“HOW MANY ROADS?”: CROSSING THE BORDER BETWEEN CHRISTIAN AND TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES

by

Jobin Daniel Davis

An Abstract
of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of English and Philosophy
University of Central Missouri

December, 2016
ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a “letter home” from a former Christian, new age lesbian, spiritually transitioning transman to colonial influenced, Judeo-Christian ideologies. Drawing upon Anzaldúa’s conocimiento and Daniel Heath Justice’s theory of anomaly, I argue that personal narrative, as decolonial methodology, is a bridge between traditional heteronormative, heteropatriarchal viewpoints and marginalized transgender persons. Finally, I draw upon the work of Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin’s milestone schema, Villanueva’s Memoria, Chogyam Trungpa’s Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior, and Zenju Earthlyn Manuel’s The Way of Tenderness to bridge the gap, open the conversation, continue the process of my mental decolonization, and ultimately accept that being transgender is both natural and necessary.
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APPROVED:

Thesis Chair: Dr. Rose Gubele

Thesis Committee Member: Dr. Karen Bradley

Thesis Committee Member: Dr. Kathryn Nuernberger

ACCEPTED:

Chair, Department of English and Philosophy: Dr. Daniel Schierenbeck

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI
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I like to think of my life as performing a set of folk songs on a Saturday night. I drive a beat up old Chevy pick-up truck to a crowded little bar, in Manville, Wyoming, called The 3 Sisters. The small, smoky, dimly-lit room is filled with those people who love me, those people who do not understand me, and strangers who are curious about transgender, or just want to listen to a transman, older than dirt, YouTube, and Facebook, perform. Before my set begins, the audience takes their seats while listening to a recording of Frankie Valli & The Four Seasons singing “Sherry” because Sherry is the name of my estrogen-self and will always be a part of who I am.

I like to dream of the song “Sherry” being abruptly interrupted somewhere during the middle of the “Sherry Baby” chorus when I jerk the needle away and scratch the record. In the silence, I ascend the stage, guitar in hand. The room quiets down to a hush; the spotlight shines on Jobin, my testosterone-self, wearing a tight black t-shirt, tattered jeans, and a pair of motorcycle boots. My hair, perfectly spiked, stands straight up, or maybe glistens in a pompadour like Johnny Cash. Everyone sees me dressed this way because clothes do make the man.

In a major study of transsexuals and other individuals in the transgender community, researchers Genny Beemyn and Sue Rankin discovered what they defined as “milestones” different groups within the transgender community have in common. In their book, The Lives of Transgender People, Beemyn and Rankin define the nine “developmental milestones” female-to-
males (FTMs) have in common as they make important life choices to become their true authentic selves (110). Like the transmen in the study, I find myself in each of the nine milestones, some more than others. By incorporating the milestones into this thesis, I have divided it into staves and each stave has a song title because my birth name is a song title, and music helps me locate the significant milestones in my own life.

I thought of myself as male as early as I can remember, which is Beemyn and Rankin’s milestone one, even as the song “Sherry” played in the background (116). I hid my “male gender identity in the face of hostility,” which is milestone two, while falling in love with Olivia Newton-John singing “I Honestly Love You” (116). I thought of myself as a lesbian, which is milestone three, while listening to the Indigo Girls sing “Strange Fire,” but eventually I knew that being a lesbian “was not a good fit” while listening to old records of Johnny Cash singing “Ring of Fire” (116).

In graduate school, I researched transgender and read about transmen like Jamison Green, which is milestone five, as I listened to Peter, Paul, and Mary’s version of “If I Had a Hammer” (116). I still play the hammer song because it sometimes takes a mental hammer to remove “denial and internalized genderism” to transition from female to male, which is milestone six (116). In addition, I give myself injections of testosterone, which is milestone seven, because it helps me look the way I feel, and I admit to thinking about Tammy Wynette singing “Stand by Your Man,” as I take the injections (116). I want to figure out what it means to be a man after living over fifty years as a woman because I wonder if I am going to tell new people about my estrogen-self, which is milestone number eight (116).
Most importantly, I choose to find “a sense of wholeness as a different kind of man” which is the final milestone (116). This last milestone is significant because the process of transitioning not only challenges cultural norms and institutions of gender, but transitioning challenges my individual norms as well. It is significant to ask the difficult individual and cultural questions that, as Reverend Zenju Earthlyn Manuel states, “openly acknowledge the real norms, desires, biological myths, and practices that fuel racial, sexual, and gender-based hatred” (Manuel 81). These issues are far too important to leave the answers rhetorically “Blowin’ in the Wind” as Peter Paul and Mary’s version of Bob Dylan’s song plays daily in the back of my mind.

The purpose of this thesis is to take the reader on a walk along the many roads of the one percent. I will use a combination of stories from my own life, poetry, songs, gender theories, and spiritual approaches, from other cultures, as well as Christianity, to create a multi-voiced genre, “letter home” to colonial ideologies. This combination of genres provides an intentional, emotional connection to one person’s experience of being a transsexual, defining from within, what it means to live as different, anomalous, or one in a hundred. Personal stories also provide a way for humans, as storytellers, to make sense of their everyday world. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, as narrators, individuals arrange the events of their lives in ways that change their interpretations and judgments about their past into a “truth” or “countermemory” of the present to provide a sense of “agency” (14). Memories, along with new knowledge and new information, allow the narrator to gain new “meaning” and “control” over his or her life. The often “culturally unspeakable” past can be turned into a manageable present (14).
Further, this thesis explores key issues central to the voices of marginalized transgender people that are also relevant to other marginalized groups like lacking language, religious, cultural, educational, and familial systems that support, encourage, and develop successful sentient beings. Reverend Zenju Earthlyn Manuel argues that society is a “collective body” and as such it must learn to develop introspection so that it can stop hurting itself and hurting others (Manuel 81). It is important to understand that truth sometimes involves traveling down many different roads, and being different is not only a part of the story, but difference is necessary.

I stare past the stage lights and scan the many faces in the audience. Someone coughs, and I know it is time to begin. I grab the mic, but before I can sing, I must ask a version of the question I have been asked throughout my life:

“How many roads must a man walk down before they call him a man?”
Dear Mom and Dad,

I wish you would have named me robin because it’s a bird and also a boy’s name.

The name Sherry was someone else’s coat I borrowed because I couldn’t find my own.

Why didn’t you ever notice the sleeves were too short? The zipper never zipped there weren’t any pockets and who would have thought fuchsia was my color?

Telling you I’ve stopped wearing it makes me want to write so small I disappear into the words, instead I write about the weather.

Today the birds tried to tell me there was rain behind the trees they were in little bunches crying their warning songs while I stood among them searching my empty branches writing with the world’s smallest pencil how much I miss you.
Sherry’s parents loved the movie Ben-Hur. They watched it every time it was on television. Charlton Heston was a Jew fighting against the Roman Empire. Her dad said “Amen” constantly when Ben-Hur was winning against the Romans. Ben-Hur wore a dress, but he was all manly, sweaty, and muscular. Women wanted him. Sherry wanted to be him. She wanted those muscular legs in a pair of sandals, the bulging biceps, the tanned arms pulling the reins, and the handsome, grimacing face fighting for God. Instead, Sherry fought her mother over frilly dresses, bikini sandals, earrings, makeup, and being a girl. Sherry’s mother was the Roman Empire, and Sherry thought of herself as Ben-Hur without the chariot.

Sherry’s mother still tells stories of sticking bows on Sherry’s sweaty, little, infant head so people would know she was a girl because even as an infant, people would ask The Question. As a toddler, Sherry would scream if anyone put dresses on her and the lacy pink and yellow dresses her grandmother brought over would cause an all-out war. Most of Sherry’s early photographs show her scowling at the camera and trying to rip the clothes from her body.

Sherry’s parents were married very young (16 and 18) and they did not have much money, so clothes were not easy to afford. It must have been quite awful to try to find something for Sherry to wear. She only liked her “tomboy clothes” which consisted of all of her older brother’s hand-me-downs. The problem was, Sherry was not very good at being a girl, and it was not her parents’ fault. Sherry prayed every night for God to let her wake up in the morning as Joe, but nothing happened.

When Sherry asked God to change her gender to male, she did not realize what a huge red transgender flag that was. She was very different from her siblings, relatives, and all the other kids she knew, but she did not know why. Sherry’s parents kept calling her a “tomboy,”
which meant she liked to wear her brother’s clothes, but the word “tomboy” fit as poorly as the dresses she hated to wear. Of course, being a tomboy failed to make sense to her because it only described a part of Sherry. Sherry wanted to wear boy’s clothes because, in her mind, Sherry was Joe.

Shannon Minter describes girls dealing with or experiencing Gender Identity Disorder, or GID, as girls who desire to dress as boys, wear their hair short, and have horribly negative reactions to parents wielding girl’s clothing (10). However, my parents certainly had no idea of GID and neither did I. It would take years of living, therapy, and going to graduate school to discover and admit that I am a transsexual man. I did not have the language to describe what I felt, and I could not discuss these feelings with my parents who were members of the Nazarene church.

Gender Identity Disorder was the name of the “mental illness” for transsexuals in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition, (DSM-4) in the United States until it was replaced with the diagnosis of “Gender Dysphoria” in the DSM-5 in 2013 (n.p.). Sexuality educator Janell L. Carroll traces some of the early writings on what is now known as “transgenderism” to the work of Magnus Hirschfeld. Hirschfeld’s 1910 book, The Transvestites: An Investigation of the Erotic Desire to Cross Dress, describes women and men who “thought, felt, or acted like the other sex” (Carroll 101). However, since most people do not experience transgenderism, there is a lack of social support (language, religion, health care, family, education) for those who are transgender.

The concept or word we now call “cisgender,” when biological bodies are in agreement with gender identities, Carroll traces back to psychologist and sexologist John William Money
who, according to Carroll, described most people as “gender congruent” (Carroll 102). Further, there is no transgender behavior when biology, gender identity, and gender behavior are all in “sync” (Carroll 102). Since the dominant culture is mostly in sync with mind, body, and identity, there is a lack of language to describe what is happening inside the mind of a transgender person that is not a mental diagnosis. And with a diagnosis comes social stigma. According to historian Susan Stryker, a diagnosis of GID or Gender Dysphoria is “controversial” for many transgender individuals. One the one hand, it creates a negative label much like a disease that begs a cure, but on the other hand, if there is not a psychiatric diagnosis, then a transman or transwoman cannot have surgeries or hormone treatments (Stryker 13).

Like many other female to male transsexuals (FTMs) before the Internet, I was not aware of any diagnosis for people like me, and I was only aware of male to female transsexuals (MTFs). I had watched the controversy on television surrounding Renee Richards who wanted to play professional tennis as a female. I knew she had medical treatments to become a woman and the news focused on her biological advantages over other women. What I did not know was I could have medical treatments to become a man.

I first discovered the term “gender dysphoria” from Carroll’s work, but the concept became real to me when I taught my race, class and gender students. Dysphoric is still not a great word to use, but it is marginally better than disorder. Lisa Wade and Myra Ferree define gender dysphoria as, “the sense of being a man in a woman’s body, or vice versa” (19). It is a simple definition, but difficult to comprehend. Gender dysphoria fit my childhood quite well because I was always dissatisfied with being a girl. I was not just a tomboy or a girl who liked traditionally masculine clothes or hobbies. I was a girl who felt like a boy. “Transsexual,” “transvestite”,

“cross-dresser,” or “transgender” are all words I work with daily, but gender dysphoria makes the most sense to me. The dysphoria for me is and was an everyday, persistent feeling that has led me to inject myself with testosterone and have a mastectomy. Such extremes are baffling to those who cannot identify with such intense dislike of one’s own body.

Cisgender writer Amy Bloom wanted to know why transsexuals would go to such extremes to feel “normal,” so she interviewed multiple transsexuals, crossdressers, and intersex individuals. Bloom wrote Normal about people who are not “normal” (Bloom xiii). Her thinking drastically changed about what is “normal” when she met real transsexuals and enlightened medical professionals (Bloom 6). However, Western European culture, as a whole, still struggles with anyone outside the gender binary. Fortunately, the students in my first college teaching experience were much more accepting than I suspected.

Most of the students in my class reacted positively to the idea of gender dysphoria. They understood Wade and Ferree’s argument that being a part of “the one percent,” that one person out of a hundred, who is not comfortable in his or her gender assigned at birth, is a natural part of the world (Wade 19). Others did not quite understand. Their issues mostly had to do with religious beliefs, lack of knowledge in gender theory, and their environments. As we learned together, intersex individuals are “living proof” that there are individuals who are not part of a clear-cut gender binary, and that transgender individuals are also part of this one percent (Wade 18). Further, many cisgender people behave in specific ways to prove they are truly masculine or feminine, or they may try to prove they are not truly masculine or feminine. Either way, the gender binary is a gender ideology that fails.
Additionally, all of the students were in the eighteen to twenty-four-year-old age range and were recently exposed to Caitlyn Jenner’s “coming out” on national television and had at least some exposure to the transgender presence in the media. Perhaps because they were young college students, they were mostly open to the gender theories presented in class, and as we studied, they become more accepting of the evidence. Sadly, not everyone is a young college student. I have had to learn, the hard way, what to say to the people who harass transgender individuals in the bathroom or are afraid of which bathroom they use.

One woman I encountered, before my transition, pointed to the women’s sign on the door of the women’s restroom indignant that I was standing there washing my hands. Did she think I could not read? Also, an older staff member (during my transition) at the university women’s locker room walked in and out of the restroom several times telling me, “I just wanted to make sure I was in the right place.” Yet, in another small college town, a kindly, older gentleman walked with me (pre-transition) arm in arm during the intermission of a Wailin’ Jenny’s concert to the men’s restroom. He told me how lucky we were to be men and bypass the long line at the women’s restroom. That was the first time I used a men’s restroom, with dozens of men, because I did not have the heart to tell the man the truth. How do you explain transgender, transitioning, and the gender binary to people like my parents who just do not understand?

Unfortunately, many from my parent’s generation, born in the late 1930’s or early 1940’s, may not be familiar with anyone outside of the gender binary. Further, Christianity can make it difficult for individuals raised within the dominant culture of the west to understand how their son or daughter might want to alter a perfectly good male or female body. Some Christians believe it is a sin for a person, created by God, to change his or her gender. Moreover,
individuals who are removed from urban areas, like my parents in Wyoming, may not be exposed to many transsexual individuals other than in the media and may reject what they see as strange, different, or anomalous. Like my students, I find exposure to something different is a process. We learned together that difference is okay, difference is variety, difference is part of nature, and being different is not a bad thing. Science writer Deborah Rudacille quotes Milton Diamond, a professor of anatomy and reproductive biology, to explain why violence, hatred, and intolerance have been a part of the transgender experience. Diamond explains that, “Nature loves variety. Society hates it” (Rudacille xxiii). Not all flowers are roses, or all people cisgender.

Sherry was born four years after her cisgender brother, Donald. Christianity was also new to the young family, and Sherry’s mom was convinced she was having a girl because God promised. Sherry’s mother had a dream, when her mother was very ill and in the hospital, that God took her up to Heaven:

“Thou shalt conceive two beautiful children. The first is to be a boy child and the second is to be a girl child,” God declared.

Later, when Sherry’s younger sister Lynn was born, Sherry asked her mother to clarify what God said in the dream and her mother revised God’s words:

“I sayeth two beautiful children and possibly more will be conceived by thee,” God declared.

Because of the dream, Sherry’s parents did not even pick out a male name for her. Instead, they picked two female names. Her mother wanted “Rockin’ Robin” and her dad wanted “Sherry” so she could be his Sherry Baby just like the Frankie Valli song. They decided on “Sherry” because Sherry’s dad stopped smoking the day she was born and they wanted to
celebrate. Because of this choice of name, Sherry has heard Frankie Valli, along with her mother, and everyone else, sing “Sherry” to her.

Her parents loved the name Sherry almost as much as they loved Jesus. Like Sherry’s mother, her dad became a born again Christian right around the time of her birth, so smoking, drinking, and large family gatherings ended. Sherry’s parents were the only born-again Christians in the family, and all of the relatives must have felt strange around them because they stopped coming to Sherry’s house. Hours of churchgoing replaced the big family gatherings.

It then became very important for Sherry’s mother to establish that everyone at church knew she had a brilliant, scholarly, eldest son named Donald and a very feminine baby-doll-loving daughter. Sherry was dressed for church in bright pink dresses, white bonnets, shiny white shoes, and even a precious little white Bible. It had a zip cover with “Sherry” spelled out in gold lettering on the front. Sherry was the second child, a special little girl that God had given to her parents, but without the bow on her head, even in a dress, people asked The Question:

“Oh, what beautiful children! Is that little one a boy or a girl?”

Sherry’s mother really struggled with the bows, the clothes, the shoes, and all of the girl stuff because Sherry wanted nothing to do with any of it, and her mother never lost an argument. Sherry’s mother was determined to have the daughter God had promised, but Sherry only liked her brother’s clothes and her cowboy outfit with a gun and holster tucked under her cowboy skirt. By the age of three, Sherry was skinning her knees, playing in the dirt, and eating bugs. All of the tomboy clothes called “play clothes” by her mother were okay at home, but not away from home. Sherry and her mother fought constantly over clothes.

Their fights usually sounded like this:
“Sherry, I told you to go put on your dress.”

“It’s ugly. I hate that stupid thing.”

“I said go put it on or I will put it on for you.” Sherry would hesitate a moment too long.

“I’m getting your dad’s belt.”

“Can I wear dad’s belt with Donald’s pants?”

Through the elementary school years, the belt would come out of the closet, and Sherry would bend over her parents’ queen-size bed. Sherry’s mother would instruct Sherry to pull her underwear down, and her mother would slap the belt against her bare bottom. Sherry imagined Ben-Hur whipped by the Heathen Romans and refused to cry. This seemed to make her mom even angrier, but Sherry was a strong, brave, tan, well-muscled Ben-Hur warrior.

Sherry thought about just putting on the dress without the spanking, but she could not bring herself to wear a dress by her own will. It would be like Ben-Hur just surrendering to the Romans without the chariot race. Sherry’s mother was not really trying to be an evil Roman. She just wanted a sweet little girl, a soft Sherry baby. In Sherry’s mind, she was Ben-Hur, Joe Cartwright or Roy Rogers. She was more Robin, like Robin Hood or at least Rob. Better yet, Sherry was Joe. Joe was the name Sherry chose for herself and she often wondered why her parents chose that stupid “Sherry” song. At least if they had thought of a boy’s name, Sherry could have asked God why he made a mistake. It seemed like being a girl was God’s will since a boy’s name was not an option. However, Sherry would rather die and go to Heaven than live as a girl.

Going to church was a big part of becoming Sherry. Attending the Nazarene church was a consistent Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night event. Attending church
was a guarantee that she would fight with her mom and dad at least two or three times a week, over clothing, until she started school. School increased the fights until policies changed allowing girls to wear pants to school. In the sixth grade, Sherry could wear pants to school and that was a good thing because it focused her mind more on learning than what she was wearing. However, attending church still meant wearing a dress, and Sunday school showed pictures of “nice girls” wearing dresses. Also, sermons in church made it seem like women were only wives, mothers, or harlots. Sherry wondered why women could not do more than being in a supporting role to men. These pictures and words encouraged her to hate herself while her education in public school was something she loved; it was the path to enlightenment.

By junior high school, Sherry decided that she wanted to go to college. Her parents were not thrilled with the idea. Her mother wanted her to work at the local Sears catalog store. However, Sherry had made up her mind. She was going forward no matter what.

In graduate school, I wrote a paper on the topic of my choice for a psychology of sexuality class. I got lucky. I stumbled upon the research of Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin, and their research drastically changed my life. It became more than an assignment, and I could not get the ideas out of my mind. I made my girlfriend stare at Beemyn and Rankin’s FTMs milestone chart on my computer screen.

Beemyn and Rankin interviewed transgender individuals and discovered a series of “milestones” they have in common. They surveyed female to male (FTM), male to female (MTF), cross-dressers (CD), and gender-queer (GQ) individuals. They found that even though each group has “differences,” for the most part, “nonbinary” individuals have many experiences that are very much the same (110). Further, I felt both frightened and invigorated as I first read
the nine FTM milestones. Without knowing anything about FTM milestones, I had already crossed almost all of them.

What works well with Beemyn and Rankin’s “milestone schema” is that it is theme-based and not based on a specific set of stages (114-5). Not all of the individuals surveyed have experienced all of the milestones and certainly not in any specific order. In addition, the theme-based approach provides information for each subgroup under the term “transgender” and demonstrates the variety of transgender experiences. The data from Beemyn and Rankin allowed me to affirm that I was a definite part of a subgroup of transgender individuals known as FTMs who have very similar experiences. Unfortunately, dysphoria was something we all had in common, but the milestones also revealed a progression toward acceptance. I found hope in that self-acceptance might be possible for me, and I made up my mind to find a therapist.

The first and second milestone on the list became very important as I thought about the story of my past: “Feeling and often expressing a male gender identity from a young age” and “Repressing or hiding one’s male gender identity in the face of hostility and/or isolation” were both true for me (116-7). Beemyn and Rankin discovered FTM participants who, as early as they could remember, had also felt they were male or very different from females (117). I knew there was never a time when I did not feel like I was a boy. Additionally, about one-third of those interviewed felt encouraged to be a tomboy when they were young, but felt pressured to act like females once they reached puberty (117-8). I was pressured by my parents, church, and even school to perform as a “girl.” In addition, being a tomboy was a familiar part of other FTMs early days. Wearing my brother’s clothes was normal for me as a child; the research affirmed I was not just a tomboy. Fortunately, by discovering the research of Beemyn and Rankin, I
realized even though transgender children are definitely different from other children, the milestones prove they are not alone.
Dear Olivia Newton-John,

While you were performing
“I Honestly Love You”
I was performing gender.

In my mind
you and I were married
because I was the man
you honestly loved.

But in my body
I was developing Playtex 18-hour boobs
wearing Kotex feminine napkins,
sitting with Sheer Energy L’eggs,
getting my ears pierced at the mall,
sweating through my Arrid Extra Dry
all against my will.

After the short shag haircut
the little opal stud earrings,
the punishment sandals,
the Oreo cookie necklace,
everyone stopped
asking if I was a boy or a girl.

I am so sorry Olivia, but
honestly, I fear
we will never love
each other.
Sherry’s earliest memory of The Question was in first grade. She was wearing a red and green plaid dress, red knee socks, and black buckle shoes. It was 1969. The dress code at her school made it mandatory for girls to wear dresses. Sherry lived in Southern California at the time, so it was always hot; she was running around sweating, chasing after one of those big red rubber balls. She had been slamming the ball up against a brick wall trying to play two-square by herself. A boy who constantly heckled Sherry ran up and asked The Question:

“Are you a boy or a girl?”

The obnoxious bully had been asking Sherry this question since the beginning of the school year, and she was really getting tired of him asking. She did the right thing. She had avoided him, walked away, and stayed to herself. Sherry was wearing one of the ugly dresses her parents struggled to afford, but she still looked like a boy, she guessed, because she had a short hair cut her mom called a pixie. Sherry had to wear her hair short because she had over-active sweat glands. That is most likely why the bows never stayed on her head in those infant years. It was a nerdy diagnosis, but Sherry was so thankful for those glands. She could wear her hair like a boy.

Back then, short hair made her happy even in a dress. However, this boy’s question seemed more as if he was trying to be mean or bully her because he kept asking the same question every time he saw her. The bullying from Sherry’s mother was already a daily event. Sherry was doing her part; she was wearing the mandatory dress. It seemed obvious Sherry’s gender was female right? However, Sherry really did not have a good answer for this boy. Sherry felt like a boy, she looked like a boy, she wanted to be a boy, or she already was a boy, at
least in her imagination, but Sherry had to wear stupid dresses, put up with people staring at her, and answer The Question that did not have an answer.

Sweat ran down Sherry’s face as she let the red ball drop and grabbed the bully by his shirt collar. She dragged him up close to her hot, red, sweaty face. Sherry’s teeth clenched together as a low guttural animal sound, from deep inside her stomach, blew a hot-air-answer up his nostrils.

“What do you think?” Sherry snarled.

“A boy! A boy! A boy!” the bully yelled.

The bully twisted from Sherry’s grasp and ran to freedom. She found the red ball and went back to playing on her own. Sherry smiled. The ball slammed against the wall. She was happy she put an end to this kid and his bullying, but his question seared into the meat of her brain. Sherry thought, “What am I? Am I a boy or a girl?”

This little story has become the perfect metaphor for who I am. During my journey, I have been all of the following combinations of gender identities: I was a boy dressed as a girl, then a young man dressed as a young woman, then a feminist dressed as a butch lesbian, then a butch lesbian dressed as a transgender person, and now I am a transman dressed as a transman.

However, I began my journey trying to be a good Christian girl. For the record, I tried hard because I was attracted to a system where there was a potential for love, as the hymn says, “Just as I am.” But the church I grew up in had a system that worked better if their members were either male or female. The Nazarenes had no room, and still do not have room, for the gender-anomalous. This works well if a person’s physiology matches who they see themselves to be, but what happens to those individuals who fall into the one percent where this is not the case?
Understanding why society struggles with girls and boys dressing, looking, and acting in certain ways is perhaps a part of what Judith Butler terms as gender being a “performative accomplishment” (Butler 520). Butler extends the philosophical idea of “performance” in language, as in J.L. Austin’s “performative” utterances (Austin 6). Austin argued certain things stated in language are also actions, for example, saying, “I do” in a marriage ceremony (Austin 6). These words, along with the actions they describe, become a performance approved and accepted by society. Butler applies this performative concept, of saying and doing certain actions in language, to saying and doing certain actions as a performance of gender. According to Butler, gender is a learned behavior; it is a social construction constantly performed and affirmed through performances. The performances create a self-sustaining loop where the performer is validated each time he/she performs an accepted gender norm (Butler 520).

Butler has two important parts of the performance that must be in place for the accomplishment of gender performativity: “The act is compelled by social sanction” and “not performing the act is a social ‘taboo’” (520). An individual who transcends their assigned birth gender goes beyond socially approved sanctions and moves into the world of becoming a social taboo. Parents can become fearful for a child who does not conform to the standards culture has deemed acceptable and can become concerned with how their child might bring harm or shame on themselves or their families.

To explain the gender performance concept, Butler quotes Simone de Beauvoir, as Beauvoir quotes Merleau-Ponty. The argument is that the body is more of a “historical situation” rather than a “natural species” (520). This is important because Butler uses this concept to demonstrate the body has significant cultural meaning and is therefore a walking piece of
history. The body is a complicated system because of its current cultural significance, as well as, all of its past cultural significance; a girl is not simply a girl, but she is a girl in the sense of how she is perceived throughout history. Butler argues gender performances are where historical and cultural meanings are vividly apparent since the actions of gender are performed to create meaning for the intended audience. For instance, clichés like “boys will be boys” are loaded with meaning of how boys have historically behaved as boys, as well as, setting expectations of how they should currently behave as boys.

Further, Butler claims that everyone in his or her own way “does” gender (521). For example, the word “female” does not signify what the word “woman” does for most cultures. The word/concept of woman is more of a cultural sign. Butler states, “…to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’” and a woman has to perform these actions repeatedly (522). In other words, being a woman is a cultural event that requires performing all of the gender expectations the word “woman” carries with it. Further, the affirmation of cultural gender norms continues each time a woman performs her gender according to these specific gender expectations.

Butler also makes two other arguments that revolutionized the concept of gender: “Gender is punished if it fails to be performed according to recognized social norms,” and gender is the type of social construction that “regularly conceals its genesis” (522). It becomes so normal to act in certain ways, that many forget why they follow certain norms like women tweezing or waxing the hair on their bodies. However, transsexual individuals are different in that they know, quite well, the genesis of their gender performances. For instance, I never forgot I was required to tweeze my eyebrows because I was female-bodied. However, I did not accept
this female social norm, but instead, desired to perform the male social norm of not tweezing my eyebrows. Unfortunately, my mother made sure that I did tweeze my eyebrows. She would force me to sit still while she extracted every stray hair; my eyebrows were required to be pencil-thin feminine brows.

Therefore, the performance of gender is ever-present in the mind of the transsexual because they find themselves constantly forced to perform out of character. A female-bodied transsexual faces expectations to perform gender in feminine ways, while a male-bodied transsexual faces expectations to perform gender in masculine ways. As a female-bodied transsexual, I acted like a girl because my parents, church, and school made me act like a girl. I deserve an award for best actor, since most of my life I did perform a female gender.

This prescient performance is significant because, unlike a transgender person, a cisgender person gets so accustomed to performing gender he/she believes it is a fact of his/her biological sex and not a performance. In addition, when others fail to perform, they are policed into performing or are even hurt or killed, as is the case of many transgender FTMs or MTFs. Butler calls this type of gender performance a type of fiction:

The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress. (522)
The fictions Butler points to have been what is used to punish gender transgressors. Individuals are also self-destructive when they feel they do not measure up to the standards placed by society and these “fictions” of gender norms.

False universals are another important element Butler argues. For example, “man” was once the word that symbolized males, females, and everyone in between. Butler explains that by leaving out the word “woman,” an entire half of humanity became invisible and hidden. Not to mention, that the English language does not really have a positive word for those of us who transcend the male and female binary. “Transsexual” or “gender dysphoric” can explain the process of transitioning from one gender to another, but fails to describe an individual who has transitioned, who does not want to completely transition, or who feels neither male or female or feels both male and female.

Native Americans brilliantly adopted the term “Two-Spirit” and created a positive term for those individuals outside the gender binary. Since words are the very tools used by everyone to think and communicate, lacking a word that is neither a diagnosis nor a medical term, such as “Two-Spirit,” makes transsexuals invisible or confusing. In this way, Butler’s false universals hold true for anyone who is neither male nor female or both. Gender norms become unchallenged performances as they define only the words “men and women” (523).

God finally did give Sherry’s mother the daughter she always wanted when Sherry’s sister, Lynn, was born eight years after Sherry. However, Lynn did not relieve the constant pressure upon Sherry to behave like a girl. In fact, things were getting worse for Sherry because she was developing into a young woman fast. At sixteen, Sherry had double D sized breasts, and that did not stop her mom from buying Sherry and Lynn the same style of clothing.
Lynn loved all things girly, and Sherry’s mother seemed to forget that what looked cute on eight-year-old Lynn did not necessarily look good on Sherry. For example, the Christmas after Sherry turned sixteen, their mother bought Sherry and Lynn matching pink fuzzy pajamas with big pink fuzzy feet. Lynn looked cute, but Sherry looked like a large, big breasted, over-stuffed, female Easter bunny.

However, one of the worst incidents was when Lynn wanted her ears pierced for her eighth birthday. Sherry avoided the earring question, but her mother and Lynn were insistent. Sherry tried to use the “isn’t Lynn too young?” argument, but her mother forced her into the car.

They drove to the mall, and Sherry had to go first. The woman at the jewelry counter was excited. She showed Sherry and Lynn the little stud earrings she was about to staple into their ears. The sales clerk searched Sherry’s face for joy and happiness, but Sherry was holding back tears.

“It really doesn’t hurt that bad,” the sales clerk said thinking Sherry was afraid of the pain. Sherry thought, “Lady you don’t know pain,” because her head was still sore from her mom forcing her into the car.

Sherry was oozing anxiety. She sat in the chair while the sales clerk loaded the piercing gun. The sales clerk drew little spots on Sherry’s lobes with a pen. The gun felt like someone was stapling papers together, and the pain brought thoughts about Christ on the cross. The nails in his hands had to hurt more than the ear-piercing gun. And what about John the Baptist? He had to eat locusts and wild honey in the wilderness waiting for Jesus. Sherry could picture herself as John the Baptist. She could easily handle eating a few honey-covered bugs over having her ears
pierced to look more like a girl. As John the Baptist, she could possibly wear an outfit like Ben-Hur. Sherry thought, “I could be John the Baptist, if I did not have to hide these little stud earrings.”

As a result, Sherry could not fake being happy about her new earrings. All she could think about was how the earrings would prove to everyone that she was female. Sherry stared into the mirror not knowing what she was seeing. She was branded and ear tagged. People stopped asking The Question. No matter what Sherry thought in her mind, her new look announced she was a young woman.

Clothing is, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman states, “the peculiar power of extra-physical expression” (3). Clothing creates an instant “extra-physical” visual recognition of an individual’s gender performance. Even if gender performances are androgynous, gender fluid, gender queer, or transgender, they are still recognizable through the extra-physical expression of clothing. An extra-physical “masculinized” gender display, through clothing, makes possible a female’s non-conforming gender performance and establishes a masculinized feminine agency that some might find threatening.

Before the 1850s, American women who cross-dressed as men could experience individuality, agency, autonomy, and freedoms typically enjoyed by men. However, historian and transgender studies scholar Susan Stryker details the “wave of legislation” beginning in the 1850’s where U.S. cities began passing ordinances that made it illegal or “forbidden” for individuals to wear clothing of the opposite sex (Stryker 31-3). This legislation significantly affected the performances of gender pointing to ways in which clothing, as Marjorie Garber states, “constructs (and deconstructs) gender and gender differences” (Garber 3).
New legislation that limited “masculine” gender expression for women also limited many physical activities and personal freedoms. Peter Boag explains how a “two-sex model” of the “modern” gender binary system replaced a “one-sex model” by 1800 (5). The two-sex model separated the sexes as being two “distinctly” different sexes and, as Boag claims, they were thought of as “complete opposites” (5). The system of the gender binary, as Boag describes, defined feminine actions and emotions as well as masculine actions and emotions that were distinctly separate from each other, thus, forming an opposite sex. In other words, Boag describes how gender in terms of how a person behaves, dresses, and feels was directly linked to their biology making gender and biology synonymous (5). The idea that gender and biology correspond, for every person, is what keeps the gender police employed.

Moreover, as Butler describes, “Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (Butler 528). Therefore, those transgender individuals who persistently perform their gender “wrong” feel an increased need to be hidden or invisible. Beemyn and Rankin’s second FTM milestone of “repressing or hiding one’s male gender identity” becomes necessary to avoid “hostility and/or isolation” (Beemyn and Rankin 117). FTMs, once allowed to be tomboys before puberty, soon find themselves covered in “feminine” clothing, jewelry, make-up, and longer hairstyles to keep from physical or verbal abuse by family and friends during puberty. Beemyn and Rankin found many of their FTM participants felt like they were “forced” into becoming girls by dressing and acting in certain ways, and they had to hide their male gender identities out of fear of retaliation (Beemyn and Rankin 118). For many adolescents the act of hiding behind clothing and persistently performing
a gender in their bodies that does not match what is going on in their minds, is devastating and often lethal.

Recently, I read about a twenty-two-year-old transgender male-to-female who took her life. She ingested poisonous pong pong seeds she bought online from Thailand. In Thailand, the plant is known as a “suicide tree,” and Lucia purchased the seeds for about five dollars including shipping (Brennan n.p.). Lucia Anderson had decided to live as a woman and had changed her name from Bernard to Lucia. Lucia’s story is like hundreds of others. Many young transsexuals ingest the poisonous pong pong seeds of assimilation and become suicidal because assimilation is so difficult. Frequent bullying often increases the risk of suicide, and if a transsexual’s friends and family do not accept who he or she is, that individual is involved in a type of solitary confinement with a persistent mind and body conflict.

In Sherry’s case, she began to feel invisible, so she lived in her imagination. Sherry was Little Joe Cartwright living on the Ponderosa with Olivia Newton-John. Sherry was obsessed with Olivia Newton-John, and she imagined they were married.

Sherry stared at the cover of the 1978 Olivia Newton-John’s Greatest Hits Album. The O N J was across Olivia’s perfect lips. Sherry listened to the breathy “I Honestly Love You” and knew it had to be about Joe because ONJ had to love Joe. In Sherry’s mind she was Joe and he was Olivia’s man. Someone had to love Joe. Sherry taught herself how to play guitar, and she was writing down lyrics and sounding out chords to songs every day after school. However, Joe dreamed Olivia would love his musical ability.

Sherry started singing in church, playing guitar, and leading children’s church. Sadly, her mom said she sounded like a cow in heat.
“Do cows even go into heat?” Sherry asked.

“I’m getting your dad’s belt,” her mother threatened.

Sherry did not understand why her mother had to be so hateful. Sherry was wearing the earrings and the girly clothes, but they still fought. Sherry’s mother wanted her to learn how to cook, do laundry, clean the bathrooms, and be a part of her domestic world. Sherry did chores for hours after school, then homework, and then she played guitar.

Sherry loved Karen Carpenter’s voice. Karen’s voice was Sherry’s first love, vocally, because Karen was the first alto voice Sherry ever heard perform as a soloist. Sherry loved the deep tones of women’s voices, and she eagerly listened to the Carpenters every time they were on the radio. Sherry would sound out “We’ve Only Just Begun” on her guitar, but Olivia Newton-John filled Sherry’s mind. Karen Carpenter was Sherry’s dream-voice since 1970, but Olivia Newton-John was Joe’s imaginary lover. The rest of the time, Sherry did what she had to do to please her mother and lived more and more in her imagination.

Then, Joe started sneaking into his dad’s room and tried out his cologne, after shave, and hair gel when he put away his dad’s laundry. If he had time, Joe would try on his dad’s shirts and ties. Joe dried his brother’s clothes several times on hot so they would shrink faster and become part of his wardrobe. But Sherry asked for forgiveness for these sins every night. Sherry knew it was wrong to fight with her mom, to hate her so much, so she prayed and prayed to become Joe. God was not listening. Sherry could not tell anyone else what she really felt and her secret was killing Joe.

Sherry considered herself lucky in many ways. She eventually wore pants to school, and thanks to Dorothy Hamill winning the gold medal for ice-skating in 1976, Sherry wore her hair
short like Dorothy Hamill’s hairstyle. Sherry’s short hair was one of the things her mom did not mind. Donald called her “Dorothy Hamster,” but she loved the haircut because it made her feel more like Joe.

However, many MTFs are not as lucky. Males cannot as easily get away with wearing items considered feminine in public. Men’s hairstyles vary, but shorter hairstyles are mostly attributed to males rather than females. Potentially, a young man may be bullied or killed for wearing a dress and earrings to school. Yet, being hidden and invisible is also painful.

Deborah Rudacille aptly questions that gender differences are not entirely cultural, as Butler claims. Rudacille, as a cisgender woman, states that her body, as in what is below her neck, and her brain, as in what is above her neck, are not “divided by some kind of biological Berlin Wall” (Rudacille xvi). Rudacille describes how the body communicates with the brain as “an open city,” and that city must be in constant two-way communication (Rudacille xvi). When the communication between the body and the brain is a biological Berlin Wall, then transsexuals face a life of ever increasing difficult choices. Gender binaries rage against transgender lives and are a significant part of what contributes to making the information exchanged between the body and mind so painful.
Dear Christianity,

Oh my god
I can’t believe we
broke up but,
sometimes I hated your boring stories
your sinners and strange fire.

You know
there’s more to life
then Adam and Eve’s
garden variety romance.

I always do this to myself.
I am attracted to systems
where I am abandoned
by my friends
like the fur trapper Hugh Glass
crawling two hundred miles on my belly
eating ice and raw flesh:
“Hello out there: I am still here…”

and I guess
I learned important life lessons
from our relationship
like being left for dead,

though I found warmth within
a carcass cut open
so that tomorrow still thinking
about us

I could crawl across the prairie on my belly
to find myself at the end of the wild path.
Sherry fell in love at age 20. She was attending Point Loma Nazarene College majoring in music ministry. Her family moved to Wyoming during her junior year in high school, and she wanted to get back to California. She was determined to be a music and youth minister in a church. She wanted to work with a youth group and sing in a Christian band. She had auditioned to sing for the women’s choir and a group called the Point Loma Singers. Regardless of what her mother thought of her voice, Sherry made it into all of the choirs, including a small ensemble called the Belles.

The women’s chorus went on tour for spring break, and each singer had to choose a “sister” to partner with for the trip. The choir traveled from San Diego to San Francisco and would stay with different volunteer church families every evening. The church would make a special dinner for the choir and the church “sponsor family” would make a sack lunch for each choral sister.

Sherry asked Jessica to be her tour sister because they sat next to each other in the alto section and were both a part of the Belles small ensemble. After Sherry and Jessica signed their tour sister form, a girl approached Sherry and asked if she had already chosen a tour sister. Sherry had never seen this girl before. She had dark hair, full lips, and lovely pale skin for a girl from Southern California. Suzy was a soprano. It was too late to be tour sisters, but Suzy found a way to sit by Sherry on the bus for most of the trip. Sherry tried to act interested in the other conversations or the scenery, but Suzy made her heart race and she didn’t know what to do with her feelings.

Sherry was nervously excited around Suzy and tried to act much older, sophisticated, and wiser. She made jokes and rolled up her sleeves to make her biceps seem larger. Suzy sat really
close and they talked about all the good songs on Phil Collins’ “No Jacket Required” album. Suzy liked “Suussido” and Sherry could understand how Phil could have a girl, like Suzy, on his mind “all the time” (n.p.). Sherry had to part with Suzy each night after they ate lasagna in every church basement all the way to San Francisco.

Sickness has a funny way of making a person think about what really matters. At one particular stop, Jessica and Sherry stayed at the minister’s house, but something went wrong with the lasagna Sherry had eaten earlier. She was up at 3:00 a.m. with lasagna flying out of every orifice. Sherry stayed with the minister’s family with a few other girls, who were also sick. Half of the choir had symptoms like food poisoning, but the other half went ahead to perform at the next church. Sherry was among the food poisoned, but she was also love-sick.

In between severe abdominal cramping and sitting in the bathroom, Sherry found herself thinking about Suzy non-stop, and that was when she realized she was starting to have feelings for Suzy. Suzy was not Olivia Newton-John, but Sherry was starting to hear “I Honestly Love You” in that breathy way when she thought about Suzy.

Olivia Newton-John was becoming a distant memory in Sherry’s mind that could not compete with a woman like Suzy. Sherry was beginning to feel like Joe when she thought about Suzy. Joe loved how Suzy wanted to be near him. He loved the way she put her head on his shoulder and how Suzy’s face lit up when she saw him. Sherry knew that she liked Suzy, in that way, AND that it was a sin. Sherry needed to forget about Joe and Suzy; she needed to focus on her devotion to God. Sherry prayed for forgiveness while her body purged the lasagna from the church.
After a long day and night of being at the minister’s house, everyone was back on the tour bus. Suzy came rushing down the aisle and found Sherry immediately. Then Suzy did something Sherry will never forget. Suzy put her hand in Sherry’s hand like couples do with the fingers interlaced. Her grasp was not a quick touch of the hand, like a friend, but was definitely a lover’s touch. Suzy moved closer into Sherry’s body and whispered, “I’m never letting you go.” Sherry did not think about God for the rest of the tour.

Sherry did not know how to be a Christian and a lesbian. Suzy showed Sherry a picture of a former PLNC student who also looked boyish and a lot like Sherry. Suzy told her this student was kicked out of school for “kissing a girl.” Sherry was scared about what she and Suzy were feeling, but she was also elated with the feelings of first love. Further, the ministerial classes Sherry attended made her feel like a fraud for having these “sinful” feelings. Sherry was hiding her feelings for Suzy and the ideologies of Christianity had no room for an individual like Sherry. She grew up reading The Church of the Nazarene Manual. She was studying the Bible and Nazarene ideology in her classes.

The Church of the Nazarene has a specific manual for an individuals interested in church membership. Members must study the manual and abide by the rules if he or she chooses to pursue membership in the church. The manual has several detailed statements that are against homosexuality and that belief exists in the church today:

- Sexuality misses its purpose when treated as an end in itself or when cheapened by using another person to satisfy pornographic and perverted sexual interests.
- We view all forms of sexual intimacy that occur outside the covenant of
heterosexual marriage as sinful distortions of the holiness and beauty God intended for it.

The manual goes on to explain:

Homosexuality is one means by which human sexuality is perverted. We recognize the depth of the perversion that leads to homosexual acts but affirm the biblical position that such acts are sinful and subject to the wrath of God. (56-7)

For Nazarenes, the *Church of the Nazarene Manual* is a document equally important to the *Bible*. The specific condemnation of homosexuality is also apparent in sermons, Sunday school, and other church-related activities. It was definitely an ideology I knew quite well.

Even though I was not completely sure if homosexuality described who and what I was, I did know the church viewed me as a perversion. I struggled with this idea because I couldn’t comprehend how loving someone could be perverted. I asked God, “Why would you create a person like me?” I wondered, why did I arrive in this world as a female if I felt like a male, wanted to look like a male, and desired to be with a woman?

Suzy was my first homosexual relationship and therefore a deliberate act to go against the will of God, but, at the same time, I thought of myself as a man. I was confused and could not quite grasp my difference from others. My body was a tortured lie. My mind could not accept that I was female. I *had* to be male in some strange way. I saw myself as a man until my reflection in a window, a mirror, or feminine clothing ended the illusion.

Ninety-seven percent of Beemyn and Rankin’s participants felt they were “different” from everyone else by the end of their teen years and the participants who were assigned female at birth felt a “negative emotional reaction” when they realized how different they were from
others (43). I could calm my negative thoughts by dressing more masculine and living in my imagination. If I could wear the masculine clothes I wanted to wear, I was able to see myself more easily as a man, but I was not quite sure if I was a homosexual.

However, I had a fully developed female body. My feelings for Suzy, to me, meant that I most likely had to be a lesbian. I was what my mother referred to as “an abomination to God.” My mom made the-abomination-to-God message clear when she saw Renee Richards in the news, or if she saw gay people, or played her Anita Bryant album. Nevertheless, with Suzy, I felt equal amounts of Christian guilt and what I was beginning to believe must be lesbian elation. The elation of being in love almost cancelled out my sinful guilt, but then I would remember my main reason for being in school was to become a minister of music. I began a pattern of asking for forgiveness, acting “sinful,” and asking for forgiveness all over again.

Beemyn and Rankin point out that many older FTMs did not have the “appropriate language” to articulate who they were and found it easier to identify as a butch lesbian (51). The butch lesbian identity was certainly a more comfortable identity for me because there was not a word or an image for anyone who was like me. I had no support from my church, college, family, friends, or even the language I spoke that could direct me to understand why I felt like a man in a woman’s body. I grew up and graduated from college before the World Wide Web, and I did not know any lesbians. I certainly had never seen a transman on television or heard about one on the radio. I never actually met a transman (to my knowledge) until I started graduate school. Without the words to describe what I was feeling, I decided to quit college and live with Suzy.
Suzy and Sherry’s relationship continued into the summer and fall. Suzy eventually told Sherry that she wanted to date a certain man, and if she could work things out with him, her relationship with Sherry would be over. Sherry was devastated. Sherry chose Suzy over her career as a minister and the relationship was ending because Suzy chose a man over her. Sherry had no one to talk to about what she was feeling. Sherry thought about how she somehow deserved to be “dumped” by Suzy because she was “an abomination to God.” Sherry thought her mom was right after all.

Suzy told Sherry if she were male, she would be Suzy’s perfect mate. Sherry did not know how to be Joe, and she could not stand to see Suzy dating anyone else. Sherry decided to keep her relationship to Suzy a secret. It was over. It would never happen again. Sherry called her dad, and he helped her move back to Wyoming. Sherry would never tell her family about Suzy.

The fear of retaliation by members of society, family, friends, church members, or colleagues may keep LGBTQ voices silent. It certainly kept me silent. However, nothing lasts forever. Seeds grow into trees. Gloria Anzaldúa, a feminist, Chicana, and lesbian scholar, explains such growth in “Now Let Us Shift…the Path of Conocimiento…Inner Work, Public Acts.” Anzaldúa tells of a bursting forth, a new growth, an “a-ha” moment, or “conocimiento” that begins when the anomalous, marginalized, rare seeds, are driven by the need to be who they truly are (540). Anzaldúa describes this moment as a “spiritual hunger” that leads away from assimilation and into a way to transform lives.

Additionally, Anzaldúa explains how creativity or art can be a way to face the “colonizing forces of culture” (540). The old ideologies of heteronormativity and the gender binary are distortions of reality in the process of “collapsing” in a “systemic” change across all
fields of knowing (541). For some, the change is not soon enough; the poison suffuses through the mind/body because the powerful often treat anyone who is different poorly because of their race, color, religion, sexuality or gender (541).

The best way for Sherry to be creative and keep herself from becoming suicidal was to keep attending college. Sherry transferred to the University of Wyoming and changed her major to secondary education. She would still work with youth, but it would not be in a Christian environment. The university was a breath of fresh air. Sherry focused on what she was learning and felt herself beginning to awaken from feeling worthless. Yet, despite all her attempts to keep away from “perverted” acts, she found herself in love with another woman; they lived together until Sherry graduated. Because they were Christians, they constantly felt guilty.

Sherry accepted her first middle school teaching job in Newcastle, Wyoming. She chose a small town because the chances of being tempted to have another sexual encounter with a woman were fewer than at the University of Wyoming. Her girlfriend accepted a teaching job in another small Wyoming town over a hundred miles away. Both of them felt guilty for loving each other. They said prayers together asking for forgiveness. Sherry wanted to do what was right, so she told herself that moving away from Jeannie was what she had to do.

The first week of school, she met several new teachers. Susan, the high school P.E. teacher, was a lesbian. Sherry laughed to herself at how Susan was so different from Suzy. This Susan was sure of herself, a strong woman, a proud lesbian. Susan wanted to know if Sherry was a lesbian. Sherry did not know what she was, but she told Susan about God, her attraction for both Suzy and Jeannie, and the difficult decision to move away to Newcastle. Susan was the first
person Sherry could talk with about her love for women. She did not, however, tell Susan about Joe.

On Sunday, Sherry put on a dress and found the only church in town that was similar to the faith of her youth. Everyone was moving to his or her place on the red velvety pews. Sherry found a seat in the back. A woman and her little girl sat beside her. The woman asked Sherry if she was married and told stories of homeschooling her daughter. Sherry thought to herself if she could marry, it would have been Suzy or Jeannie. Sherry truly loved both women and deliberately moved away from both of them to be the best Christian in the universe.

The minister began on time. He spoke of sin, homosexuals, and homeschooling. Deep inside, Sherry knew something more about this story. She felt love, she felt the force of life flow through her body, she felt her energy flow beyond these red velvet pews, beyond these stained glass windows, beyond these heavy wooden doors, beyond these beaten sounds of agony and regret. The minister’s words, of the significant and the insignificant, rang in her ears as she walked beyond the ladies’ room to the parking lot before the minister could say “Amen.”

Later in the evening, Susan brought her a lesbian romance novel called The Long Trail. Sherry eventually would read all of the books hidden in a box under Susan’s bed, but first she listened to the Indigo Girls’ “Strange Fire” album. As the Indigo Girls’ guitars pounded a fierce rhythm in the background, Sherry decided to throw away her dresses. She cleared her closet of the sweaters, the skirts, the slips, and Sunday shoes. She opened her dresser and collected the feminine panties and the panty hose.

Sherry gathered the handmade, wooden Jesus fish, the Amy Grant records, and the Bible into black trash bags and walked to the dumpster. She lifted the heavy lid and waited for God to
strike her dead. The black bags dropped deep inside the dumpster and nothing happened. There was no thunder, no lightning, and no deep, angry booming voice. The bright stars shone above, and Sherry went back inside and began reading her first lesbian novel. But before she went to sleep, Sherry prayed secretly, to anyone listening, “Please let me wake up in the morning as Joe.”

That night in Newcastle, Sherry felt a truly spiritual hunger because she was willing to eliminate the ideologies that were suffocating her. She knew loving another person could not be a “sin” no matter what gender she was. Sherry had to be brave enough to begin again and find a path where she could be herself.

In an article about Judeo-Christian-Islamic religious traditions and the power to influence American thinking, sociologists J.E. Sumerau, Ryan T. Cragun, and Lain A.B. Mathers argue how contemporary Americans learn a “cisgendering of reality” (293). Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers claim that religion is the “ultimate symbolic boundary” for what is important and what is not important in the minds of many Americans (295). Further, these religious systems teach a very definite version of the gender binary. A “Godly” man or a “Godly” woman are examples of a very specific set of gender norms that include the biological male acting in particularly masculine ways and the biological female acting in particularly feminine ways where gender is not viewed as a spectrum (295-6). Individuals who fall outside the religious gender binary system are erased, marked, or punished (293).

Additionally, many American religions teach “cisnormativity” through sermons, Sunday school, youth camps and other activities to the exclusion of the gender anomalous and therefore deny these individuals the right to be equals (295). Accordingly, if God is cisgender and has
created a cisgender world, then those who are not cisgender are automatically sinners and find themselves among groups of followers who are trained to have what Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers describe as “cisenormative assumptions and prejudices” (295). In this way, transgender persons often lack a spiritual network which, along with problematic relationships with family and friends, leaves few places to feel welcome.

In response to a member of their parish beginning hormone treatments as an MTF, authors James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, from the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University, researched ways for members of their parish to accept Robert’s transition to Roberta (171-2). One of the main conclusions Whitehead and Whitehead acknowledge is that not understanding gender variance is part of a natural “bewilderment” process (173). The bewilderment stage allows faith-based organizations to foster a sense of “humility” toward that which they do not understand. Gender variance or understanding gender as a spectrum instead of a binary system provides Christianity with a method of embracing “God’s extravagance” in regards to a “universe that dazzles with its size and diversity” (173). Transgender then becomes a part of a diverse universe instead of a sinful part of the universe. Unfortunately, the views of many Americans do not follow the research of Whitehead and Whitehead as a cisenorming of reality is more commonplace in many American churches.

It was impossible for me to find a successful path within what I knew of the Judeo-Christian world view, so I simply left the church and all of those ideologies behind. I had to unlearn the “cisenorming reality” of my past in hopes of finding something where living as a transsexual was not a sin and against the will of God. However, I was not willing to abandon my quest for spirituality.
Eventually, a lesbian friend of mine gave me a small “pocket classic” of Chogyam Trungpa’s, *The Sacred Path of the Warrior*. Reading and studying spiritual traditions outside of Wesleyan Christian ideologies helped me discover it is possible to find the strength I needed to stand strong and feel human. I could think of myself as more than a sinner. I had discovered hope.

The first step for the sacred warrior is to create an enlightened society. It is a society of wisdom that not any one culture or religious tradition owns. It is basic human wisdom. Trungpa states, “This wisdom does not belong to any one culture or religion, nor does it come only from the West or the East (3). He argues true warriorship is a tradition that has existed throughout history in many cultures and in many different times (3). Trungpa describes a legendary kingdom known as “Shambhala.” In this kingdom all people, including the rulers, practice a form of Tibetan Buddhism that teaches “meditation,” “loving kindness,” and “concern for all beings” (4).

In this tradition, all people become “highly developed people” (4). The idea of the Shambhala legend is not as important as the realization of living in a society where the ideal of a Shambhala kingdom is to represent the ideal of a “secular enlightenment,” that has the potential to uplift personal existence without the help of any “religious outlook” (8). These teachings encourage a sense of “wakefulness and sanity” that is the “potential” within every individual (8). The ideologies that value all human beings equally, replace the idea of otherness.

The first principle of warriorship is realizing that being a warrior is not about aggression. It is about being brave. Trungpa says the Tibetan word for warrior is “pawo” and it means “one who is brave” (10). A warrior must begin by not being afraid of who they are. This process also involves many of Beemyn and Rankin’s milestones for gender non-conforming individuals. The
path of decolonizing western ideology begins with bravery in the face of oppression even if this oppression is from family, friends, schools, and religious organizations. Transgender individuals must value their own worth as much as they value others. It is tough work, but spirituality does not have to be completely abandoned. Spiritual teachers like Trungpa or Anzaldúa argue there is a path where all human life is valuable. No one is marginalized. Anzaldúa argues, “Those carrying conocimiento refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge, and instead elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality” (542). Spirituality then can form a fundamental foundation along the difficult path of transition. The path of the warrior begins with the milestones of self-awareness. Warriors take a fierce introspective look within to become who they truly are.
Dear every lesbian I’ve ever loved,

Apparently, we weren’t supposed to conquer that waterfall along the Dismal River during the lesbian camping trip because everyone kept saying “Get out now” and “Carry the canoe” but the rush of water was upon us too quickly.

I was dragged under the rough waters thinking “So this is how I will die.” Grasping for anything holding onto nothing, for who can control water?

It seemed the waters that held me were whispering, “Don’t try so hard” when I let go of the branch.

On the ride home beside you I wondered “Why did I love you so much my dear?” Perhaps the patchouli, the rainbow stickers, the labrys necklace, or the way I thought I was big enough to wander around in your campfire boots.

Baby this heart of mine has a talent for singing and roasting lovers on the spit of my lonesomeness burning the ring of fire trading myself for yourself.
Sherry dated mostly straight women. She could not help herself. She was attracted to straight women like a lesbian to Birkenstocks. Her lesbian friends had encouraged her to attend the monthly potlucks and look for a women’s bookstore when she moved away from the small towns of Wyoming. Sherry moved in with her brother and his family in Lincoln, Nebraska, and she was determined to find “her people.”

Sherry found interesting people when her brother gave her a local independent, artsy newspaper. It listed all of the cool bands, art house films, and ads of singles in the area. In a small insignificant space toward the back of the newspaper, Sherry found an ad for a women’s bookstore. She grabbed her Birkenstocks and headed for the door.

The women’s bookstore was not really a bookstore at all; it was one woman on the top floor of an old home. Diana had a foldout table and copies of her own books for sale. Sherry started to leave after looking over the half-dozen books she already owned when Diana stopped her. Diana asked if Sherry liked to camp and gave her the address of some women who were going to camp out in the country. Diana told Sherry these women were a “good group” and it would be a great event to meet the community and make friends. Sherry decided she would try it because, after all, she was a self-proclaimed-butch-lesbian from Wyoming and camping was in her DNA.

Sherry, being very unfamiliar with the area, drove for miles out on backroads into the country and finally found the location. It was getting dark and she could barely see to park her truck. She pulled behind a Subaru covered with goddess stickers. Sherry noticed one that said, “My broom is broken... so I’ll have to drive this.” Diana from the bookstore was drinking homemade wine with the woman from the Subaru. Sherry took a swig, and they directed her to
the top of the hill where everyone was “about to begin.” Sherry did not think camping was something with a definite beginning, but she decided that she did not know much about how Nebraska lesbians camped.

It was a humid night, and she could feel the sweat dripping all the way down her stomach under her heavy breasts. Diana from the bookstore followed along behind her as they headed to the top of the hill.

“Do you know much about witches?” Diana asked.

“Of course,” Sherry lied.

“This is a pagan ceremony, so you’ll love it,” Diana explained, and put a hand on Sherry’s damp shoulder.

As they reached the top of the hill, Sherry began to get worried. God had pagans destroyed in the Bible, and her mother always said gay people were an abomination to God. She was afraid of mixing lesbian, pagan, and the fiery furnace. She did not know what camping and being a lesbian had to do with being a pagan, but Sherry realized she had thrown away her dresses and Bibles. She was still alive somehow and God had not found a way to burn her yet.

She had to try this.

Diana directed her to stand in a circle of women gathered on the top of the hill. Sherry noticed one very large woman was wearing a long golden flowy shirt with billowy sleeves. She had the popular long mullet hairstyle and smiled warmly at Sherry. However, she kept staring and smiling and Sherry wondered if she was a witch. The women introduced themselves quickly with names like Sapphire, Sage, and Raven. Sherry introduced herself as “Sherry from Wyoming.”
The woman next to Sherry handed her a gigantic hand rolled cigarette and told her it was a smudge stick. Sherry was to “purify” herself before the ceremony. No one else had purified herself yet, so Sherry had nothing to go by. The cigarette smelled like sagebrush after a rainstorm, and Sherry moved it all around her body including under her armpits. She used it as if it was a bar of Irish Spring. An annoyed woman who was now bare breasted with tiny perky breasts yanked the cigarette from Sherry’s hands and gently directed the smoke toward her own face with her free hand. Someone began playing a drum somewhere in the distance and almost immediately, women were taking off all their clothes and purifying their naked bodies. Everyone prayed to the four winds in the name of the goddess, and a beautiful full-breasted woman said it was time to start the spiral dance.

The straight women laughed because they were the only ones who took off all their clothes leaving Sherry, Diana, and the billowy-sleeve-woman fully clothed and looking at each other. Soon the spiral dance began and large breasts were whirling past Sherry’s face in a feverish frenzy. Sherry thought to herself, “Dear Goddess: I have died and gone to Heaven.”

🎵🎵🎵

For me, the ideologies of the lesbian community were a comfortable place to fight the heteronormative views of the Judeo-Christian world. Lesbians offer community, belonging, books, music, and feminist ideologies that allow a butch woman or masculine-looking-non-transitioning-transsexual man to love another woman. Not all female to males find their way into the lesbian community, and certainly not all butch women are transsexual men, but for those who are, the lesbian community is sometimes a friendly space that is not easy to leave.

Beemyn and Rankin define the third milestone for the FTM as, “Thinking of oneself as lesbian but realizing over time it was not a good fit” (118). Many FTMs in the study found
themselves attracted to women, and since they had traditionally masculine traits, concluded that they were lesbians (118). Beemyn and Rankin cite studies from 1997-2008 where many transsexual men “initially” thought they were lesbian because they liked other women or male clothing and activities (118).

It makes sense that many transmen would identify as lesbians before the days of Chaz Bono or Caitlyn Jenner coming out on national television. The media, YouTube, and the Internet have moved the transgender community into the spotlight in ways that have made being transgender much more accessible, but not necessarily any easier. However, the lesbian community is a group of caring women, and the term “butch” is a word where many transmen, like me, find an explanation that almost works.

Gayle Rubin defines butch as a type of “lesbian gender” where certain lesbians can successfully adopt male gender “codes and symbols” (Rubin 472). Rubin argues that butch and femme roles within the lesbian community are “connected to” but also “distinct from” the larger male and female roles in society, but butch is the term for women who are more “comfortable” with “masculine” gender identities than feminine identities (472). Butches can also be gender dysphoric (473). Rubin states:

Within the group of women labeled butch, there are many individuals who are gender dysphoric to varying degrees. Many butches have partially male gender identities. Others border on being, and some are, female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs), although many lesbians and FTMs find the areas of overlap between butchness and transsexualism disturbing. Saying that many butches identify as
masculine to some degree does not mean that all, even most, butches “want to be men,” although some undoubtedly do. (473)

As Rubin points out, even in the lesbian community, there is a variety of gender expression.

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Sherry was working overtime to be Butch Sherry in the lesbian community. She really felt like Joe, but still had no one available to express what she was feeling. Sherry’s lesbian friends encouraged her to date lesbians. They all went out dancing on Saturday nights at gay bars in Lincoln and Omaha looking for lesbians. Sherry had already had two lesbian relationships that ended in failure. Both womyn wanted Sherry to be “less butch” and accept her inner womyn-centered-lesbian-self to proclaim her “herstory” to the world. Yet, Sherry did not feel this way about who she was. She decided not to date anyone and to focus on the companionship she felt in her lesbian community.

Nevertheless, Sherry went dancing one night at a gay bar in Lincoln and spotted a straight woman who was a hot sexy mix of Madonna and Marilyn Monroe. Kate approached Sherry and wanted her phone number.

Kate and Sherry dated for four years until Kate left Sherry to marry the principal of the school where she was teaching. He was a man, of course, and twelve years older than Kate. He was married. He was building a new house, and he offered to pay for Kate’s living expenses and to attend graduate school. He divorced his wife and they married at the end of the school year. Kate went on to be a successful administrator of her own school.

Kate refused to talk to or see Sherry again. Sherry struggled with how she and Kate never had any sort of closure. Kate simply disappeared into another life. Sherry was broken. She was left to finish the school year trying not to cry in front of her students. How could she
possibly tell her coworkers or administrators that she was crying over an “inappropriate”
lesbian relationship? Many public school professionals would applaud Kate for leaving Sherry
for a man. Further, many Americans would view Kate having an affair with the married
principal of her school as much more acceptable or “morally correct” than Kate being involved
with Sherry. Sherry’s lesbian friends told her “What did you expect? Didn’t you know Kate
wasn’t a lesbian? You have to stop dating straight women.”

Rubin is careful to articulate the need for the lesbian community to be tolerant of FTMs
who are in transition. Rubin argues that many FTMs will not be ready to leave the lesbian
community and transitioning takes a good deal of time. Rubin cautions, lesbians should “strive to
maintain a community that understands diversity as a gift, sees anomalies as precious, and treats
all basic principles with a hefty dose of skepticism” (479). Even within a group that is oppressed,
there is often oppression directed toward those who are, once again, discovered to be an
anomaly.

Further, Rubin argues that feminists can misunderstand butch women, lesbians, or FTMs
by thinking they are “male identified,” in a political way, as “privilege oppressors” of women.
(473). I did not feel privileged. I felt hopeless, broken, and a traitor to my lesbian community. I
failed at being a Christian and I thought I was failing at being a lesbian. I had not yet discovered
the research of Beemyn and Rankin. I was unaware of even the possibility of being a transman.

At that point in my life, I did not automatically “come out” to others around me. I was a
public school teacher, so I was constantly aware of how easy it would be for me to lose my job if
students or parents found out I identified as a lesbian. I was also concerned with potential
violence for coming out. I remembered how Matthew Shepard was brutally murdered after I left
Laramie, Wyoming. Brandon Teena was killed shortly after Kate and I broke up in a town near Lincoln, Nebraska. I knew what happened to Brandon Teena or Matthew Shepard could have easily happened to me. I was walking a similarly dangerous path. I could be punished for being a lesbian, or I could admit I was more like Brandon Teena and suffer as Brandon suffered. I remember thinking, at the time, how Brandon Teena was a misguided butch lesbian that did not have a community of lesbian friends, so he was confused and acted too masculine or butch in public. I thought about how Brandon Teena would be alive if he would have acted more like Teena and did not try to pass as Brandon. I really had no idea that Brandon was most likely transgender and that I was too. I remember thinking that all butch lesbians secretly wanted to be men if they were being honest.

Sherry was often depressed and suicidal. She would work, come home, and cry herself to sleep. She listened to a lot of Joni Mitchell, and Johnny Cash and played Mitchell’s “A Case of You” or Cash’s “Ring of Fire.” Both songs put words to the feelings she could not express herself. Her brother encouraged her to move to Kansas City, where he was living, and start over. Once again, Sherry sold most of her belongings, resigned at the end of the school year, and moved to Kansas City. She was determined to be a butch lesbian and date only other lesbians.

She stood in the middle of her driveway. It was another argument that ended with Carol leaving. This time it was final. Another relationship was over, and she felt guilty for not trying harder to make it work. She knew she preferred straight women, because they acknowledged her male side, but her lesbian friends kept insisting she date Carol, a lesbian woman. And she
thought about how she did try with Carol. She bought a house and lived for a while with Carol and her adopted, estranged teenagers, but she and Carol were highly flammable.

Another friend told Sherry she was having an identity crisis and Sherry thought that maybe identity was the best answer. She realized, as she picked up the trash her girlfriend left behind, that she never had a romantic connection to Carol. The energy, the love, the passion were never a big part of this relationship for Sherry. She dated Carol because, as a couple, they represented what Sherry thought she should do, not what she wanted to do. Sherry knew she somehow traded the belonging she once felt in the church for the belonging she now felt in the lesbian community.

She remembered throwing away all those dresses and the Bible so long ago. This failed relationship was like forcing herself into a tight dress. Sherry was not a lesbian any more than she was a Christian. She was not the lover her girlfriend deserved. Carol deserved a better lesbian. Sherry was never going to be a better lesbian. Deep inside, she knew something more about the story of her identity. Sherry was not a woman. Sherry admitted that she had always been unhappy in this body. She did not have the language to describe what she was.

On Facebook, Sherry changed her name to Joe and stopped using the Sherry account. Joe became Sherry’s new alternate identity. This was the first time she had ever publically acknowledged her hidden self as male. Facebook seemed like a harmless, silly way to experiment with this new identity. She thought “Facebook was only a social media account; it was just a little joke to distance herself from Carol and the break up.” She chose male as her gender and made up a list of false jobs and organizations where Joe was involved. She laughed as she invited friends to be a part of this new “joke” Facebook page and seriously started considering
how to get a breast reduction. She wished the Facebook page could be the truth. Sherry logged off the computer, looked around her empty house, and put the last of what Carol left behind into the trash.

Self-help author Melody Beattie offers words of encouragement in a meditation from the book *More Language of Letting Go*. Beattie states, “The most powerful and magical words we can say in the language of letting go are these: *I am*. Then we step it up one notch by learning to say, *I am complete just as I am*” (272, emphasis in original). The words “Just as I Am” are a powerful reminder of being a Christian and the hymn most consistently played during the “altar call” at the Nazarene church. However, Beattie is not offering “a call to come forward” for sinners to accept an outside Divine force to change their life of “sin” into a life of heteronormative and heteropatriarchal ideologies. Instead, Beattie is reminding readers that, “When you are one with yourself, life becomes magical” (272). Both Christianity and the lesbian community filled me with a temporary sense of wholeness. But realizing that neither of these systems were a “good fit” was my way of letting go.
Dear Graduate School,

You are one tough prescient polemical son of a continuous performative utterance that slapped the shit out of my puny pathetic brain with a pedagogical thunder storm though when I finally saw the lighting flash behind the hermeneutic circle Clara T said, “Oh Honey. It’s all words, in this little garden we call life. So what kind of man are you gonna be?” Since you don’t mess with Miss Clara T,

I bought a Dust Buster screaming mad at dirt, to clean up some hegemonic dust bunning on my Parietal Lobe.

Clara T shook her finger, “huh uh” sashayed toward my Frontal Lobe, so I bought a commercial grade wet and dry Shop-Vac to suck up the problematic, systemic, heteropatriarchal, heteronormative inequalities embedded under my existing assumptions.

Clara T smirked, sashayed back. “Have you forgotten your Miss Karen Carpenter? Honey, we’ve only just begun.” So I bought a hammer.
Sherry’s job presented its own challenges. Two boys in her class were taking drugs daily and one of the boys kept falling out of his chair in her fifth hour class. The administration said they could do nothing unless someone physically saw the boys taking drugs. One day, one of the boys in her class threatened to hit her in the face because she asked him to sit down. His aggressive attitude was usually directed at female teachers. He did not respect women. His words for women were “slut” or “ho.” He was constantly saying “Money over bitches.” She found herself thinking how he would act differently if he had to live as a woman. She knew he would change his attitude if he woke up in the morning in a woman’s body.

The angry student glared at her for the rest of the hour. His eyes were red and glassy and he was acting hostile toward everyone. After class, he walked quickly away. When he reached the end of the hallway, he turned and ran back toward Sherry screaming with his fists balled in anger. Sherry stood still. To her surprise, she felt calm. She remembered the bully on the playground all those years ago.

“Go ahead,” she calmly told the student. “Hit me.”

“You’re not worth it!” He yelled and ran out of the building two hours before school ended.

The next day the boys were back in her class and high again. Sherry did not see the passing of the drugs because it always happened during lunch. Several teachers said both boys had been acting increasingly aggressive. The boys were red-eyed and blurtng out “what the fuck are we doing again?” The air in the classroom was stifling and filled with anger. She tried to get them both focused on their work, but the boys refused. Finally, one said he was leaving to
find his girlfriend and talk to her about leaving school early. Sherry asked the student to “please” sit down.

“Fuck you bitch,” the boy yelled. “I’m going to the principal’s office and you won’t have a job tomorrow!”

Sherry thought how nice it would be to leave this job. At the end of the day, she gathered her things and never went back. It was two weeks before winter break.

Sherry could not believe she walked away from a perfectly good teaching job. She wondered if she was going crazy. The stress over the relationship with Carol certainly added to the stress at work, but Carol was gone. In some ways it was much easier without Carol, but there were more bills to pay and not enough funds. Sherry was still going to the counselling appointments that she initiated when she and Carol were not getting along. They were supposed to go to the visits together, but Carol refused to go after the first visit. The house was much quieter without Carol, but it was empty and lonely. She had to find a new path and a new job.

Gloria Anzaldúa combines parts of her language, narrative, and spiritual identity, in multi-voiced discourse to explain a path of ideological change or “shift “in consciousness (540). The journey is a persistent struggle toward acceptance of self. According to Anzaldúa, each individual, to evolve as a sentient being, must undergo a period of self-knowledge, self-growth, self-love, self-acceptance, and self-awareness. This path includes accepting both the darkness and the light of one’s inner being. Anzaldua describes this path and names it “conocimiento” (540).
Anzaldúa’s conocimiento is a journey of ideological transition where an individual’s mind, body, and soul are shifting. (540). Conocimiento, the powerful transformation, forces a confrontation with the “shadow side” of the self, where secrets lurk pestering and poking their way out of consciousness. It is a form of “identity crisis” where the soul must face the ideologies of the tight fitting garment of colonization. The first step in conocimiento is called the “arrebato” or “the earthquake” (544). Arrebato is a deeply powerful event not unlike the eruption of Mount Saint Helens. Anzaldúa explains that an arrebato may come in many forms like a fight with a loved one, a death, an illness, or “systemic marginalization” that forcefully removes a person from their sense of safety, emotional home, or “personal Eden” and forces a “letting go of former positions” (547). It is a violent shock, a change that wakes up the soul, or the consciousness of the self. The arrebato forces a change in direction. It makes the mind wake up from its slumber and look within to a deeper consciousness. The shock from the arrebato leaves an individual struggling to find balance, a new identity, and a new way of being in the world.

Leaving a public school teaching job, even for medical reasons, mid-year is like a death sentence for a high school teacher. She worked as a career educator, had a model classroom, and led literacy-training sessions in her building. She created a service-learning rock band and had so many accomplishments that helped many students succeed. But the arrebato came anyway. Looking back, she knew her leaving created a path to graduate school, and graduate school created the path she needed to begin her transition from female to male. Most likely, it was not possible for Sherry to transition in a job that was so volatile and lacked support from the administration. Leaving her job was a huge disruption. She rented her house, sold her car, and
accepted financial aid to make ends meet. Sherry learned that sometimes the arrebato comes in spite of a person’s life plans and signals the beginning of conocimiento.

The second step in conocimiento is an in-between-ness stage called “nepantla” (548). It is a place of transition. Defining the self is the main concern. The individual is between the comfortable ways of the past where they can never return and the new ways they have yet to form. The main concern in nepantla is self-identity. Anzaldúa explains the transitional space of nepantla as an uncomfortable place where former traditions, truths, and values of the past are changing and shifting. The individual does not know “whether to assimilate, separate, or isolate” (548). The voices of religion, education, parents, friends, and community all swirl around inside the mind. Anzaldúa describes nepantla as chaotic, and individuals often act in extreme ways because of “spiritual anxiety and isolation” (548). The nepantla becomes a way of life. Anzaldúa argues nepantla “question[s] the basic ideas, tenets, and identities” that are “inherited” from an individual’s family, education, and culture” (548).

The transsexual who decides to transition must face his or her own nepantla. He or she must face what Anzaldúa calls “seeing double” (549). Applying Anzaldúa’s concept to transsexuals works well because it explains the shift in consciousness transitioning provides. At first, the transsexual is unaware of the multiple ways cultural ideologies have affected him or her. Further, during this stage, transsexuals begin to see the myth of cisgender majorities being the “superior” reality and the myth of transgender minorities being an “inferior” reality. The transsexual not only sees the person he or she was formerly, but he or she sees a present-self and a future-self immersing with a new identity (549).
Additionally, transsexuals see what it is like to be both male and female. Only one percent of the population sees the world from this vantage point. Transsexual individuals are well aware of the performance of gender, but they also understand the ways in which gender has a biological component. The mind and body mismatch leads many to begin conocimiento. Anzaldúa states, “You can’t stand living according to the old terms--yesterday’s mode of consciousness pinches like an outgrown shoe” (549). The female to male transsexual can no longer accept wearing a tight fitting dress that suppresses their spirit and hides their identity. They strip the uncomfortable “dress of ideologies” from the mind, body, spirit, and take it to the dumpster to begin again.

Sherry had scheduled the second breast reduction before leaving her job and she decided to go through with it. She had not intended for her second breast reduction surgery to turn out the way it did. She had a breast reduction five years earlier and her doctor refused to make her an “A” cup. The surgeon argued that she needed “a beautiful B cup” and that an A cup would not look right with her body size. Sherry was unhappy with the first surgery, but at least her breasts were smaller than ever before. However, she still had to wear larger shirts to cover up her breasts. She wore extra-tight jogging bras, over-sized shirts, and covered everything by an additional layer of shirts or a hoodie.

Before the surgery, Sherry’s brother gave her a book on Two-Spirit people. She had read enough to realize that some people embodied both male and female identities. She thought that maybe this explained who she was too. The meeting with the doctor came before she had time to do more than glance over the Two-Spirit book. She thought that explaining what she had read to the surgeon would help him to understand why she wanted him to make her the A cup she had
originally requested. She thought she must be more like a Two-Spirit individual than a lesbian. Smaller breasts would help her feel more at home in her body.

When Sherry looked at her chest for the first time after her surgery she was filled with a mixture of happiness and fear. The doctor had performed a double mastectomy. She had no idea that was what he would do. Some of her friends told her it was her fault.

“What did you think would happen? You told him you were Two-Spirit. What did you think he would do? Isn’t this what you always wanted?”

She thought she would have smaller breasts, but she now had the chest of a man. The scars were larger since there were scars on top of scars from both surgeries. She was happy to see her new chest, but she was afraid of being harassed. Her mind was not quite ready for the shock she would face when women started to harass her in restrooms and look at her with disgust and fear. She was not ready for the older folks who called her “sir” or the little kids who asked The Question. The surgeon took pictures of her chest and smiled. He had her sign the paperwork that said she had had “sexual reassignment surgery.” Sherry left the hospital and entered Nepantla.

Sherry was in graduate school, older than all the students and most teachers, and she still wondered how to tell her parents about The Question:

“Hey, mom and dad, how’s the weather and have you heard about transgender?”

She knew they did not accept her coming out as a lesbian years ago when she was in her estrogen-body. She knew they would think being transgender was much worse than being a lesbian. Their faith says it is wrong to change your gender. They believe God made your body as
either male or a female. She did not know how to explain to her parents that maybe she was born this way that she knew how to live as both genders. She was determined to write a letter home. However, she knew her parents did not know others like her. She wondered, “How do I tell my parents?”


Sherry enrolled in a class called “Alternative Rhetorical Theories.” These theories gave a voice to the marginalized, the othered, and the survivors who beat the odds and made it all the way through the dominant discourse to the academic finish line. Like the research of Beemyn and Rankin, these alternative theories, changed everything for Sherry.


Indigenous studies scholar Daniel Heath Justice’s “Notes toward a Theory of Anomaly” explains how Western notions of Christianity along with “patriarchal bigotry” have made their way into “Indian Territory” (208). These queerphobic ideas have caused problems within the Cherokee Nation. Same-sex marriage was banned in 2004 by the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma’s tribal council (209-10). Justice’s theory argues toward a historical understanding of anomalous beings as a result of the two lesbians denied same-sex marriage rights. Justice explains that same-sex marriage was opposed because of the “traditional” views of some of the members of the Cherokee Nation. He explains that these oppositional views are a result of colonization.

Justice posits Cherokee same-sex opponents “affirm” many “heterocentric” and “Judeo-Christian” values and espouse a “hierarchical value system” that makes queers an excluded class (Justice 213). Further, Justice argues when queerphobic ideologies are considered the norm, queer Indians are excluded from their tribe and feel shame for their erotic desires. Additionally,
author Qwo-Li Driskill explains that colonization is a form of oppression where the “erotic lives and identities” of native people “have been colonized along with [their] homelands” (Driskill 52). The idea that Judeo-Christian religious values harm native peoples, within their own communities, demonstrates the pervasiveness of the colonial mindset where anything outside of heteronormativity is considered perverse. Justice refers to the same sex marriage ban as, “a black eye on the Cherokee Nation” (Justice 210).

To combat these false heteronormative, heteropatriarchal universals, Justice explains anomalies are part of the ancient Mississippian culture. Justice uses the Mississippians, a mound-building ancient tribal nation of indigenous peoples, to explain a variety of anomalous beings since the Mississippians were ancestors to the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma (217). The indigenous Mississippians believe certain “anomalous” creatures can have more than one way of “being” (219). An anomalous creature can have “habits, appearance, or behaviors” that make it hard to define as clearly fitting into only one category (219). Justice uses the example of bats or flying squirrels. These creatures are like mammals and yet they have wings. Other examples are the Venus flytrap and the pitcher plant which are anomalous because they both trap and consume insects (219). These plants are inhabitants of two worlds in that they are plant-like and animal-like. The Mississippians observed that anomalous creatures did not neatly fit into binaries.

Instead of giving up their systems of categorization, they chose to view anomalies as special or magical. Further, Uktena, the Cherokee name for a creature common to the Cherokees and the Mississippians, is a strong, snake-like-being of the water, who has the capacity to be both fearful and powerful (221).
Additionally, Justice explains the Mississippian believe that anomalous creatures are “both dangerous and potentially helpful to human beings,” but it depends on how the human beings “encounter” the anomalous creatures (220). The creature itself is neither good nor bad, but serves to bring balance. According to Justice, the Mississippians believe in a balanced cosmology where humans are in the Middle World “paralleled vertically” by worlds that are above and below (218). Justice explains how these worlds exist in an “intimate” relation to one another so if one world is unbalanced, it impacts all worlds (218). For instance, if humans aid the anomalous creatures, they will have positive resolutions to conflicts, but if humans choose to fight with the anomalous beings, the results can be negative. Negative reactions to anomalous beings generate an unbalanced cosmology. Most importantly, Justice argues the anomalous beings are necessary; they are a part of the larger picture of life. Even though anomalous beings are not the majority, they bring balance to the world. In this way, Justice argues that queer individuals are also anomalous beings. Queers are not the larger dominate culture, but are the smaller minority culture that is a vital part of the natural world. Justice states, “Straight folks need queers; without both, neither exists” (221). If everyone were straight, there would be no concept of queer. Since there is documentation of intersex, Two-Spirit, transsexual, gender fluid, gender queer, and gender non-conforming individuals, both straight and queer worlds are part of the norm. The anomalous are part of the natural world and the natural order of life. Essentially, the one percent both balances and brings variety to the ninety-nine percent.

Justice posits the values of the Mississippian culture as a discourse for decolonization of tribal culture. The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma is living in what Gerald Vizenor calls a “shadow of survivance” as they live in the “ruins” of “the tragic flaws and denials of tribal
wisdom in the literature of dominance” (Vizenor 8). Justice travels back to his Mississippian ancestry in hopes of resurrecting the shadows of survivors. If the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma understands how white European colonizers changed the beauty of their heritage, they would recognize the marriage of the two Cherokee women. Justice ends his article with a challenge. He asks the tribal nations if they can pay the price of living without the “powerful spirits” who have “wondrous gifts to share” (Justice 232). Importantly, Justice asks:

Can a colonized people risk such a loss, especially when the neoliberal emphases on assimilation and globalized commodification continue to threaten the distinctive cultural integrity and even survival of Indigenous peoples throughout the world? (Justice 232)

The colonial mindset is a deeply rooted ideology. It is one that is often invisible. However, to make change the colonizers and the colonized will need to ask the question Justice is asking. Are these colonial ways of thinking worth keeping when the lives of beautiful, spiritual, gifted individuals are forever lost? (Justice 232)

She thought about how being an anomaly transcends race and class structures, the boundaries of the indigenous and non-indigenous, the colonizer and the colonized, the religious, and the non-believer. Lynn phoned to tell her she was sorry. She did not mean to tell her mom and dad about Sherry’s desire to transition from female to male. Her mom kept asking Lynn a version of The Question:

“Why did Sherry stop shaving her legs? Why did she have a breast reduction? Is she trying to be a man?
Lynn argued with her parents for hours. At the end of the argument, her parents decided they never wanted to speak to Sherry again. Sherry thought to herself, “They will not have to speak to Sherry again.” But someday she hoped they would speak to Joe.

I found an emotional connection to the alternative rhetorical theories written by people of color. At a deep level, perhaps even a soul-level, people of color like Justice, Villanueva, and Anzaldúa write as marginalized individuals instead of writing about marginalized individuals from a perspective of privilege. Transgender studies could also benefit from shifting toward transgender people writing as the marginalized instead of cisgender individuals writing about transgender people from a cisgender perspective of gender privilege. Each in turn has had to master the challenges of marginalization and finding a voice within the dominant discourse of academia.

For example, Victor Villanueva writes about the power of pathos in academic writing. He argues that memory or “Memoria is a friend” because when one culture absorbs another culture, memory is all that is left (9-12). The language game of the new culture cannot ever replace what has been lost. For people of color, academic writing is a language game that is not all-inclusive. The traditional academic discourse lacks the memories or history of cultures other than the dominant culture. The dominant culture often forgets that the dominant language is not the language of the assimilated, but the language of the colonizer (12).

Multi-racial or biracial people struggle between the languages of more than one culture. Biracial children may not know the language of one or more parts of their past because their parents were assimilated. It is essential for children to have stories told to them by earlier
generations. Memories, then, form the missing information from the past and people of color write from their histories as much as the dominant culture writes from their history.

Further, Villanueva uses a multi-voiced discourse style of writing to demonstrate the loss of memory in a culture. He proposes that academic discourse is written in a way to demonstrate both logos and ethos, but fails in the area of pathos (12). Memory is all that some cultures have since their language game no longer exists. By using multi-voiced discourse, Villanueva is able to communicate through pathos. Reading a memory or a poem can further explain the logic of academic discourse because the reader experiences the emotions connected to the academic discourse. In this way, multi-voiced discourse becomes a rhetorical strategy (14).

Villanueva expresses how he experiences racism and is himself multiracial. Since Villanueva is biologically a complex combination of races, he cannot claim a single racial identity and yet, as a person of color, he still finds himself a “victim to racism” (17). Villanueva’s “uneasy” combination of races is not unlike being transgender. Transsexuals, gender queers, gender fluid persons, or gender non-conforming persons possess an “uneasy combination” of gender. Transgender persons and are often punished for not performing their gender identities well enough to adequately pass as the opposite sex or are punished for not performing their more traditional masculine or feminine roles according to their biological sex.

Additionally, Villanueva feels he is a “contradictory consciousness” that cannot be reflected accurately by academic discourse alone; His identities are complex. For instance, Villanueva is both a typical “boy from Brooklyn,” and he is an indigenous American with ancestors that predate the European colonizers like Columbus (17). Villanueva is also a mixture of voices from his past, his current cultural narrative, his auto/biography, and the combination of
memories he wants to create for his readers. In this way, multi-voiced discourse is a way for academic discourse to reflect the complex intersectionality of marginalized peoples (17). Villanueva states, “Looking back, we look ahead, and giving ourselves up to the looking back and the looking ahead, knowing the self, and critically, knowing the self in relation to others, maybe we can be an instrument whereby students can hear the call” (17). The voice of the memoir affects readers profoundly. It provides understanding where a textbook or research will often fail.

Villanueva states: “Personal discourse, the narrative, the auto/biography, helps in that effort, [passing on a memory] is a necessary adjunct to the academic” (17). Along with writing academic discourse, the writer can offer a bit of memory by passing on what it is like to walk in his or her shoes. Without the power of pathos, the academic loses a major portion of the power within the writing. Villanueva argues there is not a good reason to be solely cognitive in academic discourse (12). He challenges academics to consider why a hybrid cannot bridge the gap between the academic and the creative. Multi-voiced discourse achieves a memory that cannot be fully created otherwise. Transgender peoples are a heavily marginalized group where sharing of personal narrative creates a much needed pathos.

Sherry knew that multi-voiced discourse was the style she would write. She wanted to write it constantly, to scream it, to let everyone know she had her memories. She had a gender binary, heteronormative suffocating dominant culture that kept her from fully expressing herself. She had been silenced and her mouth was beginning to open. She found the records her mom used to play. The dark blue and black one was Peter, Paul, and Mary singing live somewhere. She played the album listening to “If I Had a Hammer” many times. She wondered why she
never fully understood the words until graduate school. Soon she would gather the strength to let her pathos blend with her academic writing.
Dear straight man next door,

You play your guitar out of rhythm
it is a pounding, off-center beat
that disturbs my sleep
like gun fire but with less
accuracy and beauty.

Silence
is as important as sound
strumming
its way toward up and down.

When I take my guitar out of its case
I ask myself “Why did I stop playing?”
Turning each new string,
feeling its unique vibration
I caress the body.

I hold
the neck
feel the breath
wait for the sound.
Sherry finally took the time to read more of the Two-Spirit book her brother Donald gave her. The book was called *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures* by Sabine Lang. Donald said one of his history friends thought it was a great book about Two-Spirit people. Sherry started underlining words in the introduction. The first thing she underlined was the term “gender mixing” (7). Gender mixing was described as mixing the qualities of masculine and feminine without changing from one gender to the other. This was a new idea to Sherry. She never considered that she could be both genders at once. Lang discussed how transsexuals who change their gender are influenced by a dominant Western culture that uses force to make individuals choose between male and female roles. Western culture does not seriously consider gender mixing or androgyny (8). Sherry wondered if she was trained to think she was a woman in a man’s body. Maybe she was part of the group of, what Lang referred to as, “men-women” (9).

Ze sat in the office of the Transgender Institute waiting for hir appointment to meet with hir therapist. Ze sat next to a young “butch-looking-female” who wore a backwards baseball cap. The young person looked at hir and said, “I am so happy to be here. I can’t wait to get started on T.” Ze smiled and wondered if ze could ever make that decision. Even sitting in this office was one of the biggest decisions ze had ever made. Ze smiled at the young person as a therapist finally emerged and escorted the client into a back office.

Ze sat facing an empty reception desk with a sign that read “Transgender, The Last Social Justice Frontier.” Ze thought about making this decision and decided to discuss what ze had learned from reading the Two Spirit book hir brother gave hir. Ze could continue to be both
male and female right? The therapist opened her office door and asked hir another version of
The Question:

“What would you like me to call you and what pronouns do you prefer?”

“Call me Sherry,” ze said. But Sherry could not say, “Call me her.”

As Amy Bloom interviewed a variety of FTMs, she also included several surgeons to
explain the difficulties involved in taking the life-changing step toward gender affirmation
surgery. Bloom describes the intense need for surgery for some transsexuals as “high-intensity
transsexuality” (36). Dr. Laub, one of the surgeons Bloom interviewed, argues that the need for
surgery for some transsexuals is a blend of what he considers both biological and behavioral.
Laub believes transsexuality is a “behavioral problem with a surgical solution” (36). Further,
Laub provides an example study of lab mammals who were injected with opposite-sex hormones
soon after they were born. The animals all “behaved consistently like the opposite sex, like the
gender of the hormone with which they were injected” (36). Laub is hopeful that studies like this
conducted in Stanford, Oregon, and Wisconsin will lead to an answer that is based in biology.

In addition, Laub strives to improve his surgical techniques for the greatest “anatomical
solution” for a transsexual who has no other way to solve the problem of what Bloom calls the
“Berlin Wall” between the mind and the body (36). Indeed, biological answers would go a long
way in overcoming the “cisgendering of reality” mentioned by Sumerau, Cragun, and Mathers
(293). Faith-based organizations would have to rethink their cisgender approach to their religious
ideologies and admit they may not understand all there is to know. However, the current
understanding of transsexual identity is that it is not merely a biological issue, but one of biology
and social conditioning, so transsexuals must find and finance their own solutions.
The therapist gave Sherry an assignment. Ze had to write the story of hir life and specifically note when ze felt different from the boys and girls around hir. The therapist asked if Sherry felt like a boy or a girl or both. Then the therapist said something that made Sherry want to scream on the inside from hir head to hir toes. The therapist said, “Sometimes the hardest transphobia to conquer is your own.”

It is much easier to talk about privilege than to examine privilege from within. I realized how much privilege I have experienced in my life when I started reading indigenous scholarship surrounding the concept of decoloniality. Eve Tuck and Rubin Gaztimbide-Fernandez define “settler colonialism” as the development of ideologies where the colonizer “comes to stay making himself the sovereign, and the arbiter of citizenship, civility and knowing” (73). These ideologies destroyed, replaced, and eliminated the culture of indigenous peoples and not just at the time of the original colonization. Colonial ideologies are affirmed consistently in heteropatriarchal institutions including education and religion (73-4). Thus, being a descendant of European colonizers definitely has certain rights and privileges for those who accept these heteronormative structures, but it also creates a marginalized class of individuals based on heteronormative, heteropatriarchal social constructions such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, religion, disability, etc. I realized the best approach to decolonizing my own mind was to examine the work of indigenous writers.

Like other people of color, indigenous writers, like Linda Tuhiwai Smith, explain how descendants of European colonists can “decolonize” their thinking by examining the influences of imperialist agendas (24). Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains how even the word “research” is “one
of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (1). Research to indigenous peoples brings to light all the ways they have been studied and observed by an outside dominant culture that feels a certain superiority. Researchers form conclusions based on science that is itself, as Smith argues, “deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices” many of which were performed for the “good” of everyone involved (1-2). Many unique indigenous cultures were conquered, controlled, enslaved, studied, and sacred artifacts were collected and divided up into museums or destroyed along with the indigenous peoples. These behaviors were part of what Smith defines as “European imperialism” (22).

Smith outlines imperialism as having several agendas including an economic need to expand and enslave indigenous groups while controlling science, politics, and knowledge (23). In fact, imperialist thinking is so pervasive that the concept, as Smith argues, is inside “our heads” and within “colonized communities” (24). Smith explains that the indigenous and the non-indigenous need to understand how to “decolonize our minds” to create “authentic humanity” because both groups were part of colonialism (24). Colonies of Europeans were also controlled to maintain the imperialist agendas (24). Smith explains how colonies became an “image of what the West or ‘civilization’ stood for” (24). European colonists and the indigenous were forced into imperialist economic agendas with the indigenous suffering in the extreme. In addition, Smith argues that the imperialist agendas are not finished, but have been renamed as “globalization” and that there is not a “post-colonialism” when considering how much these ideologies are still actively pursued (25). Globalization is a new imperial frontier still exploiting the marginalized without regard to their culture or physical needs.
Sherry did hir homework. Ze wrote about hir early days as a child and ze remembered a gift hir mother gave hir. This is what ze wrote:

She holds the little brooch in her hand. It is smaller than a penny. It is a pin to wear to church, a miniature pair of silver praying hands with a little crystal heart hanging from the wrists. Inside the heart is the smallest seed imaginable. It is brownish yellow and is hard to see suspended inside the crystal heart. The heart is a small magnifying glass, and if she holds it just right, she can see the seed her mother says is a mustard seed. Her mother tells her if she has that much faith, she can move a mountain. Her mother says Jesus told the disciples if they only had that much faith they could tell a mountain to get up and it would move. She holds the tiny brooch in her hands carefully looking at both the mustard seed and the Rocky Mountains outside the kitchen window. She thought, “I have that much faith.”

Through writing the assignment for the therapist, Sherry had to admit that ze had consistently prayed hir entire life to wake up in the morning as a boy and still prayed to wake up in the morning as a man. When ze finished the assignment, ze realized several truths about hirself. In that moment, ze knew that ze would always be a spiritual person, a person with faith as ze defined faith. Ze knew ze could not believe in the God of hir parents, but God, or whatever life force that was in the universe, did not make a mistake. Ze knew that ze would go back to the therapist. Ze needed help to uncover all of the old colonial ideologies that were stealing hir life away. It would take a lot of hard work, but ze decided ze would not give up. Ze knew ze was never a girl. Ze knew ze was not Two-Spirit. He knew he was Joe.
The transsexual, because of Christian ideologies, has also experienced isolation, domination, and marginalization, from what Tuck and Gaztimbide-Fernandez refer to as the “circulation” of the story of creation (74). Colonizers covered up or hid their violent behaviors of settling and dominating indigenous peoples through their religious beliefs and the need to spread the word of God to the uncivilized indigenous peoples (74). Therefore, any indigenous cultural beliefs of Two-Spirit persons were also buried under the religious heteronormative ideologies of imperialism.

Unfortunately, assimilation begins this way. It starts small like a mustard seed. First, the person being assimilated knows that he, she, or ze is somehow different than the male or female binary of the dominant culture in Western society. Other intersections also push the transsexual even further away from the “norm” and into the category of “anomaly” as Justice describes, when race, socio-economic class, religion, sexual orientation, or a variety of other differences make cultural minorities, like transgender, difficult to categorize. Western culture often views differences as more easily manageable in a binary system of evaluation or classification, so they can remain unchallenged or hidden. Imperialist thinking is difficult to see especially for non-indigenous people. Further, the fear of retaliation by dominant members of society, family, friends, or colleagues may keep the anomalous voices silent. But nothing lasts forever. Seeds can grow into trees.

Joe started working for the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program. The director encouraged him to use Joe instead of Sherry as his name. It felt strange at first. He called himself Joe, but still had enough inner transphobia to use the feminine pronouns. His therapist told him that one day he would not want to be called by those pronouns, and one day it would
become very important. For the moment, he was happy to be asked what pronouns he preferred. No one had ever asked him that before. He told everyone to use whatever pronouns they wanted to use. However, he really liked it when someone he did not know would use “he” or “him.” It meant that he was “visible” and not what transgender activist and writer Jameson Green calls “invisible” (21). He loved to be seen as male. He underlined the following words in Green’s Becoming a Visible Man:

I began to struggle consciously with what I called the lie in my existence: if people perceived me as male, I had to worry about whether they might find out that I had a female body, and then would feel betrayed or deceived and entitled to punish me for it. But if people perceived me as a female and treated me the way they treated women in general (even if this was polite, respectful, or deferential), I felt invisible, as if I didn’t exist. (21)

Joe realized how he was living a lie. He needed to say goodbye to Sherry. He wasn’t quite sure how to begin, so, like any good graduate student, he grabbed a beer and listened to the music at a local pub called Barney’s. Someone picked old country songs to play on the digital jukebox. He heard Tammy Wynette sing, “Stand by Your Man.” He laughed along with the lyrics because he agreed when he heard Tammy sing “sometimes it’s hard to be a woman,” and he knew that it was time to “stand by [his] man” (n.p.).
Dear Testosterone,

With the sun on his back
the boy once trapped
inside a glass shaped heart
holds the little bottle of gold
and injects the mustard seed.

He smells
his musky freedom,
feels this day beyond words,
writes to those who have ears:

Listen to the sound
of goodbye when you’re home,
practice walking toward
that little spot of warmth.
Even when the blanket feels better,
know the heart keeps beating,
because it is not as you think
but it is as you are.

The light you see
those warm soft lips say,

This mountain you can move.
He stayed up late watching FTM videos on YouTube. At first there were not too many to watch, but as time went on he saw many, many more. He was surprised to see how well testosterone worked for so many young YouTube vloggers. He enjoyed watching Skylar’s videos on YouTube because the transition went so well visually for Skylar. Skylar started videoing himself from his very first testosterone shot. Joe could see the progression of changes for Skylar, and like his therapist told him, he saw that testosterone really worked. Skylar’s videos turned into a YouTube channel. Joe read all of the mostly positive support Skylar received from his viewers. Skylar was answering important questions and appeared to be becoming a young activist. However, Skylar was young, handsome, and small. He did not gain weight on testosterone and looked really good in front of the camera (n.p.).

Joe knew he did not start young and there was no way to know exactly how his transition would go. He wanted the transition to go well. He wanted to look good, but he knew he was so much older than all of the FTMs in the videos, knew that he never used hormone blockers, and knew his top surgery left wider scars than the chests of the young vloggers. However, testosterone still might make him closer to the person he knew he was.

There was not a single vlogger who was as old as him, and he worried that he had waited too long to transition. He decided to take testosterone anyway. He knew that he would not look like the young FTMs, but deep inside, he knew transitioning was about so much more than his looks. Transitioning was about being his authentic self. It was about being free from the anxiety of living a lie. He decided he would start taking testosterone. He knew it was time.

Tobias Raun explains the phenomena of the female to male transition stories on YouTube. The videos are quickly becoming a popular way to understand the process of
transitioning and are extremely popular for FTMs. Raun explains the transition stories are a “living’ archive of trans corporeality and identity” (702). Transmen are using YouTube as a way to document their surgical and hormonal treatments. Raun argues the YouTube genre is not as reliable as more traditional archives because it is “heterogeneous, complex, and unsteady” he also claims it is “constantly shifting” while being “built and reshaped by its users” (702). Google also owns YouTube so the videos might “disappear,” and Google pays vloggers who do well leading to a professional status instead of an amateur status making the videos more of a commodity. Raun also focuses on Skylar’s YouTube videos and describes how they function as documentation and performative space since Skylar has become a commercial YouTube success (707). Recently, Skylar started selling products on his channel promoting his own musical creations, so I find myself not as interested in the videos. The vlogs seem less realistic and more commercial than when Skyler first began videoing his transition.

Raun also offers a good argument for the videos creating “norms” for how transsexual men should look. Raun argues, transsexual men who do not fit neatly into the norms can find the videos to be harmful because every transition is different, and it is difficult to fight the urge to compare one experience to another (704). Raun makes a convincing argument because I often feel bad about how I look in comparison to the YouTube videos. I forgot about my age while becoming obsessed with how good the vloggers, like Skylar, looked. My transition, however, is in an older body so age factors into the equation. I look more like a man in his fifties and put on a lot of weight with my transition. I had to admit that I would never be the young muscular man I always wanted to be.
However, the stories do become a form of memory. The videos are fresh and have a sense of being “live” as viewers watch any number of videos instantaneously. FTM vlogs are another way to document and affirm a difficult process and their positive value might outweigh any negative effects if viewers keep in mind that every transition is different.

The power behind the vlogs is arguably a form of Villanueva’s “Memoria” (9). In this way, the vlogs become a powerful rhetorical strategy. The vlogs, are much like Villanueva’s “rich narrative,” and are better for memory than a wonderfully written academic discourse. Villanueva uses the concept of memory from Plato who argued that memory is better than writing. In the philosophical sense, writing is only a representation of the author and therefore no more than an image. In Plato’s view, literacy will harm memory (16). The vlogs form memories for the viewer. FTMs who want to know what it is like to transition from female to male can watch the videos and see what it is like for each individual vlogger. Plato’s standards for memory could be used in favor of the YouTube vloggers in that the vlogs are closer to the person than an unchanging archive in a university. Yet, Raun argues that the videos are not only documenting changes, but creating them as the camera focuses on certain characteristics the vlogger wants to emphasize (705). Therefore, the vlogs are also a constructed narrative in that they emphasize testosterone changes both by the “documenting effects” and the “performativ effects” and it is difficult as a viewer to keep the difference in mind (706).

It is true that the vlogs represent a person, are a recording, and are not a live video stream. But the vlogs are instantaneous, recent recordings and continue to collect en masse as the vlogger adds weekly or sometimes daily to their narratives. The vlog becomes a collective of memories from the vlogger. Perhaps that is why the FTM vlogs are so powerful. Like listening to
a story, the videos are a strong rhetorical device. Villanueva explains that with narratives and storytelling, there is the “resonance of the dialogue” and the “possibility of humor” with a direct connection to the audience and a sense of context (16). Villanueva, like other people of color, must rely on memories in a culture where the language of their ancestors is missing. Villanueva explains how memories work as a “collective” force in an “ideology that praises individualism” (16). The stories of the past form a collective narrative, a memory, a self-identity against a larger grand narrative where minorities do not matter. Memories tell people they do matter. They do have a rich memory, a story, a tradition that is impossible to erase.

Transgender individuals also have a similar burden to people of color. Susan Stryker defines the transgender movement as “the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place” (1). Since transgender individuals do not identify with their assigned gender from birth, they too face the harmful effects of marginalization from colonization. Transgender narratives form a “Memoria” where stories that were hidden, or never spoken, have a chance to thrive. The form the narrative takes is not as important as giving the narrative exposure. All stories become important and necessary for individuals who have been in hiding, living in fear, committing suicide, or getting murdered. Narratives and stories are a valuable way to humanize what is wrongly thought of, by some cisgender individuals, as the transgender person who is unhuman or monstrous.

The YouTube videos have the positive effect of being a narrative as close to someone speaking in person as some FTMs can achieve. It is not always easy or possible to find a transgender community. Where the anomalous are only the one percent, and FTMs are an even smaller portion of that one percent, narratives as vlogs, videos, alternative rhetorical discourses,
or traditional academic discourses, are all formats of an undeniable rhetorical value. As a collective, the transgender “Memoria” is a must to end the violence and hate for transgender peoples. The voices of FTMs are no longer hidden, and that memory is becoming powerful.

Recently, he is reminded of the mustard seed brooch as the nurse shows him how to inject himself with testosterone. The crystal bottle is tiny in his hand, and inside the liquid is the color of a mustard seed. He thinks about his faith. The religious ideologies of his past are a lot like the dresses he once wore; dresses never fit his body. He thinks it is funny, though, to wonder if this injection of testosterone is the answer to his prayers all these years. He leaves the nurse’s office and goes to teach his race, class, and gender course. He laughs at himself because recently he explained to his students the concept of the one percent.

One percent of the world’s population is intersex, Two-Spirit, transsexual, or transgender. Transsexuals often have surgeries and take injections of testosterone or estrogen to feel at home in their bodies. It’s hard to explain to the class that some people are anomalous. They ask questions about Caitlyn Jenner. One of the students says that it’s not right for Caitlyn to bring pain to Jenner’s children and her family because of her transition. Another, says Jenner is selfish to transition since her kids have to live with her decision. He wonders if the students think he is selfish. Do the students know he is transgender, a transsexual? He doesn’t know what they think, but he knows the testosterone is working. He feels his body and mind working together for the first time. He does not feel selfish. He feels hope.

Part of the warrior’s sacred path, also an important part of transitioning, is Trungpa’s “synchronizing mind and body” (56). This step is about trusting in the self and being doubtless.
When the body and mind do not work together, there is self-doubt. Trungpa describes the mind-body connection like a non-digital camera. The body is the camera and the mind is the film. When the mind and body are working together, they create beautiful, accurate pictures. However, if something is slightly off, like the speed of the film or the shutter speed of the camera, the pictures are unclear. For some transsexuals, when the mind and body do not match, the result is anxiety. Trungpa explains part of synchronization is realizing the individual’s right to be in the universe and there is no need to “apologize for being born on this earth” (64). Trungpa calls this realization the “Great Eastern Sun” (64). It is the Eastern sun because it is rising and not setting. It is the dawn of a new beginning in the self. It is the “dawning, or awakening of human dignity—the rising of human warriorship” (64). True self-acceptance is a process that removes inner transphobia and the desire to apologize for being true to the self.

In addition, when an individual has done the difficult work necessary to become his, her, or hir authentic self, there is also a realization of the damage done to other marginalized groups; when harm comes to one in the group it damages the entire group. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, an ordained Zen Buddhist priest and author of *The Way of Tenderness* states, “To awaken from within our unique embodiment is to awaken collective awareness: spiritual awakening and social activism are one and the same” (81). It is in this way that marginalized groups can become social activists for each other. Recognizing hatreds formed by race, class, gender or other social structures, harm everyone. It is comparable to physically cutting off one percent of a person’s skin and arguing that body performs better without that one percent. Manuel argues that society has to turn within and look at itself; it must be willing to look at the way it has hurt itself and the way it has hurt others for true healing to take place. Manuel views society as a body, a
“collective” body, that must “learn to see” or it cannot be enlightened (81). Further, Manuel argues that the path to making this fierce societal introspection a reality, is to “openly acknowledge the real norms, desires, biological myths, and practices that fuel racial, sexual, and gender-based hatred” (81). One way to do this is to recognize that each person is a unique mixture of intersections, much like a collection of songs performed in a bar on a Saturday night. Perhaps, the difficulty lies in hearing the songs that everyone is performing. The listener is performing his/her/hir own set of songs while trying to listen to the music being played by others. It is a complex task, individually and collectively, of performing and listening, of introspection, revision, and transition.

I strum a few chords and tune my guitar warming up, but the audience has not answered my question. I think to myself, “tough crowd in Manville,” so I rephrase:

“How many roads must a transman walk down before they call him a man?” The audience laughs a little as I strum a few more chords happy for the release of tension. Near the front of the stage a young student stands with a puzzled look on hir face.

“No,” ze asks. “How many roads did you have to walk down?”

Works Cited


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