**Chronicling: The failure of narrative-construction in the study of a transmasculine cyber community**

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Bloodless categories, narrow notions of the visible and the empirical… barely speakable fears of losing the footing that enables us to speak authoritatively and with greater value than anyone else who might… Our methods have thus far been less than satisfactory for addressing the very nature of the things and the problems it is our responsibility to address, leaving us not yet making something new enough out of what are arguably many new ideas and novel conditions (Gordon 2008, 21).

I never intended to write about chronicling. This was a simple project that took advantage of the Internet to glean a great deal of information with little difficulty and, the anthropologist’s most unlikely daydream, comparative anonymity. A series of Youtube videos—“journals” of trans men’s lives—would serve as a precursor to “the real thing,” when I could go “out into the field” and talk to people face to face, with all the martyrdom of discomfort and political jeopardy that I imagined awaited me. This was going to be a simple article about the ways that trans men talked about their bodies and their decisions regarding body modification. It would be a cyber-ethnography, a form that I knew was of questionable (political) legitimacy, but which would yield plenty of rich discourse analysis and some shock-factor Youtube comments thrown in. Some good, solid, data to be filed away and used to spice up the drier parts of my dissertation in a few years.

Instead, I was sidetracked by incongruences. My data stumped me; why did none of the other literature tie into it? It seemed that the engine of empiricism had stalled out in my project, and I couldn’t possibly think of what to draw from it. Until, while reading an entirely unrelated set of articles for an entirely unrelated project, I saw the incongruences. My data wasn’t broken. But the questions being asked in the literature weren’t being answered by the data; because the trans men whose words I was analyzing did not care about those questions. As a side effect of my easy research strategy, I had discovered that the presence of the researcher had dramatically skewed much of the literature available. Because the “things” that these trans men were preoccupied with were not the “things” they were being asked about. Indeed, the *way* they were being asked to answer—by giving a narrative—did not fit the answers they wanted to give.

Thus, this article is about where the subject sits, in what room, which chair; about the doctor’s office down the street or an hour’s car ride away. This is about the Canadian border, and fat distribution, and facial hair, and where my eyes go when I meet you. Finally, this is about humans who are not the bounded beings that we want them to be, who are yesterday and were tomorrow and who the hell knows today? Humans who live with drag “aunts” and see their fathers once a decade and—in case this is sounding agonizingly postmodern—who aren’t too caught up with how they felt as children or what it means to be a man.

**The Literature**

The field of transmasculine academe is small, with two or three dedicated scholars and plenty who dip into “gender” as a means to some other end (often psychologically motivated). In his impressive two decades of work, J. Halberstam has published a great deal on female and trans masculinities, effectively creating the field of transmasculinity studies (which was before only whispers on the margins of work on trans women and transfemininities) (1998; 2005). Also important, though predictably over-psychologized, is the frequently cited article, “Transsexuals’ Narrative Construction of the ‘True Self’” (1996). In this piece, Douglas Mason-Schrock argues that transsexuals create narratives of their pasts that reinforce the “true self,” and in so doing overcome the physical inconsistency of their bodies. It is worth noting, however, that only one of Mason-Schrock’s interviewees was assigned-female, and thus this falls more closely in line with the work done on transfemininities.

There is some newer literature that addresses trans men’s process of identity formation (Lee 2001; Pollock and Eyre 2012) and transgender cyber communities’ information- and support-sharing (Gauthier and Chaudoir 2004; Siebler 2012). Henry Rubin, in his ethnographic work *Self-Made Men*, strives to embed theory in the lived narratives of trans men, and to question discourses of non-normativity or transgression that are focused on transmasculine bodies (2003). Of course, there are also plenty of studies on indigenous two-spirit or third gender subjectivities, but while it has been always evident that these are not limited to assigned-male individuals, the research rarely extends its discussion of non-binary assigned-female lives beyond side notes such as “and occasionally female” (for example, see Epple 1998). It is the irony of transgender studies that, while *gender* studies categorically refuses to conflate the male/female masculine/feminine, recognizing the realities of gendered power within trans subjectivities never seems to compel the same (ideally reflexive and tentative) distinction.

What we lack (with the exception of Halberstam, though he goes in a different direction) is a way to talk about transmasculine subjectivities that does not simplify. This is not to advocate for some willy-nilly abstraction or the endless fracturing of “identities” and “culture” into sad, lonely statements like *everyone is different* that leaves room only for myopic ethnographic interviewing and terminological navel-gazing. In not simplifying, we do not have to spin off into a crisis of commas, equivocations, and apologetics. It is not our fate that “without the help of narrative mediation, the question of personal identity loses itself in labyrinthine difficulties and paralyzing paradoxes” (Ricoeur 1992, 125). We *do* have to admit that our methods are limited, and that our investigations cannot be exhaustive; does this mean that we leave the complexities un-addressed? Are we so terrifyingly vulnerable in our academic vestments that we have to finish every critical masterpiece with expansive, unexpected truths?

**Chronicling**

So, this is not an article about how trans men navigate their transmasculine identity-formation. It is about chronicling. Not about narrative; narratives start somewhere, and even the most fragmented ends up somewhere, and is limited. One narrates as though time is composed of substance and must be put *somewhere*—foreshadowed, flashed-back, flashed-forward. Indeed, this is the crisis that Paul Ricoeur point out when he argues that the problematic of personal identity “can be articulated only in the temporal dimension of human existence” (1992, 114). The narrator stands high above time and place and space, even I, narrating myself, am situated outside myself. The narrator of social life is not a part of social life; to narrate is to *give an account* of life, not to engage with it. Narrative allows us to pack up our stories into parcels and keep them clean; we can hide them from harm or alteration; we can fend off the intrusion of sticky fingers that will smudge or occlude; our thoughts, memories, and opinions are comfortably safe in the narrative-parcels and cannot be molested by inconvenient questions or meddling.

Chronicling is not narrative. A chronicle is not concerned with aesthetic comfort and easy transitions, nor does it require an even distribution of information over time, space, or place. A chronicle is preoccupied with the connections and collisions and the ongoing-ness of each. To chronicle something, we do not need to ask, “is this orderly?” Order is not a prerequisite. And a chronicle does not need to be packaged; it is better not to package it, because the events of that chronicle are far-reaching, and even the minutest calamity of social life might need a whole book.

Above all, *a* chronicle is not singular (a chronicles?), and the chronicler is situated. Maybe this is not my life, but at least I am a fly on the wall, breathing the same air, feeling the same tremors, shivering with the same cold. Yes, the chronicler is only a small entity with two eyes and as many ears, and can’t see through walls; the life in this one room is still complex. *A* chronicle is in fact a segment of *a* greater chronicle, and so on. By being inherently un-begun and unending, a chronicle makes no pretense to inclusivity, letting artificial edges sit jaggedly within sight.

The great concern, of course, when chronicling is forgetting that the edges are artificial. One reaches the end of one’s manuscript and writes, “and thus, I found this…” and suddenly it seems to be a narrative and we want it to be finished, clean, comprehensive. The chronicle, really, is different from the narrative in the attitude of finishing: the narrative wants to be tidily concluded; the chronicle goes on doggedly, until the chronicler gives up and passes it along, and maybe ends in the middle of a sentence. While chronicling, we have to keep our eyes on the periphery and occasionally go over there and see all the threads we have not yet pulled (or never will, as the chronicler has to leave off eventually, and then the threads will remain un-pulled and that is all right).

There is a purpose to all this. The narrative has been, until now, the favorite critical format within which scholars have examined the experiences and subjectivities of transmasculine people. If we are going to look at the cyber-ethnographic data that is burning a hole in my hard drive, the narrative will not work. This is not *merely* an Internet-driven crisis of representation. The ubiquity of online communities is, without a doubt, changing how humans experience solidarity and selfhood, and no matter how much social analysts would like to shunt “cyber” into the ether of niche subjects, we are at a pivotal moment in which social life is, increasingly, happening online. Not *supplemented* by social media, but *dominated* by it. Thus, a means by which to tell the stories of cyber life is increasingly a means by which to tell the stories of social life; chronicling (perhaps more associated with medieval monarchies) is such a practice.

**The Transition Journals**

I don’t think being transgender has been something that’s held me back, I think it’s something that’s helped me, you know I’ve grown a lot, and I know who I am… I’m so self-aware that I can go completely against, you know, what’s natural or whatever, what’s supposed to be happening, to actually become who I’m supposed to be. And I don’t mean to sound conceited or self-absorbed with that, but I’m very proud of that… I think it’s important to see that in ourselves, and instead of seeing it as a hindrance, see it as an opportunity… it’s what makes us strong and it’s what makes us special, you guys have given me so much support and strength, and it’s just amazing… thank you guys for being there with me, and for experiencing this with me, and I’m really glad that I have you—Ty

The Youtube trans man community—made up of a core group and many who post occasionally or limit themselves to watching and commenting—is not easily defined. Many of the videos are “transition journals”: weekly/monthly videos documenting the life, perceptions, experiences, desires, and struggles of an individual. These usually include discussions of physical transition or strategies for social life; hormonal changes, access to surgery, chest binding, “packing,” masculine socialization etc. Many of the transition journals feature time-compression comparisons in which the individual repeats the same words, or flexes the same muscles, every week for a year in order to more accurately assess progress over time. All of the journals include personal anecdotes of the difficulties, concerns and triumphs of everyday life in transition.

Other types of videos are posted, as well; reviews of useful products such as “packers” (prosthetic penises) and binders, general reflections on specific transition-related issues (“passing,” being “outed” at work, how to explain transgender identity to family, dealing with harassment, etc.), and social issues (femininity, misogyny, navigating gendered spaces). Certain members make videos together, splicing screen views to create the illusion of proximity; some address questions or issues raised by others’ videos in order to create a community-wide, ongoing dialogue. Members also use the comments section to support each other, supplement or request information, and share opinions.

This community has been mentioned briefly by DeAnn Gauthier and Nancy Chaudoir (2004), as well as Kay Siebler (2012). In “tranny boyz: cyber community support in negotiating sex and gender mobility among female to male transsexuals,” Gauthier and Chaudoir argue that trans men access online communities to learn how to “pass the test” of manhood “that is separate from simple anatomical maleness.” The authors assert that trans men’s online connections are a “study group of sorts, that will facilitate passing that test” (2004, 375). Furthermore, trans men “fear the estimation of being called *men-but-not-men*…” and:

Ironically, while the very existence of transsexuals calls into question the prevailing gender classification system, transsexuals themselves do not question the fundamental tiers of that system, but rather only whether they will be allowed to construct gender mobility within it (394).

While Gauthier and Chaudoir do admit that online communities offer support and information-sharing, their analysis is stunted by the requirements of narrative—the questions that clog and occlude such as: how did this identity develop? What strategies to trans men use to establish their manhood? Are they transgressive or normative? These questions must be answered to package the story nicely—we need origins, motivations, and results. But the Youtube transition journals do not offer that, and it is not a mistake or oddity of social fragmentation. Think of a written journal; entries are not addressed, like letters, to a third party. They are not intended to convey truths of the self or establish some means of interpersonal communication. Their *raison d’être* is self-empowerment and reflection. On Youtube, these are supplemented by the amorphous desire for connection and validation—not correspondence.

So what does this mean for the Youtube transmasculine community? Primarily, that all of the overt reasons for its existence are far too simplistic. Yes, the journals cover binding, “passing,” and stand-to-pee product reviews; yes, these things help trans men “pass the test” of hegemonic masculinity. But the community is not there *for the purpose of passing that test*. Videos such as Ty’s (above) serve to rewrite the meanings of bodies that are otherwise labeled deviant, but not, as Gauthier and Chaudoir argue, for the purpose of getting the “front stage” performance right (2004, 378). Ty is not trying to convince himself (or anyone else) that he is just as *male* as a cis (assigned-male at birth) man; his is not a project to check off the boxes of a masculinity-list. His journals are a process of chronicling.

Kay Siebler is another author whose work has centered on trans subjectivities in digital media. However, Siebler contends that digital media have become a normalizing force, naturalizing the gender-binary and providing tools for trans people to normalize themselves in turn. Again, this research rests on the question of transgender transgressiveness or normativity:

For all the strides we have made as a culture of embracing and complicating queerness in the Digital Age… we have taken a step backwards in relation to breaking out of the gender/sex binaries. What we internalize from these trans representations is that people must be either/or. Surgery and hormones are required in order to be a content transqueer and that means being a masculine male or feminine female. Capitulation to the sex/gender/sexuality ideologies is neither transgressive nor queer (2012, 76).

It is clear, from Siebler’s article, why she has come to this conclusion. Instead of investigating the transmasculine Youtube community as a whole, Siebler typed terms such as “breast binding” and “top-surgery” into the Youtube search bar. It should, perhaps, be self-evident that if one searches for terms that are closely linked to body-normalization, one will find videos that are likewise focused on binary gender/sex performance. If Siebler, however, had followed the jagged trajectories of side-bar links from, say, a trans man’s video on top-surgery, to one on trying to save for his top-surgery, to one on how he rescued a dog that had been shot, close range, by a shotgun and had as a result spent all his saved top-surgery fund on vet bills to try to save the dog, she might have come up with a somewhat less clear-cut resolution to her investigations.

The point here is not that trans men do not use the Youtube community as a means by which to “learn masculinity” (even normative masculinity!), but that this is not what is important about their engagement with it and the dynamics of the community itself. By insisting on using a narrative form to recount the story of digital transmasculine connections, Siebler, Gauthier and Chaudoir betray a fatal flaw in the form itself; that its reliance upon orderliness and finality only clouds the view. Ty’s money was earned at a big-box store, his labor increased profits for the capitalist juggernaut. And that money sat in a bank—likely one tied to transnational capital—and the dollar signs hung heavy above his life, meaningful and meaningless in their abstraction and complete solidity. That money *was* what Siebler says it is—normalizing, normative, nonqueer, capitalist, dominating. It *was* going to pay for chest-masculinization. And the money that replaces it *will* do so. But that is not why the money is important. And it is not why the surgery is important. It is Bruce—the giant black dog that was shot with a shotgun at close range and ate a cheeseburger before he died, the morphine and the burger bought by a stranger with their chest-masculinization money—that makes it all important, at least today. But Kay Siebler can’t know that, because she was content to establish a narrative, and forgot to look at the edges to remind herself that the work was not finished.

**Why It Doesn’t Matter**

As Siebler makes evident, transgender studies scholars from many disciplines have struggled to decide whether transgender subjectivities are *queer* or *transgressive*. In *Self-Made Men* (2003), Henry Rubin tries to break down this obsessive see-sawing. He says that “Transsexualism is neither essentially normative nor essentially counter-hegemonic,” and that trans men have the choice to use their body-modification projects as normative or as transgressive (145). Rubin does make it clear that his point is not to analyze the gender-scientific usefulness of transmasculinities, but instead to illuminate the subjectivities of trans men, the way that they make meaning out of their experiences, and how they interact with broader social notions of gender and sex.

Nonetheless, in saying that “transsexualism is neither essentially normative nor essentially counter-hegemonic,” Rubin reifies the foundational nature of the question itself: is transmasculinity normative or transgressive? The answer, he implies (no matter how amorphous), tells us a *truth* about transmasculinity. His book is an acceptance of narrative as the appropriate form of accounting trans lives. The difference, he appears to argue, between his work and others’ is that he is letting trans men speak for themselves (instead of documenting them and quoting a few sentences). However, just like typing in a search term like “top-surgery,” Rubin is asking interviewees questions that must be answered by narrative; who has defined transgender identity (2003, 61)? How do trans men define the borders of female masculinity (92)? Do men have to have male bodies (172)? The answers to these questions let Rubin tell a story that starts with self-definition and ends with self-empowerment, each step along the way a tidy stepping-stone and no details out of place.

Narrative cleanliness is certainly appealing. Reading *Self-Made Men*, one might think it was a novel, with each aspect planned carefully to climax together in a series of sweeping revelations. The writing and analysis is accessible to non-academics, the tone is conversational, and one might certainly think that *here was a piece of transgressive academia* for all the concessions it makes to those not versed in Butler, Halberstam, and Foucault. Nevertheless, Rubin is not interested (or does not succeed) in chronicling trans men’s lives. His need to answer the questions of narrative results in well-rounded statements about the contingency of identity, and the particularity of lived experience; no *I asked a question and couldn’t find an answer* or *this data is teetering at the periphery of usability but I will admit it existed anyways.*

Perhaps the most literal piece on transgender narrative construction is “Transsexuals’ Narrative Construction of the ‘True Self’,” in which Douglas Mason-Schrock asks, what is the “interactive process through which stories are used to construct a new self” (1996, 176)? I am partially hesitant to use this piece in my analysis, as it unapologetically conflates transmasculine and transfeminine subjectivities, barely even noting that only one of the ten interviewees was assigned-female at birth (and that half of his time with the trans community was spent in vocal-training and makeup tutorials, spaces primarily geared towards trans women). Thus, the article generalizes its conclusions with concerning freedom that completely disregards the hierarchical and meaning-laden field of social gender.

Nonetheless, Mason-Schrock offers an irresistible opportunity to examine the shortcomings of the narrative form. This is especially true of his attempts to predict the future of trans selfhood, as such predictions *should* apply to the transmasculine Youtube community. However, Mason-Schrock’s focus on narrative leads him to predict that, as “the complexity and pace of social life make it difficult to hold firmly to any one clearly defined, culturally valued identity,” trans people will constantly intensify their desire to normalize their bodies and, above all, their histories (1996, 177). However, the Youtube community does not support this. There is an overwhelming sense of frustration, certainly, with ongoing marginalization of non-normative gendered/sexed bodies, but this does not translate to (uniform) acceptance of the need for normalization. In fact, many members actively fight the pressure to rewrite their histories:

I wore dresses when I was a kid, I had long hair, and then when I was able to pick my own clothes, I always leaned more towards the men’s clothes, and then my friends, like in high school, wanted me to turn into a “real girl,” and took me shopping for girl clothes, and then at the beginning of the year I would be in girl clothes—and also im just saying “girl clothes” as like what the society means by that, I don’t mean that there is such a thing as girl and boy clothes—I was never feminine really at all… I repressed that, I couldn’t be feminine before transition because people wouldn’t think I could be trans… but then I transitioned… after a couple years, I just started to embrace it… I am now embracing the feminine aspect of myself (chase).

In this video (“It’s ok to be feminine”), Chase tells his childhood story as a chronicler might; what he looked like as a child, swinging from feminine to masculine (and the arbitrariness of those terms). He admits that he was very masculine—*not*, as Mason-Schrock might argue, because that was his “true self,” but because *he knew that only be repressing his femininity would he gain legitimacy within the gendered social structure*. There were nothing but jagged edges for Chase-the-child, and Chase-the-adult has chronicled them, not tying them up or explaining them away but letting them lie.

This is important not only because it shows that transmasculine people are *not* consistently engaged in an active project to normalize themselves, but because in this instance, the focus on trans narrative obscures the dexterity of trans men whose lives have been shaped by constant—and often explicit—tensions between their desires for personal fulfillment and their remarkable insight into social gender formation. Such tensions are not—as Chase’s video illustrates—redefined or resolved in retrospect, but are allowed to remain messy and serve as reminders of the vast interconnections that converge at the points of experience and selfhood.

I have offered many reasons why authors such as Mason-Schrock and Siebler do not break free of narrative. I have laid out the questions they ask and how these fail to do their data justice, how the field of transgender studies demands chronicling and the established questions demand narrative. But I have not offered a counter-strategy by which one might actually chronicle. I have not laid out questions that might lend themselves to chronicle instead of narrative. I will attempt to do so now.

**The Transition Journals, Part II**

[The next question not to ask a trans guy]… what did you look like before? I looked like this… I looked like an orange cat. So, I mean obviously, you should know that! Well honestly, I looked exactly how I do right now pretty much, just with longer hair and different clothes and seven years younger. But that being said asking me what I looked like before… is very invalidating to my current identity… (skylar)

One of the most frequent video topics (in that it is addressed by almost every regular member of the community) is “What Not to Ask a Trans Guy.” This is an interesting addition to the library of other videos available, because it is geared towards non-trans people who are seeking information on trans guys. This is one hint that questions about “passing the test” are not hitting the mark; FAQ videos and videos about how to address trans-ness around you are *not a part of passing the manhood test*. These videos are intended, indirectly, to make trans people’s lives easier, to decrease the stress of “passing” and being “outed,” and to make the social world a generally less hostile and ignorant place for trans people to live. Members’ purposes for making such videos have nothing to do with fitting into the binary and having a convincing “front-stage” performance. The videos are a self-defense mechanism, a pre-emptive strike; they assume that trans men have the right to live unmolested and that non-trans people have the responsibility to let them do so.

What a lovely little utopia. Trans men, however, do not necessarily *believe* in it, as much as they consider fostering it to be an organic part of their lives. Maybe doing the FAQ videos is cathartic: a way to get in all the eloquence and irreverence that never seem forthcoming in the heat of the moment. But nonetheless, we can’t answer the question “is this transgressive?” by watching these videos. What the FAQ video *does* lead us to ask is, “why do trans guys need a Youtube community in the first place?”

This question is pregnant with connotation and nuance. Like Avery Gordon’s statement “that life is complicated” (2008, 3), the “why” is a common question with entirely uncommon answers. First, the question could mean, “Why do trans guys need a Youtube community instead of a physical one?” Within this, “Is there something particularly useful for trans subjectivity-building in cyber connection?” Or, one could ask, “Are trans guys part of local queer communities, too?” and, perhaps, “Where does the transmasculine Youtube community fit into the broader queer cyber community?” All of these are questions worthy of chronicling.

The FAQ videos do not offer an *answer* to such question, but maybe some hints. The first is that an answer to “why” will not assume that trans men necessarily seek to blend in or disrupt. They might in fact seek to carve a space of their own, separated from the need to do either. The second hint is that trans men seem less than inclined to tell their life stories and to “educate” others. This, interestingly, is contrary to much queer activist rhetoric about *open spaces* in which free discussion and self-empowerment take place.

Finally, the FAQ videos hint at the presence of a transmasculine subjectivity that does not try to justify itself based on contingent models of gender and sex. The Youtube community does not dwell on discourses surrounding the “true transsexual,” as do Henry Rubin and public figures such as porn star Buck Angel, among others (2003; Ginsberg 2008). In fact, when such ideas are discussed in videos, it is usually in order to refute them. Many videos cover the question of “how I knew I was transgender,” and these are remarkably diplomatic and particular:

I had heard about gender identities that were more in-between, so I experimented with those for a long time, I think that’s really important… I just dropped the labels and said I’m just gonna be me, and see where that takes me… I sort of likened it to, I was in my boat and I stopped pumping the oars and I just sat there. I thought about how I felt, and experienced things… just let myself sort of drift, and I did naturally arrive at the answer… (twin)

Almost like a doctor giving advice over the phone, the trans men in these videos are careful not to extrapolate others' answers from their own experiences. Often, even when someone brings up masculinity, they are acutely aware of the social nature of the structures that surround them:

I was socialized and I grew up as a female, and was taught to carry these feminine traits and act a certain way, and you pick up on that. That’s how you’re taught, that’s how you’re treated, and that’s how you live and that’s how you present yourself. We can work to be more masculine if we want to, but we shouldn’t have to, I mean that’s who we are… from what I’ve noticed, in order to be more “masculine,” you just have to be a dick… (Ty)

For Ty and many others on Youtube, being a trans man does not oblige one to perform a specific form of masculinity. Indeed, as Ty points out later, when people assume he is a “gay guy” due to his weak performance of hegemonic masculinity, he is elated because, as he says, “the operative word in the term ‘gay guy’ is ‘guy’!”

In case this appears to be approaching a nice, solid “point,” the data above does *not* indicate that “trans men are transgressive” because they reject social standards of masculinity. Some of them do so most of the time, some none of the time, and some do so some of the time; some of them try to and fail most of the time, a few succeed famously, and some try and succeed some of the time; they might wake up Tuesday a man, Wednesday gender-queer, Thursday an astronaut (why not get the hell off this rock?), and Friday a burlesque performer (it’s rather lucrative, they say). Or maybe, they’re an astronaut all four days. The point is, *why is there a transmasculine Youtube community in the first place*?

**An Attempt at Undoing**

From where I am sitting, chronicling, it looks like the community exists for the purposes of refuge, validation, and claiming space. The sharing of information is useful—many comments attest to people having benefited from this aspect of the community. And, of course, members *do* share strategies and techniques for “passing the test” of masculinity, such as binding and “packing,” navigating bathrooms unnoticed, walking differently and working out. These are both the façade that legitimizes the community, and a *literal survival guide* for trans men in a heteronormative, patriarchal world.

Refuge, as a purpose for community, is not as insipid as it sounds. What Siebler (2012) apparently forgets when she rails against the normalization of trans bodies—using “hir” and “zhe” instead of individuals’ preferred pronouns, as if a “queer” disregard for an individual’s personal identification is somehow less violent than the juggernaut of normalization that so offends her—is that, personal feelings aside, trans people do not live in a gender-queer utopia. All of the Youtube video documentation is happening in one place and simultaneously in many places, and those many places represent a great range of hospitability to trans subjectivities. The existence of “how-to” videos that help trans men “pass” *is* normalizing, it *does* directly support gender-assimilationist efforts. But in the attempt to write an orderly narrative of trans-ness, Siebler, Gauthier and Chaudoir, and Mason-Schrock have completely underestimated the life and death nature of “passing” for many trans people. The slip of a binder, being misgendered by an acquaintance, even sitting down to pee—any of these might put a trans man in actual social or physical peril. The refuge of Youtube is a place where transmasculinity can be explored and fortified to withstand the dangerous waters of transphobia that confront physical bodies every day.

On the other hand, despite Kay Siebler’s insistence that videos that are non-normalizing are “difficult to locate” (2012, 87), most of the videos posted by members of the transmasculine Youtube community are *not* “how-to” manuals or treatises on the benefits of hormones and surgery. The majority of videos posted are journal entries, documenting the daily lives and stresses of transitioning or gender ambiguity. These more frequently discuss family relationships and social situations than they do the body, though *if* the individual is in the process of physical modifications he will most likely include an update on those—hair growth, voice comparisons, etc.

Journal videos are a means of self-validation but also a means by which the community as a whole can create its own space. The journals, unlike the FAQ videos discussed earlier, are documented in the language of transmasculinity and make few concessions to non-trans viewers. Explanation of terms is rare and apologies for ambiguity are nonexistent. This is the convergence of what Paul Ricoeur calls the *idem*-identity (sameness) and the *ipse*-identity (selfhood) (1992, 116). The community shares the *idem* (a basic aesthetic similarity), and thus has no need of explanations; the individual’s *ipse* is both separate from the community—embodied in one form physically, with modifications and experiences occurring outside the cyber-connections—and intimately entwined with it. Such intimacy can be seen in the ways in which meaning is made within and between videos. In them, individuals translate body modification into triumph, ambiguity into normalcy, and unpleasant experiences into cached wisdom or collective bonds.

Thus, the resulting validation also serves as a bonding-agent for the transmasculine Youtube community, and these connections allow members to collectively claim space in which their voices are not only “tolerated,” but are in fact *dominant*. It is for this reason that many members do not remove insulting and transphobic comments from their videos; such intrusion is countered a thousand-fold by the other comments and video responses, drowning out the hateful voice and—perhaps more importantly—diminishing its importance. By leaving such comments up, the trans men posting videos claim a space in which theirs are the subjectivities that matter, and the bigotry of the rest of the world (which so dominates their non-cyber consciousness) is barely even a nuisance to be “tolerated.”

Yet the community of trans men on Youtube is not simple—videos do not fit into “how-to” or “FAQ” or “journal” as neatly as this analysis makes it seem. One person’s motivation for making an FAQ video may be completely different from another’s, and beliefs about the reasons for—or against—normalization vary greatly between individuals. Thus I do not offer an answer to my question (why is there a transmasculine Youtube community in the first place?), but instead I have laid out some of the events that have occurred while I have been a fly on this wall.

**A-Conclusions**

*That* is the point of chronicling. The questions of narrative are obstructions to understanding complexity, and no matter how astute a scholar one is, asking such questions will put up insidiously difficult-to-surmount roadblocks. Attempts at explaining gender (or cyber, or really any) complexity through narrative result in back-bends and headaches, because the narrative wants order, and most social phenomena are not orderly. We social *scientists* have to relinquish our pseudo-technical methods and admit that studying social life is a-technical. Not a-*technique*, because there is no reason why we should render ourselves anarchic, but our methods must embrace awkward endings, jagged edges, and embarrassingly limited statements.

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