy. The first story is mentioned above, and in addition to establishing tone, it introduces an important and archetypal locale; The Woods. It also offers the titles for three more stories:

LIBRARIAN: There are many stories of Girl Crazy's adventures. The story of *Girl Crazy's New Name*, the *Story of the Secret Library*, *The Story of the Stolen Porn*. These stories were filled with things that seemed magical at the time. Or maybe they just were magic.

(FIREEL 2)

Sadly, there wasn't room in the play for those extra Girl Crazy stories, though Girl Crazy's New Name and The Story of the Secret Library were in the Ur-draft of the play. In the second story of Girl Crazy's timeline; "So one day— with tears streaming down their face. No, it's not important what happened, just. Tears streaming down their face, Girl Crazy stumbled into the Woods, and ran, and ran, and ran." In the woods they find a hidden cave. "Inside, a great grand figure stood frozen- a statue? holding a great grand book in one hand with the other arm outstretched." The statue comes to life, and we learn that it is The Librarian. This establishes that in addition to being our storyteller, The Librarian is a magical ally, not unlike a fairy godmother or kindly stranger met in the woods. The third and fourth stories in Girl Crazy's timeline both feature them seeking magical help from the Librarian that can make them safe from abusers. The Librarian first gives them a magical potion, and then a "badass oxblood red leather Jacket," but in typical fashion, these gifts come with provisos and rules, and warnings of dire consequences if the rules are ignored. And Girl Crazy fucks it up, *of course*. We can't just have characters in fairy tales sensibly following dire warnings. Girl Crazy's unintentional rule breaking causes them to permanently transform into a large and terrifying, and very lonely monster of a wolf. The allegory is clear; a once playful and imaginative child has slowly traded away any gentle, playful, or feminine characteristics in order to feel physically safe by taking on a masculine and angry persona. #PubertySucks

The Girl Crazy stories are interspersed with multiple versions of Little Red Riding Hood. The first and very familiar version of the tale is rapidly retold by John in the same lecture where he describes the classification system for tale types and tropes. Two scenes

later when the audience sees the first alternate iteration of Little Red Riding Hood, they've been prepped with a brush-up on the basic story and are aware that John is interested in different versions of the story. The Librarian is in charge of the more interesting iterations of Little Red Riding Hood. Each one departs completely from the most popular form of the story, in ways that examine violence and the gender dynamics between these two characters and draw on a wide range of other fables and fairy tale tropes. In the first two of these three stories, the actor portraying Kerr helps tell the tales, speaking all of Red's lines, and occasionally speaking lines of narration as well. While these three stories are original creations of mine, their elements are drawn from a vast body of fairy tale tropes, which thematically ties them to John's class which focuses on different repeating themes and tropes found in stories from all over the world.

In the first alternate iteration of the story, instead of straying from the path once and meeting the Wolf in the woods a single time on her way to her Grandmother's house, the path is magic and keeps Red safe as long as she stays on it. So, she is well familiar with the Wolf, who has harassed her many times, as she walked the path, but been unable to attack her. One day when Red stumbles from the path, the Wolf attacks her. Unbeknownst to the Wolf, a magic wish has made Little Red's hand poisonous, so when the Wolf attacks Little Red she raises her arms in defense, assuring that the Wolf's first bite is the poisoned appendage. He dies a horrible death; the magic poison completely disintegrates him. Red finishes the story directly addressing the audience: "I don't have to worry about walking through the forest now. All it cost me was one hand... Which would have been a steal at twice the price."

The second Little Red story sees the Wolf and Little Red enact an altered version of Aesop's story of the "Lion and the Mouse." The Wolf catches Little Red, she begs him for mercy promising to help him in return one day, and the Wolf lets her escape. Then, one day when a Hunter gets the better of the Wolf, shoots him, and is preparing to kill him, Little Red intervenes, bludgeoning the Hunter with a wine bottle, wine that would normally be given to Little Red's Grandmother.

The last iteration begins with a dash of "Hansel and Gretel," ladled out with less trickery: Little Red's mother turns her out, noting "The plague took your father, the famine took your grandmother, I am dying of hunger and cannot feed you. You must go make your own way." Red departs and enters the woods. Here, the story steps from Hansel and Gretel into an amalgam of tropes from a type of tale known as The Animal Bride. The best-known version of this story is "Beauty and the Beast," and indeed Red replicates the actions of Beauty's Father, lost in the woods and freezing, she steps into a monster's home to seek shelter and food, except instead of a castle or a fine house, that home is a magic cave, and instead of the Beast, the cave is home to The Wolf. Borrowing a bit from "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," Red has eaten her fill of magic porridge, and is already sleeping when the Wolf returns home. The Wolf appears ready to consume Red, and Red seems resigned, but the two begin to talk, and in a move that is a little bit "Beauty and the Beast" and a little bit *Scheherazade*, the Wolf decides to let Red live, so long as she cooks him meals. But, like many good fairy tales, the Wolf offers a prohibition: "at night, never ever come to the back of the cave where I sleep." Subverting the trope, Red flawlessly obeys this command. But as Winter lingers, game in the woods

becomes scarce, the magic of the cave fails, until Red and the Wolf both feel the fangs of famine biting. The Wolf reveals their truth to Little Red Riding Hood:

WOLF: There is a good bit of magic in me. I wasn't always a wolf. And I am not always a wolf. Every night, before I sleep, my wolf skin and flesh and muscles comes off, and I fall asleep. Then when I wake up, I am a wolf again. Tonight, before I sleep, you need to take the skin and meat-

RED: Don't- Don't say it- I understand. If this is what you want, I'll do it. But please don't say it.

LIBRARIAN: That night, when the sun set, the wolf transformed. Underneath the wolf's muscles and skin...

RED: You're just a boy, a young man, you-

WOLF: I do not know what I am, but I don't think I have ever been a boy. Now- you should-

LIBRARIAN: Red put up a hand to stop The Wolf from saying anything more. She took a piece of the wolf's flesh, cooked it in the fire, and ate it. The Wolf awakened as a wolf again the next day, but there was a large unhealed wound along his side. Neither Red nor the Wolf said a word. The wound did not heal until the next time the Wolf transformed. And even then, wolf fur regrew, but underneath it was obvious that a strip of the wolf's body was gone. The next day Red needed to eat again. At sunset, the wolf transformed, and Red saw that the empty space was still an open wound on the wolf's human form. The wolf urged her to feed herself anyway. And so it was for some time. At last- just as winter

ended and spring brought forth new prey, the wolf's human form was made solely of raw open wounds, and depleted, misshapen muscle. The wolf's lupine body was barely more than fur and bones.

WOLF: Tonight, when I transform, will you- just hold me as I fall asleep. I don't think I'm going to wake up again.

LIBRARIAN: Red was a smart and serious young woman. She didn't bother protesting that the wolf would live. She didn't wail, though she did cry freely. She didn't speak. The sun was nearly set, so she nodded yes, and held open her arms. She cradled her friend and wrapped the wolf's ratty discarded fur and her father's red coat around both of them to stay warm. She didn't fall asleep until after the wolf stopped breathing, and not once during the night, even while she slept, did she ever let go.

(Fireel 40-41)

You know- I swear, that's a low-key tragic story (which is different from a tragic Loki story! What, you don't want mythology puns? FINE), but telling fairy tales, or I guess trying to write a prose description of a section of a play in which I get to tell fairy tales, makes me feel just a little bit more able to deal with the real world, and the god awful transphobic laws that will no doubt in my mind cause trans teenagers to self-harm and commit suicide. Speaking of which!

Back in John's thread, The Outside Voice has indicated at several points in the play that John's memories are becoming detached from reality, that John is remembering the fairy tale Girl Crazy stories as if they are what really happened to John. Finally, The Outside Voice urges John to go back to his childhood home.

You need to go back to Alabama. Show yourself that none of it was real. Prove to yourself that you are just some bi-polar, adhd, childhood trauma survivor, not some character in a Wonder Tale. But John. ...what if? What if you go back and discover that the reasonable memories are the fake ones?

(Fireel 30)

John travels to Alabama, and the strands of the play are no longer cleanly separated: The Librarian begins to tell the story of John returning home, and The Outside Voice silences them, and becomes the narrator. John goes back to a strand of trees they played in as a child. They find a small and completely ordinary statue in the woods, evidence that though their memories are muddied, perhaps hiding real and painful truth, that there were strange and uncanny things in their childhood. But then as John turns to leave, the statue speaks, and The Girl Crazy stories crash into John's current timeline. And this scene occurs just after the story where we learned that Girl Crazy turned into a Wolf, and immediately following this scene is when we see the Little Red story where we learn that The Wolf had a human inside them all along. The threads have all merged into one story, John's story, as narrated by the Outside Voice. John no longer feels confused about who he is and what he needs to do, so he rushes back to Glitter Ball City, with the Outside Voice narrating the whole way.

You're ready to dive into helping Kerr and every other quietly queer kid do whatever they need to do. Saying to yourself, "I'm gonna give them so many queer books, and if they have questions about my love life, or coming out, or whatever, I am not letting these kids go through this alone."

(Fireel 41)

But when John gets back to school, he learns that Kerr has committed suicide. And originally, that's how the play ended. Kerr was dead, John felt broken again, his sole victory was that at least he was now telling his own story instead of having other versions of himself narrate them. He made an impassioned plea to the audience for them to take care of queer kids, and the lights blacked out. That was the *original* end. But I can't tell you the actual end. Not yet. Because first I have to explain how this play is actually a self-portrait, and how kids like Kerr, and adults, and a whole lot of nonbinary Queer people need to see more self-portraits of more kinds of Queers. Queers like me.

MIRROR, MIRROR

In *A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture (Identity, Transformation, and Performance)* trans performance artist Nina Arsenault lists thirteen tenets of her manifesto. The first tenet:

I see all of my creative work – documentary photographs, reality TV, autobiographical, storytelling, video art, staged photography, literary memoir writings, costumed nightlife, appearances, voice/breath/body training, cosmetic surgery, and the daily presentation of my femininity through makeup, fake hair, exercise, and diet – as a continuing practice of living self-portraiture. My life and art are irrevocably entwined.

(Arsenault 64)

Writing *The Girl Crazy Queer*, I decided early on that I wanted to tell my story, but that I didn't want to just stand onstage and recite my life. I wanted to use theatrical tools, and I loved telling stories, and the play ended up fictionalized and pretty removed from reality. But it still felt like my story, my self-portrait. Arsenault's first tenet spoke to me, but her manifesto offers a set of incongruent definitions of self-portrait. Tenet two states self-portraiture must literally discuss the true facts of one's life.

Self-portraiture communicates feelings and ideas, which cannot be satisfactorily communicated in fictionalized artistic forms. The viewer is never required to suspend disbelief, creating an immediate and compelling connection to the artistic works.

(Arsenault 64)

Tenet thirteen affirms the point.

Self-portraiture comes with a sacred responsibility to communicate my experience of life. Fictionalizing the artistic works would render them spiritually empty, intellectually reductive, and less sensational.

(Arsenault 65)

The first incongruity is Arsenault's statement that while her work is *expressly* self-portrait, she considers it "true" even though many of her works often exist outside of narrative or language. But tenet twelve suggests a range of fictional or nonrepresentational art and performance created by other artists are also *their* self-portraits: "I am inspired to see all other artworks through the frame of self-portraiture. I see the works of Jackson Pollock, Damien Hirst, Marina Abramović, Yoko Ono, David Lynch, and Lars Von Trier as self-portraits" (Arsenault 65). The splatters of Jackson Pollock are self-portraits? David Lynch's film version of *Dune* is self-portrait? Should I accept that those are self-portraits just because Arsenault said so, even when they aren't epistemologically true? They aren't "spiritually empty, intellectually reductive, and less sensational?"

Rather than using this incongruity to refute Arsenault's ideas, I choose to use them as springboard to broaden the definition of self-portrait. As an example, I'd like to offer two recent Broadway shows, *Strange Loop* and *The Ohio State Murders*. Winner of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the 2022 Tony Award for Best New Musical, *Strange Loop* focuses on an unnamed Black queer theatre usher, and composer. The characters of the play are six interior versions of the usher: Thought 1, Thought 2, Thought 3, Thought 4, Thought 5, and Thought 6. While the work is not packaged as

autobiographical or as a memoir, I suggest that it is a self-portrait of composer Michael R. Jackson. Jackson has not limited himself by seeking to present a “true” version of events in his life and can thereby free the artist to examine the subject or self, deconstructed and othered into the conflicting feelings of a queer Black man struggling with the need to express. In The New York Times review of the play’s Broadway debut, theatre critic Ben Brantly’s headline read “‘A Strange Loop’ Is a Self-Portrait in a Hall of Mirrors” (Brantly). Moving on to another recent fictionalized self-portrait closed on Broadway: Adrienne Kennedy’s *The Ohio State Murders* (Paulson) . The play is one of a cycle of four focused on Suzanne Alexander, a fictional character that shares many of Kennedy’s life experiences. They are both writers, they both went to Ohio State University, they are both married, they both spent time living in Ghana with their husbands, and the list could go on. The Alexander Plays also share a large number of dramatic tools with and has details similar to her groundbreaking *The Funny House of the Negro*. There, the main character, a writer named Sarah, is represented by four characters, but this is also a work of self-portraiture (Kennedy 11 & 139).

For my purposes, “self-portraiture” is any work an artist creates whose main concern is illuminating their own lived experience, even if that illumination must come by way of fictionalized situations or non-realistic theatrical techniques. In every play I write I place a substantial portion of my soul, creating deeply personal work. But *The Girl Crazy Queer* is the first time my express purpose in writing a play is to tell my story, my only attempt at self-portraiture. My 2019 play *Note* essentially became a self-portrait through the writing process, but I did not start with the intention of illuminating my life; I started with the intention of illuminating bi-polar interiority and suicidal ideation. I also

thought it was a cool idea- It's the story of a rehearsal process for a new play, the script of which the playwright left in lieu of a suicide note, asking her friends and loved ones to produce it. Of course, I was struggling with suicidal ideation at the time, as I have since the age of 22, and I knew the play was drawing *heavily* on my lived experience, both as a suicidal person and as someone who had lost people to suicide, and as someone who had watched a loved one struggle with losing someone to suicide. A line near the end of the play contained an idea that at the time was one of the best reasons I could think of to stay alive: Dead people don't get to make plays.

Quick side note- In case it needs to be stated, I'm not currently in any danger of suicide or self-harm. So please don't try to have me committed.

On an extratextual level, *Note* and *The Girl Crazy Queer* are both concerned with representation, a concept I'll examine later. But tl;dr: I wanted to write *The Girl Crazy Queer* in recognition of the need for more T/GE representation, and the hope that T/GE folks who are either unaware that there are options outside the binary, or struggling with trans imposter syndrome, and even TG/E whose overall gender journey may be quite different from mine might find moments of intersection with my experience, and in viewing those moments, feel less alone.

WHAT'S SOLO PERFORMANCE? WHAT IS A ONE-PERSON SHOW?

I never planned to perform the show once and then stop. The thesis production of *The Girl Crazy Queer* had always been planned as a workshop, a first full draft. An incentive to generate and perform a piece that I plan to continue to perform, in excerpt and entirety, for many years. Outside of the scope of the academic world, and aside from artistic goals, a self-generated one person show is a viable way to serve multiple goals as an artist. Many of those goals are financial and business related. Traveling with a show allows me to (shudder) *network*, making inroads and acquaintances with theatre makers from all over the country and beyond. Perhaps some will help open doors to paid theatrical opportunities or become valued collaborators in generating additional material in the future. I hope it will specifically put me into contact with Fringe Theatre Festivals in other cities, countries, and continents.

For a number of logistical reasons, it makes more sense for me to create a solo show. Touring can be expensive and emotionally draining if done poorly. Travel expenses, finding places to stay, finding food, the more people that are involved, the more expensive it is. Touring also involves keeping the show in a quasi-prepared state which requires ongoing “brush up” rehearsals, especially leading up to an actual performance. Scheduling a rehearsal for one person is far easier than scheduling a rehearsal for two or more actors. Depending on the original actor’s availability, a play with multiple actors would probably cause follow up productions to call for new actors to join the production, which would call for more rehearsals. Fiscally, paying multiple actors in hopes that ticket sales will cover their payment is a poor business model, because you can never tell for sure how many tickets will get sold. My play was conceptually designed before the first

word was written, and every initial artistic decision in the process came with the assumption that I would be on my own onstage, despite the fact that I did eventually add a second actor, a decision I'll discuss more soon.

The onstage representation of a nonbinary bipolar trauma survivor, written by and performed by someone with those lived experiences, is all but unheard of. I assume the world is wide enough that I am not the first person at this intersection of identity to self-generate and perform material, but I have yet to find another person or piece that explores this specific intersection of identity. Additionally, my work is not geared solely toward people exactly like me, I think the investigation of my own neurodivergence and queerness can speak to other specific intersectional identities, or people struggling with the effects of being marginalized. Some of the greatest compliments I received after the first production of *The Girl Crazy Queer* actually came from a group of people I wasn't even trying to specifically represent: multiple queer teachers approached me after the show to tell me how seen they felt.

CO-CONSPIRATORS

To explicate my first production of *The Girl Crazy Queer*, and my subsequent work on the piece, it is important to understand the available resources, limitations, and collaborators involved with the first production, and how they shaped the play that the audience saw in its first iteration. It's also necessary to understand the practicalities that turned my one-person show into a two-person show, and how that change complicated and perhaps even diluted the play thematically, but eventually felt right in regards to the extratextual elements of my praxis.

The first piece of *The Girl Crazy Queer* was a short story showing a drastically different version of "Little Red Riding Hood." It was written as I was finishing up a project focused on permutations of the Blue Beard story, examining the way men in fairy tales do violence to women. It was a long process, and during the course of our rehearsal, the cast and myself spent a lot of time talking about social justice, theatre, equity, and representation. I began to think about how few opportunities there were for young queer actors, especially those whose gender and sexuality was not part of an easily definable binary, to play a character that reflected their lived experience. I began including as many gender expansive characters as I could in everything I write, and trying to always use queer actors to play those roles. It became almost a dictum: Make more queer theatre, for more queer artists.

To begin work on the production of *The Girl Crazy Queer*, I sought out a director, choosing to work with Gil Reyes, with whom I have a 25-year working relationship. First, we worked together as actors, in a 1999 production of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*, before beginning a relationship that lasted across many years and plays wherein

he directed and I acted. Starting with 2018's play *Nobody Bunny and the Golden Age of Animation*, I wrote, he directed. All told, we've worked together on thirteen occasions prior to *The Girl Crazy Queer*.

Rehearsals for the October performance were intended to start in August, but in reality, what Gil and I began in August was more akin to a script workshop. I had written and revised material for five months and had short fairy tales written as early as 2018, when I first envisioned a work featuring shadow puppets and interlocking versions of Little Red Riding Hood. I was floundering, with a script that was disjointed and approaching three hours in length. While it's a familiar part of many artists' creative process to write more material than ends up in the final cut, I was discovering just how much of my playwriting process depended on watching *other* actors read my work. I was also struggling because, while it is full of analogy and fairy tales, *The Girl Crazy Queer* is an attempt to tell my story. My self-portrait. The received wisdom from creators, writers, and performers is that one should not use events in one's life as a basis for art unless there is enough distance between the artist and the event. And the received wisdom isn't wrong: it is very difficult to know what is good, what is bad, what needs to go, and what needs to stay, what remembrances and experiences are safe to bring to the table, and which memories are dangerous. I certainly was struggling with the difficulties caused by being so close to the work, artistically and emotionally. But -and I believe I share this experience and understanding with a great many other trauma survivors- there is never any distance from that past, no matter how long it has been. And I certainly cannot find distance between myself and my gender; everywhere I go, there it is.

So, the early weeks of rehearsal became a script workshop. It ate up time, and time was a limited commodity. But something much closer to a finished play emerged, the braided narrative with John at the center. What also emerged was the need for a second actor. First, I realized I could have other characters speak, other actors even, if I wrote in a few moments that called for a prerecorded voice over. It was nothing I couldn't handle by running five to ten sound cues from the stage. A little sleight of hand and I wouldn't even look like I was playing back sound cues. However, having broken the seal on the voice over idea, the number of voice over lines grew until they reached the point that no legerdemain could hide my running sound from the stage, and I felt it would be detrimental to the play. And I also became enamored with an idea that would fit neatly into my conceptual design, i.e., my interest in creating a touring production. I conceived of a role for a second actor, which for some time was simply called The Sound Designer; an actor technician who would record all the voice over lines, and run all the sound and light cues, which allows for short conversations -short scenes even- between me and characters who were solely voice over. But it was a slippery slope. Because now all of a sudden there were even more lines for the offstage character, especially for Kerr, and I wanted to make performing in the show interesting for the actor (cause I sure couldn't pay them enough). But that's okay, the Sound Designer would just voice all of Kerr's lines! Because dichotomies, the Other, and Gender Models! More on that in Chapter Five. *But*. It was a slippery slope. The other actor is already theoretically at the play, they might as well come onstage *one time* at the very end of the play. Oops, *two times*, once at the beginning of the play and once at the end of the play. The role of Sound Designer officially became the role of Kerr. This way of staging the play would still allow for a

minimal rehearsal time for any additional or traveling iterations of *The Girl Crazy Queer*, either with the original Kerr, or with a new Kerr actor (PUNS), because while a second actor was necessary, they would still only have to memorize minimal script and blocking.

Enter Clarity Hagan, stage left. An AFAB theatre artist, Clarity had sort of crept into my mind as an ideal collaborator while the role of the Sound Designer grew. Item: They were an AFAB nonbinary actor, matching Kerr's description. ITEM: They literally have worked as a stage manager and sound designer. ITEM: They are also a playwright whose work I like, so they can offer input and lived experience to my depiction of assigned female at birth T/GE person. ITEM: They liked my play *Note* a whole lot, and as another multi-hyphenate seemed to get the general vibe of my praxis.

I also just wasn't that opposed to having a second actor. The combination of the ideas and life experience I've related in this chapter, and a simple artistic imperative emerges, one that is a lot like a rephrasing of my thesis. Combat the emotional trauma with which Queer people struggle by creating Queer theatre that puts emerging complexities and queer subjectivities onstage. Do it by writing original work that is either solo work, or *nearly* solo work, work that is nimble enough to travel and fits into traditional and non-traditional theatrical settings. To boil it down even further: Make Queer theatre. Show it to as many Queer people as possible.

And now, as promised, I go back to that summary of the play, and the ending where Kerr died. Well- I go back to the first time that Gil, Clarity and I read the whole play out loud. We're in this rehearsal space with bare white walls, and little skylights. When we started reading, the sky was blue and the space was full of natural light, but the sun went down while we read the play, and the room was much darker after the natural

light disappeared. I am full on ugly crying. I cried through the last ten pages of the play actually. Clarity is also crying, but in a much more collected way. It's very masculine and stoic. We take a five-minute break and come back to get reactions. Clarity asks, "What if she lives?" She started talking about how girls, and assigned female at birth folk are more likely to survive attempted suicide, because they are less likely to use guns. And at first, I really recoiled from the idea. When I'm trying to end plays, or longer creative non-fiction, when I'm torn about how to handle something awful, or something tragic, I think about what kind of truth we owe the world. I don't like letting the audience off easy. And Kerr's death? I mean this really is life and death stuff in the real world. I'll do statistics in the next chapter, but for now just- This is real life and death stuff. Trans and gender expansive kids are dying. People need to face that. But they're also living, and holding on, and making it through. Then I started thinking about magic in the world of the play. And I started thinking about why I write, and how I write, and then I wrote what I called the "alternate totally bonkers ending" and showed it to Gil and Clarity. (And they liked it). And- You know, I think actually I'm going to save this next part for the Conclusion. Because it kind of belongs there.

I think you get the basic drift of the play anyway, right?

CHAPTER TWO: WHY *NEW* T/GE THEATRE?

ME: Yeah, why?!?

ALSO ME: I'm getting there- Geez, keep your skirt on.

ME: *What? What did you say?* That's a *really* rude and homophobic idiom.

ALSO ME:.... You're wearing a skirt.

ME: (looks down) *Touché.*

In this chapter, I start with a metaphor that I fear you will find trite and annoying in “The Cliffs of Insanity.” It’s one of the ways that I try to convey what it feels like to be nonbinary, and hopefully by conveying that feeling, I’ll strengthen my case for the need for new T/GE theatre. I also to share statistics about mental health, self-harm, and suicide among trans and gender expansive kids and adults. But those are just numbers. So, the next section, “Biopsychosocial/Everybody Hurts,” explores ways people experience pain, and discusses the painful experience of trans imposter syndrome that I feel regularly, that many trans people feel regularly, that I believe is mitigated by seeing stories that I can identify with.

THE CLIFFS OF INSANITY

“Sometimes you wake, and sometimes, yes, you die. But there is a third alternative.”

Whether it is the prologue to Neil Gaiman’s *Fables and Reflections*, or the cavalier fatalism of Wile E. Coyote suspended for a moment in midair, for many years I’ve been drawn to cliffs as metaphors for moments of contemplation, decision, epiphany and crisis.

So- The gender normative binary presentation of gender is a set of two opposing cliffs. The Male/Man/Boy/Masculine cliff is a jutting stubborn jaw; the Female/Woman/Girl/Feminine cliff is a softer set of angles. The chasm between them is dark, bottomless. The vague sense of binary transness I formed as a kid was the rope from Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. It was 1980’s G.I. Joe Bridge Layer vehicle playset I lusted over. *It made a bridge. AND WAS A VEHICLE!!* Someone might bridge the gap, but they definitely hack down the ropes bridge like their assigned at birth gender is the evil leader of a Thuggee cult dead set on ripping their hearts, making them spontaneously burst into flame, and offering it up to Kali. Hindsight, that movie is deeply racist. This two cliff, rope bridge understanding of trans-ness is what led me to believe for so long that I was cis-gender. I didn’t like my cliff, often the people on my cliff didn’t like me. But I could also tell I didn’t belong on the other cliff either, so I worked to figure out how to stay alive on my assigned side of the divide. A lot of nonbinary people, a lot of queer and trans people in general, can’t. Some fall off the edge, some jump because they can’t stand there anymore. And a lot of us get pushed off the edge by the fuckers on the cliff with us.

Trans Bodies Trans Selves is a book aimed at helping several groups navigate trans issues, including family members, medical providers, and trans people themselves. It seeks to protect us from the dangers without and within. In Chapter 14, Mental Health and Emotional Wellness, Sand C. Chang Nathaniel G. Sharon discusses many of the dangers. “Research shows that our communities have higher rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, and suicide, when compared to the general population due to the daily stressors of stigma and discrimination,” A person does not need to have had a major traumatic event to face major emotional consequences. “Simply being a member of a stigmatized group can put us at risk for medical and mental health concerns. The accumulation in effect of having a marginalized identity is referred to as minority stress” (Chang and Sharon 384-385).

There is an accumulated cost to the various issues that trans people face. “As in other marginalized communities, rates of substance-abuse use are higher in T/GE communities, and this link is related to our higher rates of societal discrimination and trauma.” One particularly alarming factoid: on average, one out of two transgender people have thought about suicide, and a third have attempted suicide at least once (Chang and Sharon 392).

Sebastian Cordoba’s book *Nonbinary Gender Identities* “examines how nonbinary people discover, adopt, and negotiate language in a variety of social settings, both offline and online” (Cordoba iii). Like the authors of the other texts I’ve read discussing trans issues, Cordoba cites alarming statistics regarding various types of risk that trans people face. But unlike other authors whose works I referenced and research, Cordoba considers data that differentiates binary and nonbinary trans people. One study that did specifically

examine nonbinary genders reported that “40% of nonbinary people had attempted suicide in the past, 17% of participants had experienced sexual assault, and 33% had experienced physical assault based on gender” (Cordoba 17).

It’s fraught, I think, to focus too greatly on the differences between the levels of victimization and harm experienced between binary and nonbinary trans people. There is too little data, and a danger of creating strife through an attempt to codify and limit how trans people identify. But Cordoba did point to research that suggests nonbinary trans people experience more feelings of depression, hopelessness, and worthlessness than their binary trans siblings (Cordoba 17).

BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL/EVERYBODY HURTS

What these compassionate but somewhat lifeless numbers represent, and never quite say, is pain. The pain that all minorities, especially intersectional minorities experience, based on a variety of stimuli. Pain is a complex subject, despite its ubiquity. After all, as the great queer lyricist Michael Stipe told us, “Everybody hurts sometimes.” But what does and doesn’t hurt, should or shouldn’t hurt, and how much something hurts is up for debate? To quote the comically over the top masculinity that is the 1989 Patrick Swayze action film *Roadhouse*: “Pain *don’t* hurt.”

The popular podcast *Ologies*, hosted by Alie Ward, features a different expert in their field -an “ologists”- each week. *Ologies* is the best kind of pop-science. It’s easy to understand, deeply enjoyable, and it’s easy to find, available on a wide variety of streaming platforms, or for free on the host’s website. In addition to explanations of the ologist, host Allie Ward provides links to primary data sources by a variety of credentialed experts in their fields, including scientists, anthropologists, engineers, and academics from the humanities and social sciences which help support individual ideas that she and the week’s ologist are discussing. So, it fits my methodology of whenever possible finding sources with few or no barriers to access that nevertheless have a level of rigor befitting a master’s thesis. *Dolorology*, which premiered on November 1 2021, is an *Ologies* episode focused on pain, and features Dr. Rachel Zoffness. The main concept that Dr Zoffness introduces on *Ologies* is the biopsychosocial (BPS) model of pain. Pain has three sources: biological, psychological, and sociological. The biological is your body, the psychological is your mind, and the sociological is all the stuff outside of your body and your mind. According to BPS models, every single pain that anyone has ever

experienced contains all three of those elements, though the particular experiences vary drastically in the primary cause of any individual pain (Ward). The pain I'll discuss in this thesis is usually heavy on the psychological and sociological, because those are the elements that interact most directly in the social and emotional realms that I discuss in connection to my work in theatre and storytelling, and they are the elements that are most directly in conversation with the pain I experienced growing up and still struggle with. Sure- getting assaulted hurts on a biological level, but not more than the many injuries I sustained in various risk seeking ways of playing I loved when I was a kid. It was the psychological and social levels of the pain that haunt me. (I really wish they would ghost me instead.)

One of my goals in the creation of works like *The Girl Crazy Queer*, is to help sooth or remove the painful experiences that T/GE and neurodivergent people experience, including trans imposter syndrome, the feeling that despite having deep feelings that align with your conception of gender and trans-ness, you are not trans enough. So, super fast detour for my nonbinary readers: you are trans enough. I promise. You. Are. Trans. Enough. Trans imposter syndrome, and my driving need to help mitigate its effect in other Queer people is at the center of my belief that gender expansive nonbinary artists need to generate material that directly interacts with their specific trans identity. Sadly, trans imposter syndrome isn't only a self-inflicted sadness. Elements of the Queer community, and even the trans community itself have in recent years accused trans-nonbinary people of being "transtrenders," a concept that Natalie Wynn, a.k.a. YouTube Goddess (my words, not hers) and content creator Contrapoints, explains in her video *Transtrenders*. Contrapoints is a trans woman who makes elaborate videos

interrogating issues that relate to trans-ness in general, as well as specific political issues, and her own internal life. In her videos Contrapoints uses highly theatrical images and costumes, often portraying multiple characters in conversation with each other, a classic example of a dialogic in action. In *Transtrenders*, Contrapoints plays three characters: Tiffany Tumbles, a binary trans woman; Baltimore Maryland, an over-the-top caricature of a nonbinary trans woman; and Jackie Jackson, the host of an imaginary talk show hosting a debate between Tiffany Tumbles and Baltimore Maryland.

TIFFANY TUMBLES: Look Jackie, I'm gonna be completely real with you. I am a transsexual. That means I have a very specific mental disorder called gender dysphoria. I was born a boy, but I have a female brain because of a hormone imbalance in the womb. This is a real psychiatric disorder, that is verified by science, and requires hormones and surgery for treatment, or else I literally cannot function. It is not a fashion statement, it is not a trend, it is not an easy way to feel special and oppressed; it's a very difficult condition to live with.

JACKIE: Okay so you're both transsexuals then.

TIFFANY: No. I am a transsexual. That is not a transsexual. That is a transtrender.

JACKIE: Transtrender? What is that, is that a gender?

TIFFANY: No it's not a gender. A transtrender is a person, like Baltimore over here, who puts on a dress and puts glitter in his beard and goes around telling people he's transgender and complaining about "misgendering" for oppression points.

(Wynn)

Tumbles has offered what is the main claim of her point of view, a point of view meant to represent a sentiment shared by various binary trans people in the community. nonbinary people are not really trans. We're just assholes. She specifically cites having dysphoria, a term that comes up a lot in discussions around transness. To greatly simplify -and to include a dangerous misconception that I won't completely refute until page 101- let's define gender dysphoria as a painful sensation, often specifically described in terms of being physical, that one is in the wrong body. It can also -as noted by Tumbles- be a medical diagnosis. So according to Tumbles, dysphoria is only linked to an internal sense about a person's body.

Contrapoints lives up to her name, always illuminating both sides of an argument, though she is never afraid to mock people, and certainly asserts her own opinion by the end of each video she produces. Part of the disconnect between different views of who is and isn't trans is the disconnect between different ideas of *what transness is*, even within the trans community itself. Much of it is linked to how one "transitions" a process whereby a trans person moves from living their life as a member of the gender with which they were assigned at birth, and living a life that expresses their authentic self.

Can we talk about the verb "to be" real quick? It's always pretty fraught when it comes to its existential meaning. But its trans lexical interrogation feels urgent for most T/GE. Take for example this doozy- Is my friend (and amazing drag queen) Gilda Wabbit a woman who was born in a man's body, or was her body at her birth already a woman's body because *Wabbit is a woman*, and she was born in that body? Think of every tense, every aspect of the verb to be, its modal uses, interrogatives, imperatives, double it to get all the negative uses of this verb: To be. This verb is a place of struggle. For trans people,

in the way we speak, and in the way we live, To Be is a place of struggle. It can be a place of *great* struggle. And I hate to disagree with the star of *Dirty Dancing*, *Ghost*, and *Too Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar*... but I'm sorry Patrick Swayze. Pain *do* hurt.

PERFORMING A NON-GENDER?

In my conception and understanding of the word, nonbinary is not a gender, it is simply a short hand that says “I am not any of the genders that have been presented to me as options.” If we look at gender as a performance, how does one perform a gender that is not a gender? It almost sounds like a zen koan. IRL it doesn't help me decide what shoes to wear, and in the theatre it doesn't help me play Feste from *Twelfth Night*, or Millenette from *(Re)Fashion*, both roles I performed at the University of Louisville, both roles that occurred in production with the stated purpose of allowing the considerable number of queer actors in the respective productions to explore gender and race in an open artistic forum.

In theatre we have tools and exercises to help create and refine elements of our performances; objectives, stakes, tactics, and a hundred other things. But there aren't tools designed to find gender, or to *help expand what gender can mean*. In both instances mentioned here, actors including myself were given space, and the unspoken assumption was that they could use the tools of acting we already had. But I've found that the standard set of tools applied to a standard script will not turn out new results. Some tools are more useful than others. In *(Re)Fashion* our director handed us a list of hundreds of verbs. We were asked to randomly pick a verb from the list, and try to play that verb. We'd do this multiple times, with multiple verbs, sometimes changing verbs several times in one scene. The point of this exercise isn't to find the “right” way to do a scene or perform a character, it is to explode and expand options for the scene beyond what an actor might normally think of, and then go back and see if one discovered anything they could use in the scene. The sheer random zaniness of this exercise makes some space for

less gendered exploration. I find that many games are even more gendered. Anything centered in power dynamics, persuasion or control seem to almost immediately bring toxic and gendered assumptions to the fore, and force everyone in the game to play in a gendered way. I have found that the gender normative elements already at play in rehearsal halls and acting classrooms are a gravity controlling the nonbinary actor at all times, and subtly enforcing gender normative choices even in safe and open minded rehearsal rooms.

Open minded directors offering actors the chance to explore their gender is like a loving parent throwing a child into deep water and telling them they should learn to swim. In and of itself that might work, but imagine along with the normative elements mentioned above, the existing power imbalance inherent in the production process, the normative gaze of even the best intentioned cis actors, and the impending normative gaze of the audience are sandbags attached to the child's arms and legs. It is possible that the child will learn to swim. It is far more likely that they will drown. Analogously, the gender-affirming exploration of nonbinary character is likely to be subsumed. Working with queer directors is perhaps more akin to having a collaborator throw you in the deep water, and then jump in after you. The solidarity means everything, but whether in academia or the professional world, queer directors face a similar set of creative difficulties, i.e. no one teaches them how to direct trans nonbinary performers. And as much as a queer director can mean emotionally, they run the risk of simply drowning next to the actors. We don't need more people drowning.

ASSIGNED GENDER BY COSTUME AND AUDIENCE

In the two productions mentioned above, in the absence of a definable gender to assert at *the beginning* of a rehearsal process, or even earlier depending on when design work on costumes begins, I was assigned a gender by someone else's gaze before I had time to work to discover it in rehearsal. In both of those productions the gaze initially and primarily belonged to the costume designers of the shows in question, an assignment that was then confirmed by the audience's interaction with the iteration of a character. In both instances costume design was in line with the original *gender presentation* of the character. Millenette's French maid outfit combined with my observable physical being, was, for lack of a better era-appropriate term, gendered as a trans woman. Feste, who wore heavy boots, blue jeans a white T-shirt and a masculine jacket was, I believe, assigned the gender of Male at the site of interaction between character and the audience. The juxtaposition of these two gender outcomes, one which presents me as a transwoman, the other which presents me as a cis man, shows a willingness on the part of cis costume designers to work with trans actors, but a lack of real understanding of the concept of gender expansive exploration. To explore gender for me is obviously not to play a cis man, but it is also not to play a binary trans woman. Those are two relatively fixed points, neither of which reflect me, neither of which are found through an exploration.

To say "assigned a gender" is to raise the allusion of the harmful practice of assigning gender at birth, and my intention is not to imply intention of harm or intentional gender negation on the part of designers. They are plying their craft as they have been taught, in the power structure and sequence of events they inherited; the one created by

and for the cisgender theatre makers. Perhaps a better way of discussing this would be to say that a presentation of gender that would be read or perceived as “male” or “female” man or woman, was created by the interacting factors of decisions made by the designers, the way my physical form is generally “read” by people, and the cis-normative aspects and binary centric conception of gender implied by the scripts involved. In all fairness, there is a last culprit in the unintentional non-consensual gendering of these characters; my own struggle to speak up as a nonbinary actor, and to take up space as a *nonbinary actor*. I am well familiar and adept at taking up space as a cis presenting actor, as I’ll discuss later. For better or for worse, at my University nonbinary praxis was given room to grow, but no guide or guidelines. While I’ve spent hours and hours in the library and online researching theorists, theatre makers, and creative practices, my research into the intersection of theatre and gender has been and is mostly an active hands on research project. I have stumbled and flailed while navigating new situations, at times very angry because there are no guidelines. Then somewhere along the way, I began to understand that I have to *be* the guideline. If I want to stop drowning, I have to climb out of the water, and build a boat.

..... I’d really love to just mic drop it like that: BUILD A NEW BOAT! BAM! But in reality I’ve found at least for now, it’s an ongoing process. I can’t undo two thousand plus years of theatre tradition by writing a thesis and trying some acting exercises.

WHY NEW WORK

The influence of the script in the above accounts is not meant to suggest that there is no value in using a nonbinary lens to examine and perform classic, and even contemporary works. A trans nonbinary actor performing in the role of Viola in Kentucky Shakespeare's 2022 production of *Twelfth Night* is one of the most identity-affirming characterizations I have seen since coming out. However, their gender presentation was heavily influenced by Shakespeare's various plot devices, and by the individual lines Shakespeare wrote, and because presumably Kentucky Shakespeare's main goal was to make an excellent production of *Twelfth Night*. To be clear, I love the act of queering Shakespeare. I just started a queer Shakespeare company with two other queer Bardophiles, and that is absolutely a part of my artistic practice- but being able to start a theatre company based on one's views of 400 year old Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre takes privilege and access that many people do not possess. There are barriers and gatekeepers. It can be hard to get a place at the table. *In A nonbinary Actor Prepares (for Battle)* K. Woodzick links the need to create work to the need to express one's queerness: "Don't wait to be invited to the table. Build your own table." The article is primarily focused on how a nonbinary actor can make space for themselves in existing plays, especially the classics of the theatrical canon, but still recognizes that "sometimes it is simply time to start building our own, new queer canon" (Woodzick 1-14).

These kinds of imperative statements sound great, and I do find them inspiring, and worth repeating; but pardon my irony, the use of pronouns here raises questions. Who is building the table? Who is building the new queer canon? Who is doing the work?

Consider the many ways that academics, activists and artists understand the word “work.” Acting is “the work,” a play is “a work.” In activist circles “the work” references a macro level view of all the work it will take to reach revolution. In academia, I have most often encountered the word “work” in reference to Marxist theories, and other discussions, where work means labor. Adding to the artistic canon, or making our own nonbinary canon, will interact with all these iterations of work.

The phrase “it’s not my job to educate you,” is standard in activist spaces online and irl (Molloy). Like “build your own table,” it leaves a lot unsaid, but in the interrogation of the question, I find the need to ask and answer other questions. Is “educate” providing harrowing figures that will hopefully shock some aforementioned Fuckheads into suddenly valuing neuro/queer lives? Does negating the responsibility of my “job” in the hypothesized education come with no room for me *choosing* to educate? I think part of the flaw is in the question itself, the assumption that education is what we need to change hearts and minds. I posit that we should replace the question and ask instead “Is it my job to help you empathize,” I *choose* to take on the challenge to tell stories and teach empathy, but it is only part of the work. As an artist, activist and academic, I embrace and take up work in all of the senses. I help bring about change by creating plays, and by encouraging others to do so, and by removing barriers to access. Woodzick suggests building our own table, but I’d rather offer queer and nonbinary theatre makers jetpacks. It works with my cliff analogy better. If being nonbinary is jumping from the cliff and hoping to fly, then making nonbinary theatre requires a similar act of stepping into the unknown- creating your own work. Perhaps someday the expanse of gender possibility will have so many new works in it that it won’t be hard to find one

that lines up with your particular queerness, but for now we are still standing next to a yawning chasm where an existing nonbinary canon should be, and an empty sky where queer futurism needs to be created, and neuro/queer artists should be leading the way. Because that is *the work*.

BUT SURELY, TRANS PEOPLE ARE ALREADY WRITING PLAYS?

Well, yeah, of course they are. But let's look at some numbers, shall we? The number of Broadway plays written by T/GE artists: Zero. The number of published collections of plays written by T/GE artists: One, *The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays*, published in 2021. Pre-pandemic, Howlround published a statistical analysis of the 2019-2020 season of new plays produced by the League of Resident Theatres and the National New Play Network, identifying 111 new plays being produced. There were no plays written by transgender people. Well known representations of trans people on Broadway include The musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* composed by Stephen Trask and written by John Cameron Mitchell -both are cis gender- and Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife*, which told the semi-biographical story of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a transgender woman. In 1998 *Hedwig* premiered off Broadway, earning awards and acclaim for the cis writers and performers, and in 2014 when it was revived for Broadway, it won the Tony for best play, and star Neil Patrick Harris won Best Leading Actor for playing Hedwig. In 2004 *I Am My Own Wife* won a Tony for Best Play, and Best Performance for the actor Jefferson Mays, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Neither Wright, nor Mays, nor the play's director Moisés Kaufmann are trans. Wright also took a lot of liberties with Mahlsdorf's story. These are trans stories told through a cis lens, which net cis people awards and acclaim. The only trans writer to get much mainstream traction is Taylor Mac, who almost won a Pulitzer for judy's play *Hir*. Mac's pronouns are judy (Keyesm Mantoan, Schiller 1). There are signs of change in New York. In October 2022 *Breaking the Binary Theatre Festival* presented seven world premieres all written by T/GE playwrights. The success of the first festival led to the founding of an

ongoing non profit that is planning a yearly festival, and small scale programming throughout the year (Breaking the Binary). But one festival in the heart of the theatre capital of the country can only have so much reach. Trans writers are still finding that if they want to make theatre, they often have to find their own space, and produce and promote their own work in addition to creating and rehearsing the work (Drake 57). Much like the trans writers I've helped put onstage at Louisville Fringe Festival (I'm the founding artistic director), often T/GE work is being made and shown in DIY spaces, for limited runs, or at other Fringe Theatre Festivals around the world. Back rooms of bars, empty studio spaces, people's living rooms. My own work, when I've gotten it on traditional stages, has been produced by smaller, independent theatre companies.. This has been the case all over, for a long time (Drake). In Louisville, my homebase, there is a small but loud and visible trans T/GE playwriting presence. There are at least four trans-nonbinary playwrights who've had work produced by small independent companies in Louisville, and there are also a variety of drag and comedy trans artists creating original material. Trans plays are getting written in Louisville. While there isn't much published on the subject, I suspect that many cities are like Louisville, where a small but fierce cadre of creators is working to change the status quo. Not unlike my work, the other trans playwrights in Louisville populate their plays with fantastic elements; an incubus art collector and a kindly masked figure of death; body reshaping nanobots, cyborg genitals, and giant snakes waging war on humans in a small restaurant. (Those elements all appear in staged but as of yet unpublished works by Clarity Hagan and Vidalia Unwin, respectively).

In addition to Louisville's local oeuvre, Methuen's collection of trans plays show that these artistic concerns, removing the action of the drama from reality by way of story, structure or staging, are part of a larger artistic sensibility in trans writers. Of the eight plays in the collection, six are removed from realism in a substantial way. Three involve puppets. I was aware of Louisville local trans artistic tendencies to exit reality before I began my research, but I was fascinated to find that so many other trans playwrights found the need to step outside reality to tell their stories. It's as if convergent evolution pushed us in the same direction. These plays by trans artists show a marked contrast with plays about T/GE artists by cis or straight writers. The cisgender playwrights and screenwriters focus on an all too familiar formula of minority characters mostly experiencing trauma and death. This suggests that from the outside, all these cis writers don't see trans folks as much more than the sum of their tragedies. The kinds of stories they are telling are limited and limiting (Keyes, Mantoan, Schiller 3-4). To me, this contrast suggests that maybe we should press pause on producing these cis penned dramas for a while, and allow the lived experience of T/GE people to inform art about T/GE people.

CHAPTER THREE: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The very first representation of transness I saw wasn't based on an image in art, film, or TV, but on one of my mother's frequent caricature performances. She is and was a woman who can't just talk. She's always performing. During her time living in Hollywood in the late 1970's, she worked in nightclubs, often alongside a woman named Andrea Andrews, who described herself as a "transsexual," in line with the accepted parlance of the time. According to my mother, in addition to a feminine appearance, Andrews also presented a great number of behaviors associated with traditional womanhood: She liked to cook and clean; she always dressed in frilly clothes. To my mother, a self-avowed feminist, these behaviors were all associated with a traditional style of femininity that she rejected. My mother -according to the story I heard her recount multiple times, often asked her friend why she would engage in such activities. The climax of this story was always my mom, taking on a stereotypical drag queen aspect as she performed the answer, punctuating her words with a dramatic snap: "Honey, I'm a woman by choice, not by accident."

LET'S PRETEND

Let's pretend I have satisfactorily demonstrated the idea that T/GE people are in crisis, And need to see some theatre that represents them. In this chapter, I try to explain how I came to feel that I needed to do something about it, or how I came to realize I was already trying to do something about it. This chapter also offers another viewpoint on the timeline of my life, with a focus on how I "came out." In the section "Gunslingers, Comedians, and Sexy Alien Cat Ladies" I present the images of gender and stereotypes of gender I grew up with, along with a lot of other Gen Xers and Millennials. #GenBetween. Spoiler alert: These images of masculinity and femininity usually *weren't healthy*, and I was well past adolescence by the time Ed Wood and Eddie Izzard showed me anything I felt real kinship with. The next section. "The Incredible (Queer) Journey" charts my early path through gender, and leads to my depressing alcoholic downward spiral, and the death of all light and creativity. Yes, it's grim, but it's quick. "Don't Call it a Comeback" recounts the rebirth of Queer in my life, intertwined with the renaissance of my creative life.

GUNSLINGERS, COMEDIANS, AND SEXY ALIEN CAT LADIES

I could pick any number of examples from my childhood to showcase a popular version of either masculinity or femininity. For masculinity I had Han Solo, Arnold Schwarzenegger, James Bond, Flint from G.I. Joe, and the completely on the nose monikered He-Man. There is a broad range of presentation here, and the difference between Han Solo and Arnold Schwarzenegger could be measured in light years, but they were all unequivocally male, and shared certain characteristics. For femininity I could look to Princess Leia, Cheetara of the Thundercats, Barbie, Cybil Shepherd from Moonlighting, or Daryl Hannah from the films like *Roxanne* and *Splash* (the duo had a strong influence on me, in one Hannah is a mermaid and almost naked several times, in the other she's basically Roxanne from *Cyrano De Bergerac*. Oh shit- Or maybe it was Steve Martin I had a crush on all along). There is a narrow spectrum of femininity represented here, but it is embodied in a variety of physical manifestations: everything from a flesh and blood woman playing an everyday person, to a (super hot) cat alien person from the fictional world of Thundera. And yet, their femininity is clear. And all of these examples, men and women, it is taken as granted that they are cis gender and straight.

It's hard to recall any actual media depictions of trans-ness from my childhood. There were plenty of examples of comedic men in dresses, in films I saw 1982's *Tootsie*, 1986's *Armed and Dangerous*, 1990's *Nuns on the Run*; in cartoons, Disney's *Robin Hood* and *The Jungle Book* both featured men comedically wearing dresses. A full list of the times men comically dress as women would be God only knows how long. Achilles

was dressing as a woman on Skyros, though who knows if it was funny, or if Achilles was actually just trans.

Discussing trans representation in the film and television of my childhood requires an examination of what is considered trans. In *Before We Were Trans* Kit Heyam discusses the difficulty in examining trans representation throughout history, noting that the term “trans” is relatively new, and has multiple categorically different definitions. This, they say, makes it impossible to definitively label anyone as trans (Heyam 1-31).

I don't remember the first time I saw a transgender person represented in film or television. I feel certain it was a trans person showing up just long enough to be the butt of a joke before they quickly exited. There are also the ubiquitous parade of serial killers, street walkers, and other harmful portrayals. I do know that I never saw anything that felt like it represented me. Likewise, I never saw my neurodivergence represented on screen. The closest I came to seeing a concrete single moment in performance that came close to representing me was when I was already 14, in the 1994 Tim Burton film *Ed Wood*. At a crucial moment in the film, Wood and his new girlfriend Kathy O'Hara (Patricia Arquette) are on a dark ride, the amusement park rides popular that featured a car moving through a series of animatronic and hydraulic jump scares. The ride stops unexpectedly, and in an unplanned moment of honesty, Wood turns to his love interest, and says “I like to wear women's clothes. Panties, brassieres, pumps. It's just something I do. And I can't believe I'm telling you this, but I really like you and I don't want it getting in the way down the road.” Fuller asks “Does this mean you don't like sex with girls?” Wood responds, “No, I love sex with girls.” After a moment of consideration, Fuller responds,

“okay.” As if by magic or cosmic alignment, as soon as this moment has passed the dark ride resumes.

A second moment that I did not encounter until my early 20’s, occurs in *Dressed to Kill*, the 1999 stand up special by comedian and actor Eddie Izzard, as Izzard describes being a transvestite:

It’s male tomboy. It’s not drag queen, no, gay men have got that covered. People do get them mixed up, no no no. Little bit of a crow bar of separation there, And gay men I think would agree. It’s male lesbian, that’s really where it is...Running, jumping, climbing trees, then putting on makeup when you get up there.

(Izzard)

It should be noted that Izzard used the term “transvestite” to describe herself at the time, but has since begun to use female pronouns and identifies as genderfluid. I have often wondered, given the fact that I already enjoyed wearing women’s clothing, why did I not see Depp as Wood and Izzard and think “Oh, I guess I’m a transvestite!” And I just don’t know. There are a lot of things I don’t know about my gender. Its very foundation is not knowing. I often conceptualize nonbinary not as a gender but as a placeholder that recognizes whatever my gender is, it’s not on one of those cliffs I was offered when I was a kid, and it isn’t even finding a different cliff. Perhaps the reason realism feels insufficient for my theatrical practice is because instead of navigating two earth-bound cliffs, I jumped off, and started making theatre in hopes that I’d figure out gender, and how to fly, before I hit the ground. But I have at times suspected that I’ll never fly, and that the trick is to just keep making theatre, just keep on falling, because maybe life *is* falling, maybe my gender is the act of falling.

THE INCREDIBLE (QUEER) JOURNEY

Within the context of this thesis, it is important to sketch my social transition from cis-het outlier, to nonbinary queer. I'll try to keep this to broad strokes, by my Queerness, and my journey to get there, is one of the structural foundations of my creative work and my thesis.

I loathe the ubiquity of the phrase “coming out.” While it may accurately represent the feelings of a large number of queer people, I strongly dislike the implications of hiding, especially when applied to nonbinary genders and their emerging prevalence in the queer community. While I can manage to pretend for short periods, I am mentally, emotionally, and arguably physically incapable of hiding for any extended amount of time. In early childhood I did my very best to succeed as a normative member of my social settings, in and out of school. I failed, and continued to fail until sometime in early adolescence when I gave up. Certainly, by the time I left Catholic school at the end of 6th grade and entered public school in 7th grade I had embraced an anti-establishment outlook. It was the only mindset I had encountered in media that matched my lived experience. I did not know the phrase gender presentation, but I dressed in an outlandish manner, often embracing the aesthetic, if not the phrase, camp. My Freshman year of high school I had my first fight with my parents about wearing women's clothing to school. I lost the fight, but began to sometimes wear my mother's clothes around the house when I was home alone. Near the end of Freshman year I began occasionally wearing women's underwear to school, in a large part due to having seen *Ed Wood* the year before. The fact that those underwear generally belonged to my girlfriend

is an example of the gender/sexuality conundrum I'll explore some other time. But as I noted earlier, this combination of characteristics did not match any gender I had seen.

So, 1998. 18 years old. I start college, majoring in dance. I believe in art, hope and love. My gender presentation continued to evolve and include more traditionally feminine aspects. I had more freedom to make my own choices, but I was less accepted socially, and in 1998, I experienced what I believe was my first major depressive episode. I mostly bounced back, but when the deep ugliness in America started surfacing after September 11 2001, I give up on theatre, stop believing in hope and art, and started believing in alcohol and drugs. Hindsight I was also struggling with PTSD from my childhood, but I was thoroughly convinced that while my childhood was tough, I was totally over it. All of which is to say that I was out the whole time. Out alone, and looking for some kind of relief from loneliness and fear. But addiction actually only served to push me further into heteronormative environments where I felt like an absolute freak. I eventually decided to accept that I was an outlier, and that there wasn't a category into which I fit.

DON'T CALL IT A COMEBACK

Abridged love story: Then I met my partner, quit drinking, did some healing, and eventually reentered a full time creative life starting roughly in 2012 when four things happened in the span of about three years. I started acting again. I went back to college, majoring in creative writing. I started writing plays, and started working as a freelance journalist, writing mostly about arts and culture. I guess actually five things happened, because I also started wearing women's clothes again.

All of those things changed me, but the thing that changed me the most was journalism. Starting in 2014 I began writing for the now-defunct website Insider Louisville. My first article there was about a professional wrestler, my last article there was about a new Cleopatra ballet. In this period of my life, from 2014 until my acceptance into graduate school in February 2020, I worked as a full time freelance arts and culture journalist. I wrote for WFPL, Louisville's Public Radio Affiliate, LEO Weekly, Louisville's Alt Weekly, the theatre journal Howlround, Salon, and others. As a freelancer I took whatever stories I could get, but I consistently and intentionally sought out stories about artists and businesses created by marginalized people, especially Louisville's Black and Queer communities. This brought me into contact with a wider variety of queer subjectivities. At the same time trans issues were coming to the fore in public discourse, gay marriage became legal, as well as a host of smaller events in the zeitgeist. I came to suspect that I was trans nonbinary but had many reservations and fears about definitively and publicly saying so, which I later came to understand were trans imposter syndrome.

I find it telling that what finally led me to embrace my trans nonbinary gender wasn't theatre. It was punk rock. I wrote about several queer punk bands in the Louisville music scene, including two bands, Transgressions and Bathroom Laws, that were comprised entirely of trans people. These musicians were performers, who performed their gender onstage, and performed their gender in real life. These artists were trans nonbinary by way of punk rock, goth culture, and David Bowie inspired glam. Those influences, and surely many others, expressed themselves differently for each performer, so while there was a sense of unity in this gender presentation, its unity was grounded in its diversity. Finally, this was a queerness that I recognized as being in line with my inner self, one that did not traverse from one end of a gender binary to the other, but instead started a riot somewhere in the middle, proclaiming "Fuck You" to all of the traditional gender roles available. It's worth noting that at least one of the musicians was autistic, so their struggle to navigate trans-ness and neurodivergence even more closely reflected my own.

TL;DR: Performing plays from the existing theatrical canon had defined and confined my gender. Punk rock liberated it.

OH THE IRONY

From 2013 to 2016 I played stage magician Ludlow Quinn in a monthly serialized play presented by Theatre [502] in Louisville, Kentucky. This 30 month long project began with a true serial, *The Stranger and Ludlow Quinn*, and the chapters were all penned by playwriting duo and married couple Diana Grisanti and Steve Moulds. After the initial story was completed, the series continued, morphing into an anthology titled *Ludlow Quinn Presents*, with Quinn narrating -from beyond the grave- fictional stories about real magicians. I returned as Quinn, and also wrote two of the installments, *The Story of Chang the Chinese Magician*, and *Karmi and the Ghosts of Memory*.

I did not realize at the time that I was trans nonbinary, because my understanding of what “trans” meant was severely limited by the male/female binary. Additionally, my understanding of myself as bisexual was not embraced by much of the cis gay community, messages I internalized. So I identified as a heterosexual man, because I thought I didn’t have any other options.

Karmi and the Ghosts of Memory featured two trans characters, because I felt that it was important for straight, cisgender artists to make and hold space for marginalized artists, and to tell stories about marginalized people. I also believed that it was imperative to make sure that the production had at least one trans actor or collaborator, someone who could have a seat at the table, and be an equal partner in the creation of the realization of the play. But we couldn’t find one.

This lil anecdote isn’t just for the lols and the irony. My work on those plays laid out themes, recurring story elements, and dramatic techniques that I have returned to time and time again: A person who is viewed by the world as one gender, someone we might

call trans or nonbinary in today's accepted terms, can find nothing in the everyday “real world” and its representations in art that reflects who they are. So they must look to some other kind of reality to find themselves, whether that reality is one of metatextuality, magical realism, or a mixture of both. In my play *Note*, which was produced by Louisville based theatre company Looking for Lilith Theatre in 2019, the main character, or at least the one who has the vast majority of lines, is a dead playwright who never appears onstage. Instead, her words are rehearsed by an actor. In *Nobody Bunny in the Golden Age of Animation*, an artist who creates and draws Looney Tunes-esque characters, accidentally attracts the notice of a rabbit trickster god who becomes the basis for his most famous character, a Bugs Bunny analogue. The trickster appears as various cartoon characters throughout the play, switching genders repeatedly, equally male and female, as well as aping the style of a 1930's radio newscaster who directly addresses the audience. *Orpheus: A Silent Circus* is my attempt to make a black and white film live onstage, with all its dialogue projected onto a screen behind the actors. The star is an assigned female at birth Chaplinesque street performer whose gender is never directly addressed, though their androgyny is alluded to in the scene in which they wed Eurydice.

I was exploring my gender by writing it, a shifting exploration that could not happen in realistic drama. Once my concept of queerness expanded enough to include me, I continued to write in a variety of metafictional and often magically realistic ways in hopes of expressing what it means to be trans nonbinary, and I find works set in the real world to be wholly insufficient for the tasks. Repeatedly in the existing academic writing and research about trans and nonbinary identities, there is talk of continuing growth and exploration in emerging genders, of creating new language about these

genders, and holding space for that creation to exist. Throughout *Nonbinary Gender Identities: The Language of Becoming* Sebastian Cordoba keeps using that phrase: “the language of becoming.” (Cordoba). My artistic practice seeks to go further than changing *words*. If there is a need for a *language* of becoming, I believe there is also a need for *stories* of becoming.

CHAPTER FOUR: WHY STORYTELLING/ WE'RE ALL STORYTELLERS

At the most basic level, despite their limitless backgrounds and performance style, all solo performers are storytellers. And if we assume that the very first performances in human history consisted of an individual telling stories in front of other members of his society/tribe, then the form is primal.”

(O Solo Homo, page xiii)

In the darkness, a voice booms out, beginning a spell that sets the stage and paints the world. But the voice can only begin the magic spell. Our imaginations must finish that act of creation. This is how *The Girl Crazy Queer* begins, with the storytelling magic that comes from voice and imagination meeting in the dark. Before the antagonist and the protagonist stepped out of the chorus in ancient Greece, theatre started out as storytelling. It was really the only way I could ever start this play. In this chapter I'll spin a yarn explaining why.

In the first section, “Tricksters,” I'll consider the image and the idea of the Storyteller as a subject, and dig beneath the surface of that image to reveal that Queer

history, and my personal history have deep roots in storytelling. I'll dig further, down past the roots and into the bedrock to uncover the links between storytelling, and the mythological and folkloric figure of the trickster.

“Modern Storytelling Events” brings us back to the present, as I recount the way events like The Moth Radio hour influenced my creative oeuvre, before moving on to “Han Solo, Princess Leia, and Ideal Gender Dyads,” which describes a short one person show that I wrote, *Secretly Han Solo*, and what it helped me express about the binary concept of gender. I continue the discussion of that piece, as well as another piece I wrote, *The Burn It All Down Play*, as I ask “Story? Monologue? What’s the Difference?”

Any kind of person can tell a storyteller, but a capital ‘S’ Storyteller in the archetypal sense is tied to fantastic stories. We have a cultural amalgam, composed of uncountable iterations of the character, up to and including in many people’s homes where a child’s first storyteller is their own parent or caretaker. The figure of The Storyteller can be invoked sometimes as a single line of dialogue or two, or even just the image of a book opening. From my childhood, notable storytellers include Shelley Duvall from *Fairy Tale Theatre* and John Hurt in Jim Henson’s *The Storyteller*. This fantastic Storyteller is a crucial part of establishing the feel of a magical world.

In *The Girl Crazy Queer*, I sought to draw on that amalgam, but also reveal the Queer energy that I think is inherent in the action of storytelling. Storytelling culture *is* Queer culture, and Queer Culture is storytelling, for a variety of reasons, but the most basic reason is because to tell a story, the Storyteller *is outside the story*. They must speak from a place of *being* the other, in order to reflect the subject back at itself. Current Queer oral tradition -which I’ll speak on later- often claims that in prehistoric or stone age tribes, Queer people were often chosen to be the Shamans, spiritual leaders, and lore keepers. The Queers were the storytellers. This may or may not be true, but the idea is

prevalent enough in the Queer community that the community's sense of self has incorporated it at a deep level.

In my personal history, storytelling came in the form of my mother's tendency to tell stories about her family's past, which is full of dark humor, violence, murder, and incest. They also included stories of insanity, of eerie and otherworldly people. "Our people are witches," my mother regularly claimed. Mother, was never the type to tell a story quietly, and any story told took on a performative element as she drew on her skills as an actor to turn anecdotes into little one person shows, performed for micro-audiences comprised of family or friends. While most of the relationships in her stories were heterosexual, there was nevertheless a queerness contained in them, both literally and figuratively. She had tried relationships with women in her youth, had flirted with polygamy, and had a gender presentation that spanned from high femme to tomboy, stopping at many points in between. Figuratively, the Gothic myths of our family's history were stories told about people in the margins, people unable or unwilling to live within the dominant culture. These stories were full of neurodivergence, trauma responses, and generational trauma, the same elements that are wrapped up in my queerness.

TRICKSTERS

Mom did love telling other stories, sure, the more well known stories made appearances, but her favorite fairy tales *The Jack Tales*, which focused on the same Jack as found in *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Jack is one of the few fairy tale figures that manage to travel across the Atlantic and populate stories told about America, specifically the American South (Chase and Williams). In his many exploits outside of legume venture capitalism, he is an anti-hero and a trickster, taking on a set of adventures that placed him beside the likes of Coyote, Loki, Anansi, and others. Tricksters are often tellers of stories, and frequently they use a convoluted tale to gull the gullible with whom they interact. But like The Librarian, any storyteller has the power and proclivity to be a trickster. The archetypal Storyteller is *inherently* a trickster. They can shape reality with words, reveal surprise endings, and shape narratives to suit their own purpose. Before I continue let me acknowledge that this is, pardon the phrasing, a tricky thing to navigate as a Queer person in today's world. The repressive religious right accuses Queer people of being deceitful, manipulative, predatory, evil child groomers. So for me to suggest that we are tied to Trickster's seems kind of, um. Fucked up? Yes and no. There are certainly Tricksters in some world religions that are up to no good. But more often the Tricksters' role is to laugh at and challenge the powerful, restrictive, or hypocritical beings in their pantheons. This is an argument for a completely separate thesis, one I feel sure someone is exploring, or has already explored, but it seems obvious to me that in an, ahem, *binary* pantheon that has only good and evil, Trickster's can be allowed to exist. Tricksters, like nonbinary people and the Queer community in general, have been demonized by the dominant social and religious paradigm in the western world. The sacred clowns have been

silenced. Lucifer, whose name literally means “Light Bringer,” has more in common with Loki, Coyote, and Prometheus than most right wing Christians will admit. Lucifer is damned to hell for challenging authority. Their other great sin? Having the audacity to offer humanity knowledge.

I’ve noticed that affinity for Tricksters is common among T/GE people, as Hannah Fons talks about in an essay in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*: “I knew that when I read about the trickster – like Coyote, or Loki, or Anansi, the Spider – who gleefully embodied contradiction and lived to troll anyone arrogant enough to try them, I felt like I was reuniting with old friends,” (620). Trickster can cross between worlds, bringing fire, farming techniques, and all kinds of gifts to humanity. They are an archetype that continuously pops up in theatre, whether it is intentionally challenging power structures or not, and whether or not their presence onstage is accepting or challenging the rules and structures of the particular form of theatre in which they exist. “The trickster who juggles simultaneous realities functions in many respects as the facilitator who of the dramatic action, at once provoking the performers and interpreting for the audience: Puck, Feste, and Lear’s Fool from Shakespeare belong in this camp, as do Schweik and Azdak from Brecht’s plays,” (Prentki, 20) Augusto Boal calls the facilitator in his games “The Joker,” and places them in the tradition not only of shaman, healer, and community therapist, but also in the position of sacred clown who must challenge authority. By rejecting a gender binary, by refusing to “pick a side,” nonbinary artists have already set themselves in space that is forever liminal. We are already moving between realities, and we are ideal creators to observe, interact, challenge and puncture ideas, egos, and illusions. We have stepped outside of the story, and we are, in the absolute best sense of the word, tricksters.

Not for nothing, but world myths from Loki to Coyote and beyond feature wily Gods changing their shape when they need to, including and specifically changing their gender, (Schnurbein, 109-111)

Before written language, storytellers were the keepers of oral history, and even after the advent of the alphabet, repressed cultures still rely on oral tradition (Wyatt, 129). The Librarian draws on queer culture's tendency, especially pre-internet, to spread culture and stories of our history in recitation and storytelling, not the least of which is the story that we were once Shaman. Before it was safe to regularly and openly discuss queer culture in mainstream media, queer culture was storytelling. Drafts of *The Girl Crazy Queer* included many versions and names for the character that eventually became The Librarian, including The Storyteller, but my favorite, one that was changed for dramatic clarity and coherence, was The Grand Old Queer, which I think captured the roots of the character better; a slightly older queer person, usually a cis-gay man, holding court at a social affair or party, telling stories of the past. This oral tradition is important in the Queer community, where so much of our history has been purposefully erased, suppressed, or obfuscated. In 2023, The queer community is poised in a strange moment. Our elders from the beginning of the modern movement are still among us. Someone who was 25 during The riot at the Stonewall Inn is only 64. These grand old Queers lived through Stonewall, The AIDS Crisis, the slow growth of queer representation in film and TV, and finally saw the landmark Supreme Court decision of Obergefell v. Hodges which made gay marriage legal—Attempts to collect and preserve our history are underway, but still face secrecy and homophobia In Kentucky, a cohesive attempt to preserve queer culture began in 2015 and 2016. Those attempts include pouring over old newspapers,

looking at official documents of all kinds. And talking to a whole lot of grand old queers
(Fosl, Vivian, 218-2019).

MODERN STORYTELLING EVENTS

Like I said earlier (“it’s AS I said,” my mom is yelling in my head. She also taught English) storytelling is theatre in the oldest sense, and it is still close kin to the modern discipline of theatre, especially in the context of the modern storytelling event. The most well known is likely *The Moth*, i.e. *The Radio Hour*. The program is a formal event in a theatre or other venue, where people get onstage and tell a story, generally based on a theme. The live events are recorded and broadcast nationwide through 575 public radio stations. While the radio program is filmed and recorded live in New York, around the nation there are live local Moth events. In Louisville these events began in 2011. Louisville was the 11th city outside of New York to host live *Moth* events. As of February 2023 these events take place in 28 cities, The regional events, like the ones in Kentucky, are a competitive affair. The basic format for these events is simple. A theme for the live event is announced in advance. The night of the event, before the show starts, storytellers interested in performing put their name in a hat. Once the show begins, a name is drawn, and that person tells a story that is roughly five minutes long. They are then scored by 3 teams of judges, each team made of three people. The process is repeated until ten stories have been told. The storyteller with the highest score wins, and goes on to a larger yearly event, *The Moth Grand Slam*. In Louisville, the presence of *The Moth* spurred the birth of other storytelling events including *Double Edged Stories*, *Tales from the Jukebox*, *We Still Like You*, and other occasional special events such as *The Mothra*, and a Louisville iteration of *Fuck Up Nights*. Each event has a different format, something that makes it special. Some allow ten or fifteen minute long stories. As part of my artistic practice and interest in solo performance I have regularly performed in

storytelling events, including *The Moth*, *Double Edged Stories*, *Tales from the Jukebox*, and *We Still Like You*. I have also told stories at cabaret style mix discipline events in Louisville. I made *The Girl Crazy Queer* as a piece of theatre, using theatrical devices, and playing multiple characters. But storytelling onstage, holding the audience's attention all by myself while telling my truth that really ignited my thirst to create a solo performance.

Storytellers at these formal events prepare in a myriad of ways. I know one performer who carefully writes out their entire story in advance. Many storytellers I know are often comedians, and have worked on pieces of their stories at open mic nights, the small comedy shows open to any performer who signs up. I know storytellers like me who are based in theatre, storytellers who are journalists. Most of us work off outlines, practicing our stories alone, or for a few friends. My dogs are an excellent audience.

Though our methods are myriad, I have observed performing skills that high level and award winning storytellers have in common, and many are similar to those found in theatre, skills like production of vocal sound and poise are important, but the most difficult, and possibly the most important skill is the ability to read the audience. It's a nebulous skill, and it appears in slightly different forms across disciplines. In the theatre I think it most directly applies to comedy. The twin sins of performing comedy are: performing at a sluggish pace, and stepping on laughs. A sluggish speed kills crispness- comedy is generally light and fast. But if a performer delivers a joke that successfully lands with the audience, they need to give the audience a chance to laugh. If you step on the laughs, i.e. keep going without pause, the audience will stop laughing. From performance to performance what an audience finds funny, or how funny they find

something, changes. Close observation and attention to the audience, the skill we call 'reading' the audience, is the difference between a success and a failure. Reading an audience in the storytelling milieu is essential for comedic moments, but must also be accomplished in moments of tension, suspense, and drama. There are online tutorials, articles, and even classes in the art of storytelling. They are full of useful advice. But the only way to really learn to read an audience is to get in front of one.

**HAN SOLO, PRINCESS LEIA, LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD
AND THE BIG BAD WOLF**

Interlude: From unpublished piece "Gender is a Galaxy."

I suddenly knew why I have always loved making clothes for aliens and adventurers in other Galaxies. It's because I never felt comfortable in the role this galaxy wants me to play. My body, and some part of my brain, had been trying to tell me this for a long time.

...I'm nonbinary, but I don't think people really understand what that means to me. In navigation on a planet, you need two points: where you start and where you are going. But in three dimensions, in space, you need at least three points. So male, and female, that's just two points, that's just the gender roles available on this planet.

But for me- the range of genders, the possibilities of me.... It's a whole galaxy. And it's not a long time ago, and it's not in a galaxy far far away.... (Trumpet fanfare of Star Wars main theme starts) So now I've got a blaster at my side, the engine of the Millennium Falcon revved up, while the light speed blurred stars make lines of light that streak past my eyes, and right here, right now, a great adventure takes place.

Before *The Girl Crazy Queer* I experimented with writing solo performances several times to understand how they worked onstage and on the page, though I didn't perform them. These shows both featured a solo performer, onstage, relating events to the audience by telling a story.

In May 2022 I wrote and co-created *Secretly Han Solo* (Solo), a short one person show with a trans-masculine actor named V Reibel. I wrote the piece, drawing inspiration

both from my life and from a passage about gender discovery that V had written and featured on their website. V performed the piece, and choreographed the drag performance with which the piece ended. In addition to being an experiment in writing a solo piece, *Solo* featured an examination of Han Solo and Princess Leia as models for gender expressive behaviors, and how the pair of them *together* shaped my understanding of gender and sexuality. Maybe some people idolized either Han Solo or Princess Leia, but I idolized them both, and my gender expression was influenced by them both. The piece of theatre that resulted was a story of an assigned female at birth Star Wars cosplayer who theatrically performs as Princess Leia, begins having panic attacks, realizes they are T/GE and then starts to heal by beginning to perform theatrically as a Drag King version of Han Solo. In the script, the cosplayer's performance begins with them dressed in a nondescript pair of black pants and white shirt, which lends them an androgynous or even feminine quality. But throughout the play, the cosplayer slowly adds costume pieces and props, a black vest, a holster, and a blaster. These additions transform the cosplayer's gender presentation, and they are now read by the audience as very masculine, complete with a symbolic penis. The cosplayer had secretly been Han Solo the whole time. The piece culminated in an actual drag performance: V as the Cosplayer as a drag king as Han Solo, lip syncing to Motley Crue's "Kickstart My Heart."

In *Solo* I examined the antithesis and possible synthesis of a masculine and feminine gender model; Han Solo and Princess Leia. In *The Girl Crazy Queer* I explored a more problematic pair of gender models, Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf, and I explored the possibility that storytelling is the most apt performing discipline for constructing narrative that examines, deconstructs and ultimately reconstructs

problematic or unhealthy images of masculinity and femininity. Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf have also held my fascination, which I now understand stems from my struggles to understand the combination of my gender and negative self image created by living with ADHD and self destructive behaviors brought on by responses to accelerating assaults. In many ways, *Solo* functioned as a template for *The Girl Crazy Queer*. It had a metatextual lens, using an almost ekphrastic relationship to pre-existing stories, focused on a gender journey that layered multiple metatextual characters using multidisciplinary techniques. It involved someone telling a story, but still blurred gender performance, theatrical gender performance, and onstage transition. It was also, like *The Girl Crazy Queer*, a self portrait, filtered through fictional characters.

The piece offered more fuel for contemplation when it traveled from the writing phase to the performance phase, and demonstrated one of the difficulties writing and staging trans narratives: When the piece was conceived and begun, V had only socially transitioned, but between the conception of the piece and the execution they began taking testosterone hormones. Their face rapidly began to change, swinging their perceived gender solidly towards Han Solo, limiting the full effect of the leger de main originally intended by the costume transition. Instead of a piece where a person we perceived as a Princess Leia transformed into a person we perceived as a Han Solo, it was a Han Solo origin tale, recounted by the scoundrel himself. We were both very happy with the piece, but it points out how as a trans person's body changes, the way the audiences genders them will also change, which has an affect on the stories we tell. The piece was initially performed as part of a mixed discipline evening of cabaret performance that featured drag, comedy, theatre and burlesque, and we evoked the overt femininity of Princess Leia

by programming Secretly Han Solo directly after a burlesque number wherein a cis gender performer, Beatrix B Naughty, performed a strip tease as Princess Leia.

Working with V strengthened my belief that though it is important for trans and nonbinary artists to create extremely specific and personal works of self portraiture, we are not necessarily doing so in order to reach someone whose gender journey and life is exactly like ours. We never know when or where another T/GE person's journey will echo our own. Reibel was assigned female at birth, acculturated as a girl, came out, and is physically transitioning. I was assigned male at birth, acculturated as a boy, came out, and I'm not physically transitioning. We are on very different gender journeys, but saw aspects of ourselves in the other, and as artists we explored the galaxy together by creating a portrait that resonated with us both.

STORY? MONOLOGUE? WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Artistically, I learned -or explored- many things watching that *Solo* performance. One was a better understanding of the difficulty of embodying different gender representations onstage. And it led to a better understanding of the difference between storytelling and monologue, a difference I had struggled with while working on another one person show that I wrote pre-graduate school: *The Burn It All Down Play*.

Dramaturg Dr. Janna Segal, who is also the Director of Graduate Studies of the Masters of Fine Arts Program in University of Louisville Department of Theatre Arts, read *The Burn It All Down Play*, and her first question for me was “who is the character talking to?” It completely blew my fucking mind, as such foundational questions can, because that question opened up other questions. To know who the character is talking to, I must know *where* the character is, why they are there, what they want from the audience. I was never quite able to satisfactorily answer these questions, questions I still struggled with in *Secretly Han Solo*. Because I hadn't yet understood what is probably the *most* foundational question of a one person show: What is the *artistic discipline* of the performance? Are they performing a play? Are they storytelling? Are they doing comedy? Any of these might involve standing on stage alone and addressing the audience, but they are distinct artistic disciplines. They function in different ways. In hindsight the problem with both the plays I described above is that I treated their protagonists as *storytellers*, not *characters*. Which brings us to an integral question: what is the difference between storytelling and theatre?

Theatre is action! Stuff happening! Antagonists! Protagonists! Hopefully sword fights! And sex scenes! And dance numbers! Storytelling is just some jerk talking to the

audience. Right? In Act 1, Scene 3 of *Othello*, the antagonist Iago turns to the audiences and -in typical villain fashion- discloses his entire plot to destroy Othello.

Is Iago just some jerk talking to the audience? Is he a storyteller? He's definitely a jerk. And while we can argue over the level of reality in which his speech occurs, he's usually staged so as to be literally talking to the audience. But he's *not* just some jerk, he's Iago in *Othello*. An awfully specific jerk, a character in a context. He is speaking a speech as part of a scene, whether or not he is directly addressing the audience. A storyteller on the other hand, in essence, is *not* part of a scene. They are, as discussed at the top of this chapter, outside the story. Outside the scene. Of course, this is a conceptual difference, and since theatre in the 20th and 21st century loves playing with conceptual levels of reality, and breaking the frame, there are plenty of gray areas between the two, bleed over where storytellers step into the scene, and a lot of purposeful "fuckery," to use the term from the delightfully queer Cinemax television program *Our Flag Means Death*.

Relating this back to my work- in *The Girl Crazy Queer*, both John and The Librarian speak directly to the audience. But John is part of a scene that casts the audience as John's classroom. The Librarian is, conceptually, not a character. They are a *Storyteller*.

And my play, because of my personal history, because of Queer history, because of my obsessions with fairy tales, because my daycare and Catholic school told me I was bad, just like they told me Tricksters were bad, absolutely *required* a Storyteller to "tell my truth," as the saying goes. But! I also needed theatre to *show* my truth.

CHAPTER FIVE: WHY THEATRE

My mom taught theatre. Did I say that already?

She also taught me that being gay is fine. But I have multiple polaroids in my head from the early 80's, my early childhood. Mom coming home after some rehearsal, deriding some actor. "He needs to learn how BUTCH IT UP." The words always came from a scowling face, her voice dropping to the lower end of her alto vocal range, the bilabial plosive B sound of "butch" punched the air, an assault that lasted until that sound's unvoiced twin at the end of the word "up" jabbed the ear. Her center of weight dropped from her chest to her hips, her feet took on extra weight, grounded her to the floor, and her two first raised up like a pugilist protecting himself from body blows.

Being gay? Fine. But you damn well better know how to perform like a man.

In this chapter I inspect several ways that gender and theatre intersect beyond the obvious connection and inherent tension between performing *gender* and *performing* gender. Was that sentence unclear? Does it seem like I'm not sure of the difference between *performing* gender and performing *gender*? Good, because *I don't*.

But I *do* know that a lot of this chapter focuses on situating me, my play, and a variety of T/GE peoples lived experience in the context of a juxtaposition of on and off stage performances of gender and transness.

The first section, "Theatrical Transition v. Basic Gender Transition," gives context to the rest of the chapter by fleshing out definitions of theatrical transition and the basics

of a T/GE person's transition, before moving on to clarify "Physical Gender Transition v. Social Gender Transition," juxtaposing sartorial and social changes a trans person can make with physical changes. This brings my discussion back to trans-imposter syndrome, with a specific focus on trans-imposter syndrome experienced by nonbinary people, and a juxtaposition of physical dysphoria and social dysphoria through the lens of biopsychosocial pain.

In "People are (Es)Stranged," I introduce the idea of estrangement in context with trans-ness, then demonstrate how, within my artist praxis as based on my lived experience, estrangement can exist in a more literal way as theatre, why I chose allegory and fairy tale as a tool to theatricalize estrangement, and why splitting myself via the character John into multiple subjectivities is a useful tool. This section ends with a breakdown of how I used costume to repeatedly transition between characters, likening it to the way my nonbinary identity involves choosing clothing on a daily basis can trigger feelings of dysphoria.

"Trans Time and Transition" moves the kiki back into juxtaposition land. Onstage transitions can show immediate changes in time and self, as opposed to how the lived experience of time changes for a person as they transition socially and/or physically, which we often call "trans time."

The examination of multiple selves jaunts into a look at the Other, how the Other and othering are literalized by theatre, and how that literalization interacts with my schema of "recognition," "representation," and empathy, which is explain using a synthesis or Aristotle's Poetics, and my own ruminations.

THEATRICAL TRANSITION V BASIC GENDER TRANSITION

In theatre the phrase transition most often refers to an action that, in one form or another, changes an aspect of the world the play is building for the audience. A transition can transport the story and the characters of the play from one geographic location to another. A transition can move from one time to another, with or without an accompanying change of place. A transition could be from one *tone* to another- a moment when a scene felt safe and warm could suddenly feel strange and frightening. These changes often employ technical aspects; scenery changes, lighting changes, even shifting soundscapes. A skilled performer can create a transition simply by walking from one spot on the stage to another, or simply changing the direction they are facing; Shakespeare's asides might be thought of as a transition from a scene in the real world of the play, to a character's inner life or inner monologue, and then back again. Often, especially in the context of one person shows, an actor portrays multiple characters. They must transition from one character to another, become a new person, sometimes in view of the audience, sometimes not. Possibly they'll have the help of scenery, sound and illumination, but often the actor will choose to simply show this transformation in their costume and in the way they use their body, perhaps how they stand, how they use gestures, the way their voice sounds. I'm not going to lie and pretend that isn't a flex to some extent. But hey- it feels good to feel good at something.

For trans people the word transition means something altogether different. Loosely defined it means changing gender presentation from one in line with their assigned at birth gender, to a gender affirming presentation, i.e. one that is in line with their self-identified gender. Transitioning can include a name change, a pronoun change,

a new birth certificate, and other official or unofficial conceptual changes. The observable aspects of gender presentation often change: clothing, posture, gesture, makeup and hair. Special garments may be worn such as a binder, which flattens or de-emphasis breasts or padding to create a feminine body shape around the hips, butt and breasts. People with penises may tuck or de-emphasize their penis and testicles (Ashley, Skolnik, 196-206). These may be elements of a transgender person's transition. Trans people may work to change the way they speak, and sometimes take vocal lessons to train their voice, much like an actor would train their voice (Ashley and Skolnik, 210-211). Arsenault, the performance artist whose manifesto on self portraits I discussed in chapter one studied The Alexander Technique, a system of voice and movement training that I also studied as an actor (Arsenault, 67). The observable aspects of real life transition can closely mirror the changes an actor makes while transitioning from one character to another. As a trans nonbinary actor, I am fascinated by this shared space, because I occupy it. I am the middle slice of a Venn Diagram featuring real world transition and theatrical transition... except the criteria for what does or doesn't constitute a gender transition is a subject of heated debate within and without the trans community. And for some people, I have not transitioned, at least, not as a trans person. Or not as a "real" trans person. Well- not according to Tiffany Tumbles, the binary trans character Contrapoints played in *Transtrenders*, anyway.

SOCIAL TRANSITION V. PHYSICAL TRANSITION

As stated above, in the context of gender the term “transitioning” generally means the process of moving from a gender presentation inline with the normative presentation of one’s assigned gender to a gender presentation that reflects the gender with which one identifies. No two transitions are exactly alike, but they are usually sorted into two categories; physical transition, and social transition. Social transition includes a variety of possible activities and changes, often including but not limited to several of the following: coming out, wearing gender affirming clothing, wearing makeup, changing one’s name unofficially or legally, and choosing new pronouns (Ashley and Skolnik, 185-238). Physical transition refers to changes made to one's body. This might include taking hormones or having gender affirming surgeries, or both. People may primarily think of “top” surgery or “bottom” surgery, i.e. surgery that alters one’s chest or one’s genitals. But there are a myriad of other possible surgeries. Arsenault discusses her surgeries, and her internal sense of self:

I have had approximately sixty cosmetic procedures over the course of eight years, financed through sex work. It should be noted that some of these procedures created an external feminine gender to match my own internal sense of being. Other operations, however, were motivated by my continued quest for beauty, a PASSION I devoted myself to completely—body, mind, and spirit.
(Arsenault 65-66)

People who physically transition have usually already socially transitioned, in fact in many places social transition is required in order to change one’s name legally, or to have surgery. In a particularly silly rule in Ypsilanti, Michigan a person has to take out an

add in the newspaper proclaiming their name change. In this thesis, I focus on the social aspects of transitioning for three reasons. The first is that at this point in time I have no intention to physically transition. That may change someday, and many nonbinary trans people *do* include physical transitions. The second is that the theatrical transitions I undertake in *The Girl Crazy Queer* mirror social transition. That resemblance is one of my main sources of interest in the play, both as a playwright and an actor. The third is that emotionally speaking, transition really hurts sometimes. I say that as a person, not an actor. Arsenault addresses the same pain, and even juxtaposes it with pain tied to her physical transition.

The physical recoveries were often painful, but adjusting socially and psychologically to my increasingly feminine and sexualized body (plump lips, breasts, hips) was even more challenging. Because I was personifying new social and sexual roles, people treated me accordingly.

(Arsenault, 65-66).

For me, this transition never quite stops. That's not a "oh poor me" moment, it's just an awareness of some of the difficulties I have in my T/GE life, and something that I think other nonbinary people share. Without a physical transition, I face the choice every time I walk out of the house of how I want to present. Earlier, I discussed the strictly physical aspects of gender dysphoria. For quite awhile, I thought that's the only dysphoria there was. You *physically* feel you are in the wrong body. It *physically* causes anguish. I couldn't square that with my feelings about how I feel when I look too masculine. Even that phrase, "too masculine," what does that mean? I don't hate being tall and I don't hate my broad shoulders. I hate that my physically imposing form is

frightening and triggering to people who have experienced violence. I don't hate my penis. I hate that if I wear yoga pants or a thin skirt people in the room with me have to cohabitate with all the difficult social phenomenon or even their personal experiences with sexual violence. I hate that some men feel the need to be a bigger man than me through all sorts of petty dick measuring social interactions. I want to scream- Honey- *you are the bigger man*. I'm not a man at all. I hate the way that the shape of my body can override the reality of the clothes on my body, and render me "man" in the eyes of people around me. It's easy to verify how I'm perceived, by what words are used in conversation with someone. Will they call me sir? Will they use my correct they/them pronouns? If I tell them my full name, Alicia Fireel, will they look confused, or alarmed? If they are a clerk, or in customer service, will they verify multiple times that MY name is Alicia, asking with the hint of a suggestion that I'm lying, and couldn't possibly have a "girls name." I can wear a woman's shirt, women's jeans, and women's underwear, and they are seen as men's clothes unless I pair them with some other signifying piece of clothing or make up. Frequently, even nail polish and lipstick will only femininity on me if they are in suitably frilly colors. I hate it. But I feel like an asshole saying this, because of the privilege and relative safety that a masculine presentation brings me. When I get dressed in the morning, I face complex questions that I like to sum up as, "Do I want to feel like *me*, or do I want to feel *safe*?"

Social dysphoria, however, is seldom mentioned. It can be just as painful as its physical counterpart, revolving around how a person's gender is perceived by those around. Being misgendered for example, is a common trigger of social dysphoria. It doesn't necessitate bodily discomfort.

(Chang and Sharon, 380)

Now- I'm an easy cry. Books, movies, theatre, I cry real quick. And yet- the number of quotes and concepts I have come across researching this thesis that straight up make me cry is intense. I didn't know there was such a thing as social gender dysphoria. I just thought I was a whiny jerk. So I cried when I read the above quote. The aspects of social transition that I do or don't reify everyday with the sartorial aspects of gender presentation can bring with it intense feelings, feelings that up until a few months ago I wouldn't have felt comfortable calling pain-

Huh... I just realized that as of today, 7:57 AM, Thursday March 16th, 2023, I have never described it as pain to anyone. Not in conversation, and not in writing. This is a moment of change. I keep uncovering quotes and assertions about transness, like buried scrolls or suppressed wisdom. There is an immediate visceral and emotional reaction, though I keep the lore secret, and I keep it outside myself. I try it on as a thought, without telling anyone. I slowly bring the chest, the arc, closer, looking at it and trying it on, until at some point I forget it is a secret, or a scroll, or lore. At some point I say it out loud for the first time, without thinking or planning to, and the idea is an incantation that reveals a reality. Social dysphoria is painful. Social Dysphoria is a biopsychosocial experience of pain (site ologies again?) I still sometimes experience social dysphoria when I look at my outfit, often made exclusively of women's clothing, and realize that it will still be seen as men's clothing because of my masculine body. And it probably always will.

But how the hell do I put that onstage?

PEOPLE ARE (ES)STRANGED

Nathaniel Dickson (remember him from the introduction? He wrote “Seizing the Means: Towards a Trans Epistemology”) likens social transition to art:

Transition is estrangement. By estranging, I mean that it bears the same character that Russian formalist Vict Shklovsky claimed as the most vital capacity of art; to add difficulty to the seeming naturalness of things, and in doing so prolong and make strange our perception of the everyday so that we might see it anew.

(206).

^That guy gets it.

To make the dysphoria palpable onstage, and to attempt to explore the sense that my gender is something that isn't, re: “The Cliffs of Insanity” section from Chapter Two, *The Girl Crazy Queer* makes use of allegories by way of fairy tales. What is an allegory but a way to “make strange” our seemingly natural perceptions? So fairy tales, fantastic stories, Icarus flying off the cliff, these are the best ways for me to explain and explore my personal and frequent estrangement. What could be stranger than stories with magical talking animals, quests, and transformations? Put another way, I turn the stories of my gender into art by estranging them from their real world “true” versions and turning them into fairy tales, which I think are better able to tell My Truth. Then I perform them.

These performances are deeply informed by the way my concept of vulnerability has evolved in graduate school. For a long time I've taken pride in how vulnerable I am. In real life, online, in my art, I have no secrets about myself, my past traumas, my alcoholism, my suicidal ideation. It's all out there for people to see. Vulnerability is part of my process and praxis. But when I began grad school I came to realize that I have been

thoroughly inside my comfort zone. Or rather, that I strategically pick the moments I am outside my comfort zone, which has stunted my growth as a writer and a performer. This led me to an intense realization: I'm *open* about my life, but that is not the same as being vulnerable. *Open* is sharing painful details, *vulnerable* is risking harm or failure. So a big part of making progress as an actor has been working towards vulnerability.

The progress I've made is linked directly to the strides that multiple professors in the Department of Theatre Arts have taken in incorporating a range of fairly new theatrical pedagogies that fall under the umbrella term "trauma informed," including the three professors with whom I've spent the most time: Assistant Professor of Acting and Movement Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano, Assistant Professor of Acting Jennifer Pennington, and Assistant Professor of Acting and Voice Rachel Carter. Trauma informed acting techniques begin by recognizing the existence of trauma, and understanding it as a phenomenon that affects the body long after the trauma has passed. This view of trauma is based strongly but not solely on the work of Dr. Bessel A. van der Kolk and his groundbreaking 2014 book *The Body Keeps the Score*. Broadly speaking, From this understanding of trauma, these pedagogies recognize that the effects of trauma are present in each actor, and treat that understanding as an important part of actor training, as well as rehearsal and performance. The trust and communication built by these techniques allows students like myself to be vulnerable. This was imperative to the creation and performance of *The Girl Crazy Queer*, onstage, and coming offstage. Part of trauma informed acting is knowing how to fully release painful and intense energies. Without being able to fully step away from the character and these stories, as a bi-polar trauma survivor it would have been too emotionally dangerous for me to engage them.

The stories in *The Girl Crazy Queer* are not simply me removing my history from reality and making it strange. The estrangement is a reflection of the reality I was handed. I was proclaimed strange before my comprehensible autobiographical memory began. Through stories, daydreams and imaginative play, I found real and imaginary places and realities that matched my assigned birth strangeness. I imagined what magic or fantastic creature or character I needed to be to exist in those worlds. Often, those characters were the little girls and young women in fairy tales, Rose Red, Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood. I was drawn to stories where the heroines are lost or trapped, realities that mirrored the feelings I had linked to the painful reality I was living. There is a chicken and egg element to all my realities, what came first, my gender, or my ADHD, or my ostracization from my peers, or some unremembered violent trauma from childhood? Regardless of the theoretical possibility of answering this question, in my lived experience all these aspects were always already me.

To express my imagined realities onstage in *The Girl Crazy Queer* I estranged them from each other, split them into different characters, and situated them around the subject of my play, the English Teacher John. To split them into characters, I have to develop ways that the audience can see and understand the differences between these characters. Then, to make the drama of the play work, I chose to theatrically transition back and forth between these characters. In *The Girl Crazy Queer*, I change character 19 times. As I noted at the top of this chapter, transitions between scenes, and characters, can be partially or fully accomplished with a change in lighting, a change in scenery, or a change of location of the performer on the stage. In the first production, these elements were used sparingly. I relied most heavily on costume changes, and acting choices. I

attempted to bolster the visual elements of these changes with physical and vocal acting choices. The physical choices were rooted in gesture and posture, and the vocal choices were based in register and rhythm.

I drew on several techniques. For the posture and gesture of the Librarian -the storyteller- I drew on dance training, and the work of Jerzy Grotowski. I trained extensively in ballet and improvisational dance in high school and my first attempt at undergrad. While I didn't expect to use those skills in my Master's studies, I found that they often came into play in my movement classes, especially in the study of theatre maker Jerzy Grotowski. His technique includes a set of gestures and movements used to create spontaneously generated movement based interpretations of text. To portray the Librarian, I attempted to use Grotowski techniques, but allow the dance training, especially the ballet, to come fully to the fore. This included a slightly exaggerated dancer's postures and carriage. For the voice of the storyteller, I drew on the rhythm of a Southern accent, the near aristocratic lethargy associated with the old South. I paired this with a freer use of my upper vocal registers. Those higher registers, according to frightening playground abuse I experienced, sound "gay," "queer," or "like a girl." So, The Librarian freely uses my higher vocal register because they are *not afraid*. For the character The Outside Voice I attempted a neutral posture, and put my focus on gesture, primarily focused on the work of Rudolf Laban. His technique describes, among other things, "arcs" and "spokes" as types of movement. Arcs are movements that sweep in arcs. Imagine the circles described by Da Vinci's Vitruvian man. Alternately, spokes move directly from the body outward; imagine the spokes on a bicycle. I feel that spoking movements have a propensity for implied violence. The direct movement is like a direct

attack, which fits with the Outside Voice, who I'll address more in the upcoming section "The Good Soldier and the Outside Voice." Vocally I attempted to mirror that quality, and the Outside Voice speaks in bursts and jabs. Finally, with John, I wanted to imagine a tool that someone like John, not trained in acting, might attempt to use to speak in public, in front of a class full of students. For inspiration, I found a Youtube video on public speaking. I decided that even if John was trying to seem confident, his childhood trauma would have made him a sloucher. To physically show that posture but still retain my ability to create sound, I drew on Alexander technique.

Simplifying character transitions to mostly use my body and costumes serves to simplify technical needs for future, possibly barebones productions, but it also reflects a key aspect of my artistic practice; my wish to always meld form and content as much as possible. Transitioning from one character to another in *The Girl Crazy Queer* is primarily accomplished through a change of costume and change of presentation, because those changes directly mirror the tools of transitioning that I primarily employ in expressing my gender in everyday life.

But it had to be fast. As my theatre-teacher-ohyeah-also-bipolar mother always said: "the audience will forgive you anything so long as you are brief." This iteration of the show requires me to be onstage constantly, necessitating the need for fast transitions, accomplished through donning and removing the simplest costume pieces possible... 19 times. 19. Look- that's a lot okay? The costume piece is a blazer; a brown and black houndstooth with patches on the elbows. The blazer is an archetypical academic garment, seen in countless interpretations across multiple forms of media. This blazer is worn by John when he is in academic mode, lecturing his students. Once it has been donned, its

metamorphic possibilities are limited; its sleeves can be pushed up slightly, or it could be unbuttoned, both indicating a slightly relaxed moment. It is a masculine garment. The second costume piece was a shawl, a lightweight garment, delicate fringe on both ends, with an expansive square footage that allows it to be worn in a variety of ways, a shawl, a scarf, a babushka. Its femininity is hard to ignore. It is worn exclusively by The Librarian. The Outside Voice eschews the blazer and the shawl, doffing both and rolling up his sleeves, an action that implies “let’s seriously get some shit done,” attitude. Very masculine. Each garment matches the character, helping the transition not only by differentiating the characters visually, but helping me, as an actor, to let the shape or function of the clothing shape the way each character moves; John hides in his blazer, the archetypal garment helping him convince himself and others that he belongs in front of a classroom, despite all his negative classroom experiences as a child. The shawl catches the air, billowing, fluttering, and sweeping with ease as The Librarian makes grand, almost balletic gestures. The Outside Voice doesn’t want to hide, and doesn’t have time to gesture. He doesn’t gesture. His arms stab when they point, accuse, and assert. The artistic concern, how the transitions affect character, come with the logistical feat of finding the trajectory of each garment as it travels through the play so that I know exactly where to put a piece of clothing at the end of a scene. Consider the first few scenes. At the beginning of the show, I’m wearing the shawl, and the blazer is already placed onstage, on a coat rack. When the first scene ends, I take the shawl off and grab the Blazer and I step into the classroom, taking off the Librarian, putting on John, standing beside my desk. At the end of the scene, I take off the blazer, place it on the back of my desk chair, pausing just a moment to roll up my sleeves and consider the blazer, stepping

out of John and into The Outside Voice to perform a monologue. At the end of that monologue, I put the blazer back on, and cross the stage to stand next to my chalkboard. It's one of those old school, wood framed, freestanding, two sided chalkboards that can flip over. There is a knob on the side that one must loosen to make the chalkboard flip, so at the end of the scene, I take off my blazer, and hang it on that knob, because the next time I need the blazer, I'll be using the chalkboard again. If I put a garment in the wrong place, the scene breaks, or pauses between scenes, grows as I look for the correct costume piece. The longer I fumble and search, the larger the risk the audience will lose interest. Remember: The audience will forgive you anything if you are brief. Once, I heard my mother condemn a play she had seen; "You could've driven TRUCKS through those pauses!"

The exertion of mentally tracking each costume piece is accompanied by the physical reality of taking clothes on and off as quickly as possible. The shawl posed few problems. However, taking the blazer on and off multiple times, as I got sweatier and sweatier, was what actors would call a giant pain in the ass, and no matter how well rehearsed I was, the transitions couldn't help getting a little longer towards the end of the show. Opening night, just before the show started, it hit me: just wear glasses. Take them on and off. This sort of revelation is exactly what a creator looks for while considering the elements of a show they will perform multiple times. In future performances John will wear a professorial pair of horn rimmed tortoise shell patterned glasses. I should have figured that out earlier, but hey. Hindsight is 20/20.

To synthesize the first three sections of this chapter: transitioning in general is a long, often agonizing process, for me it was full of a dozen blind alley's and wrong turns

for each moment of feeling like I was on the right path. A lot of that "transition" comes/can come from gender performance. And I often feel like that transition is ongoing. And it's painful. That mirrors the work I'm attempting to perform as a trans-actor, in essence, transitioning all over again as I attempt to understand the similarities and differences between my own gender, the character's gender, and the artistic and emotional relationship between the two. This is complicated by the fact that I am playing multiple separate characters who are all part of the same person either literally and allegorically, in different stages of their transition. This is literalized onstage by costume changes, which mirror the way clothing and makeup are part of my onstage gender performance. In performing these transitions I seek a purgative experience, partially it's a form of aversion therapy, where I just transition between scenes so much it stops being hard. Partially it's an attempt to come to peace with social dysphoria, the way my body affects how I'm seen. In this production, I still worry that I'm read solely as a man, that I have not signified transness enough.

TRANS TIME AND TRANSITION

The connection between transition and time goes beyond the need to keep the play moving forward: early in my gender journey I encountered the term “trans time,” and became fascinated by it. But- trying to find a citation and definition to support my discussion of trans time, led me to the realization that for several years I have had a completely different idea of what the phrase means than the one that seems to be widely accepted, or at least the definition I found in *Trans Bodies Trans Selves*. That definition indicates a time of *waiting*. Specifically any time of waiting that occurs to further one’s transition. Perhaps it’s waiting for surgery, waiting for hormones, waiting for legal name changes (Ashley and Skolnik, 191). For me “trans time” has meant the feeling that when I transitioned, I emerged into a new personal chronology. It is not an idea that is foreign to the human mind. Much of the Western World still counts the years in time since Jesus’ supposed birth, though attempts have been made to switch from the AD of Anno Domini to CE or common era. More recently, Gen Xers and the older Millennials may think of time in one of several ways: before the Berlin Wall fell, or before 9/11; Gen Z will likely think of Pre-Trump, or Pre-Covid. In addition to feeling that my life has a new chronology, there is a strange sense of repeated adolescence- people years younger than me have been T/GE for years longer than I have, so in a way they are my elders in the trans communities. A lot of my friends use the term “egg” to describe someone who has recently begun to identify as trans, as in “Oh, they’re still an egg,” or “back when I was an egg....” It’s a term that I can’t find a definition for, but the word “egg” leads me to believe that my particular understanding of trans time, or sense of a new chronology beginning after transition is a shared concept. So much of the trans community’s

colloquialisms and slang seem to have sprung fully formed from the internet, like Athena leaping from Zeus's skull and yelling, "I am so queer!" I was part of a wave, a palpable change in the zeitgeist. Trans woman and actor Laverne Cox, who rose to fame due to her performance as trans woman and inmate Sophia Burset for 40 episodes of the 2013 hit Showtime series *Orange is the New Black*, claimed in 2014 that society had reached "the transgender tipping point," (Lopez and Driskill, 605) Facebook tells me I officially "came out," on October 5th, 2018, but I had been contemplating my gender pretty intensely since 2012. Not unlike John, I had worked in a conservative school that restricted my wardrobe from 2006 to 2011, and that wardrobe slowly took over my outside of work gender presentation. I wore button up shirts, nice pants, and other traditionally masculine office attire. That enforced masculine work wardrobe continued from 2011 to 2012 when I worked for the YMCA of Louisville. When I stopped working with kids, and moved first in the service industry and then into freelance writing, I started wearing more and more women's clothing.

My sense of trans time was something I tried to express in *The Girl Crazy Queer*. Theatrical transitions can manage and create a sense of time, either through their deployment, or the lack thereof. In Aristotle's *The Poetics*, the Greek philosopher discusses the use of time onstage in multiple ways. The received theatrical wisdom is that in *The Poetics* Aristotle was prescribing what theatre professors, critics, and practitioners mistakenly call "The Aristotelian Unities," or *the rules* of theatre. In his introduction to the Hill and Wang edition of the *Poetics*, Francis Fergusson asserts that Aristotle was in no way prescribing or dictating, he was simply describing what he saw on Greek stages (Fergusson). But his observation nevertheless serves as a basis for comparison. Many of

the great works of theatre, like the seminal *Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose occur in a single time and place. Other great works, Chekhov's *Three Sisters* jumps to mind, use a multi act structure, with action set multiple times throughout the characters lives, all in the same suite of rooms. As theatre moved from Naturalism, to Modernism, to Post-Modernism, Magical Realism, and beyond, time has opened to the possibility of a fluid state onstage, with a vast array of techniques for playwrights to use in establishing, playing with, and deconstructing time, place, and reality.

This fluidity is a necessary condition for my attempts to create a sense of my trans time in *The Girl Crazy Queer*. I didn't want to simply establish a literal analogue between real life and the stage, because real life is not sufficient for describing trans time. Moving from the fairy tales about Girl Crazy to John's present day includes a shift in time, but it also crucially presents a shift in *reality*. The combined effect of the transitions in character, time, and reality, allows for an ongoing juxtaposition of the characters that is crucial to the continued exploration of my experience of trans-ness.

As described in the first chapter, The Librarian opens the show and quickly introduces John and Girl Crazy, establishing that they are the same person. The Librarian continues to introduce the audience to more characters throughout the first third of the play, telling fairy tales featuring a host of secondary characters: a mother, a magpie, a hunter, an enchanted well, and a magic blue path. These fairy tales also introduce us to The Wolf. In John's real world we meet The Outside Voice the first time John starts to have a public panic attack, establishing himself as John's inner monologue, one that directly addresses him and the audience, and is clearly another manifestation of John's inner life. By the end of the play, the audience hopefully also understands that the

Librarian and the Wolf are aspects of John as well. The juxtaposition of a past and future self is a standard trope in all forms of media and offers a particular attempt to know oneself. It is also a tool people use in the real world to consider their own life. The chronology of events that lead Girl Crazy to become John make up a large part of *The Girl Crazy Queer*, but what of the many other aspects of John we see? What about the other juxtapositions we see? If John is the Wolf, who is Little Red Riding Hood?

Additionally, a second actor appears, who plays both Kerr. and Little Red Riding Hood. The use of voice over establishes other minor characters, Jared and The Headmistress of the school.

The following section will explore some of the philosophical and psychological concepts at play in the piece, and explore one of my major themes, the interaction between Hegelian concepts of The Other as a necessary foundation for understanding self, and more complex ways of seeing self. I will also consider what it means to *be* othered. These philosophical underpinnings and ideas interact with my real ongoing struggle to understand my gender.

THEATRE AS THE OTHER

Though it is referred to as entertainment, as art, as a discipline, as a craft, I believe at its heart theatre is a *way of knowing*. An epistemology. Its epistemological heart has always engaged the major questions of philosophy, either thematically or structurally. Of particular fascination to me is the concept of Other, and how it enters theatre in a variety of ways. The audience sees a play, which taken in its entirety is an Other, an other reality, which helps them to define themselves, at least contemplate themselves. Within the world of the play an audience, or an actor or a writer, might identify with the protagonist, thereby creating, or possibly necessitating the Other that is the antagonist. Characters measure and define themselves using different characters: lovers in and out of love define themselves by who does or doesn't love them, brothers measure themselves against each other, sons and daughters measure by their mothers or fathers. The list is endless, and grows longer once characters, or the playwright, expand "self" past a character's individual self and identifies with something larger -an idea, an ideal- to create in and out groups, us and them. For this contemplation to be theatre, characters must do things, say things, and take action. Which Aristotle says is the very essence of character.

For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of a life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy, or the reverse, dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as a subsidiary to the action.

(63)

The various ways that I originally wished to dramatically explore and collapse the idea of the Other onstage were further complicated in the first production of *The Girl Crazy Queer* when the evolution of the piece suddenly included the need for a second actor, adding extra layers of meaning. *Another* actor is in essence *an Other* actor.

The Other is discussed in various terms across intersectional and feminist critique, and has evolved to include the verb form Othering, the process by which we as people can dehumanize another being, or in some way separate them from our idea of humanity, or the very least ourselves.

“The language of appropriation, instrumentality, and distancing germane to the epistemological mode also belong to a strategy of domination that pits the “I” against an “Other” and, once that separation is effected, creates an artificial set of questions about the knowability and recoverability of that Other,” (Butler, 183-184). That sort of Othering in is direct conversation with my artistic focus on oppressed and other groups, with a strong focus on queer and neurodivergent people. Judith Butler is critiquing use of The Other as a strategy of domination, but the crucial fact she misses is that there can be a consensual and mutually beneficial act of othering in the creation of a state Otherness that exists between an audience and a play. That “artificial set of questions about the knowability and recoverability other,” can be a tool for self knowledge that does not harm, and can in fact spur healing.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle uses and defines the word “Recognition” as an element of Plot. “Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune”(72).

What Aristotle does not consider is that a kind of recognition occurs between the audience and the characters, when an audience member gleans a new understanding of themselves because they have seen some part of themselves displayed in the onstage action, especially when that part of themselves is something that they either could not satisfactorily put into words, or were afraid to. Representation, which we discussed earlier, involves a kind of basic Recognition based on outward appearances or simply stated affiliations or identities, i.e. if I see a play featuring a nonbinary bi-polar queer, I would be seeing Representation, though for that hypothetical play to trigger a strong sense of Recognition, it would need to speak to my lived experiences and my inner life.

For me, as a writer, actor, and human, exploring the various Others within *The Girl Crazy Queer* allows me to contemplate my gender, and my trauma. But I want that contemplation be in service of interaction with the audience, in two ways: To create empathy in straight and cisgender audiences, to offer comfort and validation the T/GE audience members.

In the service of creating empathy in an audience member, recognition is best when an audience member has a moment of recognition with a character who does not represent them, who at first glance is the opposite in some way, their Other. A cis gender heterosexual white father might see a Black transwoman and mother experience a moment of pain or joy, and experience recognition. Performance artist Nina Arsenault, who I previously discussed while contemplating the meaning of “self portraiture,” describes that moment as the chief goal of self portraiture: “One of the principal aims of self-portraiture is to inspire the viewer to ask, “How did she know that about me,” (65). I believe, and I think many artists share this belief if not this terminology, that such

moments can lead to a unification of self and Other in the minds of Fuckheads in the audience. They might see how they are part of the same group of humans that they previously found incomprehensible, contemptible, or evil. And it is an artist's hope that this will lead that audience member to stop being a Fuckhead, or at least put the first seeds in their mind of someday not being a Fuckhead.

When my artistic goal is to emotionally support or comfort an audience member, Recognition is best when it is coupled with Representation. Someone who outwardly appears or identifies in a fashion that aligns with my appearance or identity who then puts into words or shows an experience or thought that I have had, but was unable to put into words, or afraid to say those words out loud. While theatre is my discipline, one can experience Recognition in any medium. Often in the process of researching this paper, I have experienced intense moments of Recognition, perhaps most especially while reading Heyam's *Before We were Trans*.

As a male accultured child, I was expected, pressured, and abused into using the socially normative juxtaposition of boys and girls to help define myself. Girls were the other. I use the phrase "male acculturated" to indicate that I was always already not a boy, but that I was culturally treated as and conditioned to be a boy. This concept is important because it also recognizes the male privilege I still have, as well as the problematic internalized male behaviors I still struggle to cease exhibiting on occasion, such as the male gaze and mansplaining, though mansplaining techniques come in handy in some kinds of academic writing. Male acculturation in Alabama in the early 1980's, included strong physical punishment from my peer group and from children older than me.

The preschool I attended, where my earliest cogent set of memories emerge, accepted kids as old as 6th grade in their afterschool program, so I came into contact with children quite a bit older than myself. My early acculturation also frequently included time spent without the direct supervision of adults. We were set loose within the bounds of a large, fenced in outdoor area, which included many places the adults in charge could not see. The term “bullying” is wholly inadequate to describe the frequent physical beatings and emotional abuse that many queer and neurodivergent children experience, though physical abuse and even acculturating assaults are in no way solely the prerogative of such kids. Here I use the phrase “gender acculturating assaults,” to describe physical assaults that are perpetrated by one's peer group or caretakers in order to force them into a socially normative gender presentation. I also dislike the term “bully,” especially when applied to children. It dehumanizes and others the “bully.” It allows adults to conjure a specter, a boogeyman, and ignore the fact that the “bullies” are kids who are re-enacting the acculturating assaults that they themselves experienced, often delivered by the hands and mouths of the same adults who decry “bullying.” It ignores the fact that in children, and adults, violent behavior comes not only from attacking something someone sees as “other,” but from the reliance on the Other to prove the existence of self. Any one that threatens or challenges a person’s Other is a threat to that person’s very existence. Male’s Other is female. I believe that my inability to be either boy or girl posed an existential threat to the people who had only learned to define themselves using a binary Other. They felt their existence being negated by my complexity and reacted to that threat violently. I cannot possibly be the first person to make that observation.

While theatre can and should help unify and create empathy, it also performs the vital, possibly life saving act of creating and teaching multiplicity. In *The Girl Crazy Queer*, that multiplicity is personified by John's multiple versions of self, and offers tools for contemplation of self beyond the simple juxtaposition of self and other.

The tangled nature of John's identities onstage is purposeful. The frustration and confusion of navigating gender, as well as the psychological responses to gender based trauma and adversity are not clearly defined in real life, and should not be cut and dried onstage, no matter how allegorical the presentation. But in a dramatic sense, no matter how tangled John's identities are, their differences must be intelligible to an audience in order for that audience to engage them emotionally or intellectually. As an actor, this requires strong physical and vocal choices, but before I can act these identities, I must be clear on who these identities are in a textural sense. In essence I had to write them as if I were writing completely separate people, use the same tools of the craft, and ask the same questions. What are their characteristics? What are their relationships to each other? What do they want? What tactics do they use to get what they want? What stands in their way? How is this character different at the end of the play, how have they been changed by the action? I first ran into that list of questions as an actor reading Uta Hagan, but those questions work just as well for writing characters as they do for acting a character. My belief that T/GE writers need to create original material rests on the idea that they are best equipped to answer these character based questions in ways that dramatically sound and feel truly authentic T/GE audiences, sparking recognition that will give them comfort and strength, and hopefully help T/GE people struggling with suicidal ideation.

Thursday March 16, 7:40PM. In a move to limit time for debate and political action, the Republicans in the Republican controlled Kentucky House of Representatives sat on Senate Bill 150 for several days, then amended it to include all the laws from the failed House Bill 240, and bring it to the House for a vote. The Senate and the House passed the bill. Now it goes to Governor Andy Beshear to be vetoed or signed into law. Beshear has signaled he will veto it. The Republican controlled legislature has a large enough majority to override his veto. It's almost certain at this point that this bill will become a law. Go back and read the health statistics from Chapter Two. This law *will* kill trans kids. I'm changing my thesis title to *What the Fuck Is Even the Point They Will Never Stop Hating Us*, or possibly *Should We Even Bother Trying to Stay Alive*.

And now I'm floating outside of my body again. My brain stepped in and removed me from my feelings. I'll watch them from out here.

THE LOYAL SOLDIER AND THE OUTSIDE VOICE

In *Wild Mind: A field guide to the human psyche* Bill Plotkin offers a way of understanding self that identifies four facets of self, and also the four sets of fragmented or wounded subpersonalities that form during childhood. *Wild Mind* offered me a framework and terminology for a lot of the emotional healing I did before “coming out.” These facets and subpersonalities do not literally translate one for one to the characters in *The Girl Crazy Queer*, but Plotkin’s complex schema allows a flexibility that speaks to the multifaceted selves that I am expressing through all of the characters in *The Girl Crazy Queer*. The character that *is* directly influenced by Plotkin is The Outside Voice, who corresponds almost directly to the sub personality The Loyal Soldier.

There’s a boy in you about three
Years old who hasn’t learned a thing for thirty
Thousand years. Sometimes it’s a girl.
This child had to make up its mind
How to save you from death. He said things like:
“Stay home. Avoid elevators. Eat only elk.”
You live with this child, but you don’t know it.
You’re in the office, yes, but live with this boy
At night. He’s uninformed, but he does want
To save your life. And he has. Because of this boy
You survived a lot. He’s got six big ideas.
Five don’t work. Right now he’s repeating them to you.
(Bly, Excerpted by Plotkin)

This poem starts the chapter on “The Loyal Soldier,” and illustrates the power art has to sum up and activate complex emotional truths grounded in psychology or sociological phenomenon. The first time I read this poem I felt a shock of recognition. NOTE: I did *not* cry, because it was still fairly early in therapy. In the course of the chapter Plotkin describes multiple iterations of The Loyal Soldier, but the one that I think most artists and performers will recognize is The Inner Critic. The voice that tells you your work isn’t good enough. Depending on the person, an inner critic can vary in size, strength or technique. “Each one of us has subpersonalities that are Loyal Soldiers: courageous, competent, stubborn, and self-sacrificing versions of ourselves committed to assertive and sometimes drastic measures to survive the realities of our families and communities, which, in egocentric societies, are often dysfunctional,” (Plotkin)

Supposedly -i.e. according to my therapist- some people have an inner critique that offers gentle suggestions, and is very polite about it instead of the “harsh criticism” Plotkin discusses. I accept my therapist's claim as true because I trust him, and because he’s an expert in his field, but on an emotional level I don’t really believe that anyone’s inner critic is anything other than an all out verbally abusive monster. Kind of like I don’t believe that most people don’t think about suicide at least once a day. Really? You people really don’t think about suicide all the time? Of course, if you’re T/GE or neurodivergent, there’s a good chance you *do* think about suicide all the time. Hang in there friends. The idea of “ignoring” your inner critic is firmly entrenched in pop culture, and perhaps even more entrenched in the arts. In my head he -oh, very definitely he is a man- has always just been The Mean One. His job included stopping me from trying new things through what Plotkin calls “a sort of psychosocial downsizing, suppressing our natural

exuberance, emotions, and desires,” But as suggested in Bly’s poem, it also includes belittling me into pushing past my comfort zone. The thing I struggled with for years, and could never quite admit out loud, is that as much as The Mean One could be hurtful and limiting, as much as he could lead me to choices that caused me additional pain, he absolutely saved my ass on a regular basis. But I was afraid to admit that because it seems so counter to what the received wisdom on the subject tells. What spurred the shock of recognition the first time I read Bly’s poem wasn’t the idea that childhood trauma could cause someone to be afraid to open up, it was the opposite: “He’s uninformed, but he does want/To save your life. And he has. Because of this boy/ You survived a lot.” Tran Bodies Trans Selves discusses this specifically in regards to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, (PTSD): “Because PTSD symptoms have served, in part, to protect us, we may not even be fully aware of our trauma reactions or the ways in which trauma has impacted our daily lives,” (Chang and Sharon, 390). Plotkin’s work, and my work with my therapist, taught me to stop trying to silence or ignore The Mean One. I’m paraphrasing but my therapist said, “Don’t try to lock him out or ignore him, invite him in. Give him a hug. Thank him for his service and for his input, then tell him, “I’ve got it from here.” The Mean One has slowly chilled out. He can still become overpowering at times, and I don’t think I’ll ever completely get rid of him. He’s saved me too many times. And he continues to do so.

This loyal soldier, as personified in my real life internal monologues, also performs an important interior work of protection: He steps in when I need to stop feeling. He *is* dissociation. When I began to build the stories and monologues for *The Girl Crazy Queer*, I internally visited a lot of dangerous places and memories, mining

material. The Mean One, recognizing the place of their birth, was immediately ready to step in and stop me from feeling hurt. At which point I asked him to help write some monologues for *The Outside Voice*. Figuratively.

As a character, *The Outside Voice* ran the risk occasionally of telling, not showing. But that was balanced by him having the clearest goals, objectives and arc, all of which seemed to fall naturally in place. His goal is to keep John safe. His tactic is vitriol and anger, used to keep John safe from his emotions. But through the course of the play *The Outside Voice* discovers that the best way to keep John safe is to push him to feel his emotions, and to experience the emotions with John, finally absorbing back into John.

Through this chapter I have illustrated the ways in which theatre -like mine- i.e. self generated work by this here nonbinary artist, is particularly suited to help, heal, represent and recognize the T/GE community, particularly nonbinary trans people.

CONCLUSION: I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NOW.

This is where my conclusion is supposed to go. This is where I am supposed to restack and restate with stunning alacrity the facts and ideas I have set out to support my thesis, alight on the unshakable academically sound premises and arguments and say “See! It is vitally important for transgender and gender expansive artists to create original work that utilizes their lived experience in order to portray the varied emerging queer identities that are missing or misrepresented in the current theatrical, filmic, and new media canon.” And then say something cogent that makes all the other pieces of this thesis -the biographical bits and snarky asides, the attitude filled attacks on The System or whatever- feel like it adds up to something. Make it seem like it means something. But I swear to God I just can't. I cannot with any certainty or anything approaching honesty say that I believe any of this matters. I did believe it in October when I performed my show. Here's a brief list of things that have happened in Kentucky since then. In Kentucky. I'm not even talking about the two 15 year old kids in Britain who stabbed to death a 16 year old transwoman named Brianna Ghey (Holpuch), or last November when a man went into a Queer nightclub in Colorado and murdered five people (Clyde and Kim). No, this is just Kentucky: Henry Berg-Brousseau, aged 24, an impassioned trans man who first spoke in support of trans rights in front of Kentucky's legislature when he was 16, killed himself on December 16th (Tumin). That was three months ago. Zachee

Imanitwitaho, a Louisville trans woman was murdered 1.6 miles from where I'm sitting (Rocío, Bríñez, and Johnson).

That was on February 3rd, so about a month and a half ago. On March 8th, the Department of Justice released a report imparting, among other things, the information that Louisville regularly “Violates the rights of people engaged in protected free speech critical of policing,” i.e. fires beats the hell out of people who speak up about injustice (Rickert, Watkins).

The last scene in *The Girl Crazy Queer* starts with John saying “I don't know what happens now.” A lot like John, I don't know what comes next. And not in some vague “the future is unwritten” kind of way. It's 10:16 PM on Monday March 20th, 2023. I'm turning in this thesis tomorrow morning. Between now and April 4th when I defend my thesis, Kentucky Senate Bill 150 may or may not get signed into law (Watkins). It'll probably get signed into law, unless a conservative lawmaker has a stunning change of heart.

Last week was Spring Break, and I cleared my schedule months ago, but I spent most of the week obsessively checking on the status of the anti-trans bills going through the Kentucky Legislature. Staring at news websites, refreshing them, checking Kentucky's pro-queer advocacy groups social media feed. Waiting for updates, reading and rereading language from the bills, checking up on the sometimes arcane rules of the states governing bodies. It was a rollercoaster. Bills stalling, us hoping, bills suddenly picking up speed, us afraid, bills failing, celebration, unrelated bills getting an extensive list of amendments. Long story short, the “anti-drag” bill died. It was a bill that would have all but outlawed drag, and the vague language would have opened the door for a lot

of trans people to be harassed by law enforcement any time they were in public. Last Thursday, I sat and watched Kentucky Educational Television, counting votes in real time hoping, and watching parents, legislators, doctors and advocates plead for the rights of trans kids. But a terrifying anti-trans omnibus senate bill, SB 150, is on its way to the governor. I don't know what comes next.

Update. SB 150 passed (Commission, SB 150). I defended my thesis, passed with revisions. 10:45AM, Monday April 10. I'm working on revisions. Active shooter in downtown Louisville. Six dead (Elahi, et.al).

This is where my conclusion is supposed to go. I'm going to write it, and really try to make it sound smart, and well put together, and hopeful.

I GUESS MY CONCLUSIONS SHOULD BE HERE

In this thesis I have worked to build an academic work that mirrors the artists work that it discusses. The threads and arguments I've laid out are braided, in hopes that the individual pieces will come together and make something stronger, and more beautiful, than any of those separate threads could have ever been by themselves.

Starting from the first section of the introduction, "This is where my thesis statement is supposed to go," I have set out not only a clear map for the main arguments in the five chapters, of my thesis, but also a *key* for that map, an explanation of the artistic tools, and academic liberties I'd be taking with this thesis' format, so that no matter how far I strayed from the road more traveled my readers, weather queer, trans, cis, straight, from inside and outside academia, would never feel lost, and never feel that I had dealt with them unfairly.

Before I recount how the chapters themselves add up to my conclusion, I want to restate two more important aspects of my thesis. The colloquial tone isn't just a pedantic display of childish rebellion. I'm hoping to make this thesis readable to Queer people who aren't as able to navigate academia. What makes this more than a gesture is the ways in which I intend to disseminate this work post graduation. I will make it downloadable from my website, along with the play itself, and I will also share it in other Queer populated online spaces.

In order to successfully braid together this thesis, I've tried to balance the examination of four main subjects. The first three -myself, my play, the connection between modes of storytelling and Queerness- are hopefully in service of the fourth: the Queer community's needs. Those need's are succinctly stated by the numbers related to

health outcomes I shared in chapter two, but I'll boil them down even further: Queer people suffer enormous amounts of pain, and it has created a deadly mental health epidemic that strikes most viciously at younger members of our community. I have suggested that this is mitigated in two ways: make people feel seen, and make them feel less alone. Theatre and storytelling can do both these things, and the best people to make that work are other queer people.

“SO... WHAT?” *SO CONFUSED.*

Students are taught that a good conclusion includes an answer to the question “so what?” As in “if you’ve made your argument well, what does it suggest we do?” And here’s where I run into trouble, because “so what” is a question a lot like “what’s next?” And that’s where I start to fall apart. Because I don’t know what happens next. My character John doesn’t know what happens next. Trans and gender expansive people don’t know what comes next. And we’re scared. *I’m scared.* I’m scared my younger sibling, who is trans and autistic, will kill themselves. I’m scared that the trans kids I’ve taught at U of L won’t be able to access healthcare, or will face violence and death. I’m scared that I will lose the right to talk to my students about trans issues, I’m scared that trans artists like myself won’t be able to find funding. I’m scared that fundamentalist white supremacists will succeed in silencing and erasing Queer culture.

I guess if the question I’m supposed to answer is “so what,” the best answer I can come up with, given my thesis and given all the horrible shit that is scaring the hell out of me, is “*so do it anyway.*”

Make art with other Queer artists anyway, teach more Queer people to make theatre, keep telling queer stories. Keep becoming. Keep going, keep doing the work. I have a nearly ready to tour version of *The Girl Crazy Queer*. Okay I’ll tour it. In the most immediate sense I have performed the “Little Red Riding Hood” variations as stand alone pieces. I’ve been using oral posture and other tools for creating dialects to build different voices for the characters in those stories. I’m hoping to take them to Chicago in may to perform them as part of a quarterly puppet cabaret “Nasty Brutish and Short,” run by Rough House Theatre Company. As soon as I’m fully finished with grad school, I’ll

begin submitting *The Girl Crazy Queer* in its entirety to a variety of theatre festivals. I'm also hoping to trim the piece by about ten minutes.

I've been learning to teach theatre, Okay I'll teach theatre. I have already secured teaching work at Jefferson County Community and Technical College. Publish my work about making theatre, and live my work about making theatre, and keep performing my loud Queer, bi-polar self as authentically as I can wherever I go.

With the "anti-drag" bill in the news last week, I spent a lot of time thinking about Judith Butler's conclusion to *Gender Trouble*, where she asserts that in order to attack and rewrite gender, we must perform drag. She arguably means "drag" in a way that is very specific to her reading of gender, contextualized by *Gender Trouble* itself. I don't think she really means drag performance onstage. But let's actually perform drag anyway. Onstage. And perform shadow puppets onstage, and attack the patriarchy with our own brand new fairy tales. And explore as much as we can. Chart the galaxy. Jump off the cliff and fly. Jump off the cliff and hope. Fuck it. Let's do it all, let's do it all.

There is a basic kind of hope implicit in the very first line of every story- The hope that we will get to finish telling *that* story. Every story begins with one basic hope; that we will get to tell the story.

Shit, fuck, wait, I never finished the recap of *The Girl Crazy Queer* that I started all the way back in chapter one. I didn't explain the second ending I wrote. I'll do it now. I mean, it makes as much sense as any other ending I can come up with.

A NEW ENDING

Okay, so, right. When Clarity (the other actor in *The Girl Crazy Queer*) and Gil (my director on *The Girl Crazy Queer*) heard the old ending of the play, the depressing one where Kerr dies, Clarity asks, “What if she lives?” She starts talking about how girls, and assigned female at birth folk are more likely to survive attempted suicide, because they are less likely to use guns. And I started thinking about why I write, and how I write, and finding the balance of brutal honesty, and hope for the future and then I wrote what I called the “alternate totally bonkers ending” and showed it to Gil and Clarity. (And they liked it). Initially, it’s just like the first ending. Kerr dies, John is heartbroken. Then he stops and says, No. This is not how this play ends. It’s kind of half John and half me actually, and at that point the various threads of the braided narrative have woven *me*. They’ve woven my self portrait, And I’m *me*, onstage, I’m telling stories, deciding which ones are fairy tales, and which ones are realistic, and which ones are tragic, and the me that is John performs an actual magic spell that changes the way the play ends. Kerr lives. And I only realized the play could end that way because I was telling a story with other Queer artists, who are facing the same terrifying shit I am, and-

Look, that’s a hopeful ending, and last summer when I wrote it, I *believed* that hope. I *felt* that hope. But now, I don’t. Like, I am trying so hard to come up with some kind of something here that I can authentically say that isn’t horribly depressing. I got nothing. I think the best I can offer you is this: If you’re still reading this, and you’re in the 40-50% of the trans and gender expansive community that has seriously considered or attempted suicide, and you’re looking around and feeling the way I’m feeling... I promise if you stick around, I’ll stick around. If you hold on, I’ll hold on. Way, way, way, back in

the beginning of society, of people being not just sentient, but *sapient*, we started telling each other stories huddled around little fires, distracting ourselves from the fear that the darkness just outside the circle of light might come to life and kill us. We'd tell stories till we weren't afraid anymore, or until daylight came. Let's just keep telling Queer stories for as long as we can. Until we stop feeling scared, or start feeling hopeful, or until the daylight comes back.

If you hold on I'll hold on.

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Louisville Ballet: *#CHORSHOW, The Movement*, 2020
Louisville Fringe Festival 2019: *I'll Turn to Sparks of Flame (The Burn It All Down Play)*, 2019
Actors Theatre of Louisville: *Dis/Comfort Zones: A Journey Into the Sensations and Politics of Being*, 2019
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Theatre 502: *Nobody Bunny and the Golden Age of Animation* 2018
Derby City Playwrights: *The Bus Stop at Sycamore and Vine* 2016 (co-written with Tyler Curth)
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 Finnigan Productions: *Shot Me Down*, California, 2007
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 Artswatch: Corpus Christi, *Joshua*, 1999
 Actors Theatre of Louisville, *Christmas Carol, Turkey boy etc.*, 1993
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