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Goblin: Microaffirmations, a Theory of Communication

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Abstract

This project is a study of nonbinary identity and the ways in which nonbinary individuals find validation from nonbinary communities, cisgender friends and family members, and themselves. It advances a theory of "microaffirmations," or small acts that can have a large, positive impact on nonbinary individuals, with a significant focus on humor, language, and other forms of communication. Research for this project was conducted through a series of personal interviews with friends and families, as well as analyzing the author's own experiences as a nonbinary individual. These interviews and experiences are filtered through lenses of feminist theory, trans theory, and phenomenology, as well as scientific studies of gender and trans identity.

Introduction

It is difficult to overstate the prominence of transgender issues in the public mind in recent years. We have seed debates over transgender rights, from where trans people should be able to use the bathroom, to what parents owe their trans children, to whether or not trans women should compete in women's sports. There has been an increase in visible trans voices, from actress Laverne Cox to activist Janet Mock to celebrity Caitlyn Jenner. Much of the discussion we have heard has been arguments for trans rights, or descriptions of the discrimination that trans people face. Both of these are crucial discussions to have. However, in this piece, I hope to address a somewhat related topic: how nonbinary individuals find validation in communication with their communities.

Nonbinary individuals are those who don't identify purely as either male or female. It's an umbrella term that covers a wide range of identities. Some nonbinary people identify as transgender, while others do not. They are a community that is often left out of conversations on trans rights, in part because the idea of people who do not identify as one binary gender or another is still a foreign concept to many. As a member of the nonbinary community, I hope to shed some light on our experiences. In particular, I hope to elucidate and explain a theory I've called "microaffirmations." Microaffirmations are small ways in which nonbinary individuals are validated by themselves and those around them. These acts can often have a disproportionately large effect on an individual, in much the same way as microaggressions. A microaggression, in contrast to a microaffirmation, is a small act of prejudice or bigotry, often one that goes unnoticed by those who perpetuate them, but that can have a magnified affect on those against whom they are used. The microaffirmation, therefore, is essentially the inverse of the microaggression. Because this piece focuses primarily on acts of validation, many of the

interactions I describe here are positive ones. This is not to suggest that trans and nonbinary individuals do not still face discrimination and prejudice, only that there are positive interactions that occur within our daily lives as well.

As a member of the nonbinary community, a significant portion of this project draws on my own experience and the experiences of other nonbinary individuals and allies at my small, liberal arts college. I believe using my own experience for this project is crucial due to a lack of current academic research on topics of nonbinary identity, since many nonbinary people's lived experiences fall outside the purview of academia, and my position as a member of this group gives me a unique insight into some aspects of what it means to be a nonbinary person in the United States today. Sharing my own experiences is also important to me because of Dr. Perry Zurn's distinction between trans and nonbinary people as objects of curiosity versus subjects of curiosity. Zurn discusses the ways in which trans and nonbinary people have historically been regarded as freaks, curiosities, and anomalies. Our experiences have been dissected, poked, and prodded by medical communities, media outlets, and even our own friends and families. This experience of being rendered an object of curiosity is dehumanizing, often robbing trans and nonbinary people of our agency and our ability to control our own narratives. Zurn suggests instead making way for trans people to become subjects of curiosity—that is, to have the freedom to explore our own identities and experiences in ways that allow us to retain control of our stories. That is what I have tried to do in this project: to give myself and other nonbinary individuals a space in which to explore and discuss our identities as curious scholars of identity rather than mere scholarly curiosities.

To that end, it is also important to note that my experience is in no way representative of all trans or nonbinary experiences. This project draws from only a small sample of the nonbinary

community, all of whom are students at the same small college. My goal here is not to provide an overarching description of how all nonbinary identities function—merely to supply a few examples and to advance the theory of microaffirmations in the hope that it might prove useful in some cases. I must acknowledge that myself and the others I interviewed have a great deal of privilege merely to be able to be open about our identities in our lives, at least on our college's campus. Furthermore, gender and race interact in complicated ways within our society. Our understanding of the gender binary in the West is by its nature a colonialist construct, and several Indigenous and non-Western cultures include models for nonbinary, transgender, or gender nonconforming individuals within their cultures. As a white nonbinary person, therefore, there are certain experiences that I cannot speak to, although I have tried to ensure the greatest possible accuracy within my work.

My hope for this work is primarily that it will help people understand a few examples of what being nonbinary could look like, not what it should look like or will always look like. I hope as well to analyze these examples, and attempt to supply explanations for why some forms of microaffirmation can be so potent. Overall, I hope to further awareness and understanding of nonbinary identity and experience, especially through a lens of positive interactions that can be used to increase support and acknowledgement of nonbinary individuals.

Chapter One: Moving the Needle

The artist's eyes light up as I describe what I want. He nods approvingly. "I think this is going to be really powerful." His words ease the clenched fist of anxiety in my chest and reaffirm my resolution. A half hour later, with a stencil drawn up and applied to my shoulder, I sit down in his chair and rest my arm on the little cushion. He chats easily with me as he readies his tools, and before long I find myself relaxing. As he begins etching the design I've chosen into my skin, our talk turns to that of identity, bodily autonomy, and the reason I'm there. To my surprise, the conversation eases the stinging pain of the needle. It urges me to share confidences, in this strangely intimate setting.

"I mean, I identify as trans and nonbinary," I say, figuring he could have guessed based on the design he's currently imprinting on my shoulder with needle and ink. Even so, the revelation surprises me a little, as this isn't something I'd normally say to someone I'd just met outside of the safe haven of my small, liberal arts college. "So I don't identify with the gender I was assigned at birth, but I don't identify as strictly male or female either."

The artist nods sagely. "It must be hard, with some of the things going on in the world today."

I lapse into silence for a moment, considering my fear of the current political landscape, and the anxiety provoked by the rapidly-approaching need to find a job outside the academic sphere, where I'm not sure how my identity will be perceived. The pain of the needle draws me out of my reverie, back to the conversation. "I'm lucky, though. I have a lot of great support from my friends. Like the ones I'm here with today." I gesture over my shoulder, reflecting on the two friends who encouraged me to take this leap. Tara, a fellow nonbinary person, is the first

person I described my tattoo idea to. They gave me confidence by exclaiming over how much they loved it. They drove me to the tattoo parlor that day, and reassured me about the pain. Looking back further, my decision to sit down in a tattoo artist's chair was undoubtedly affected by all the incredible nonbinary people I'd met since coming to college, who encouraged me to explore my identity and my desires outside the realm of cisnormative standards.

There had been meanings inscribed on my body since before I had even thought about tattoos—in fact, since before I was even born. These meanings had been forced on me by a culture obsessed with a strict gender binary, that believed they could predict the way I would relate to myself and the world based solely on the presumed shape of my genitals. For most of my life, I believed they were right; I took for granted that I was, in fact, a girl. After all, that was what my birth certificate said. It's what my parents told me, and what society reaffirmed. I was born with a vagina that allowed the doctor who delivered me to classify me as female. At puberty, I developed breasts and curvaceous hips, and started to menstruate. I even liked a lot of the things society told me I should like as a girl—pretty dresses, make-up, and dolls. It was only after meeting other nonbinary people that I began to ask whether I really was a girl after all.

Coming to college had exposed me, for the first time, to people who had asked dared to question their gender, who had discovered their truths because of it, and who were now living lives more reflective of their true identities as a result. It's one thing to learn about the existence of nonbinary people—those who don't strictly identify as male or female—online, and quite another to realize that they really existed, as real people, living lives quite similar to my own. Before college, while I had begun to question my sexuality, I had no ability to visualize myself with a future as a queer individual. From all the media representation I'd seen, it almost seemed like I didn't have one. College opened my eyes, both to the possibility of queer futures and the

reality of queer presents. Before, I had largely suppressed my own queerness out of fear and confusion. College gave me the chance, not only to express myself, but to explore myself and discover new possibilities of who I could be. Those in the nonbinary community were some of the first to teach me that I could treat my body like a canvas, that I had a right to do with it what I pleased—as well as the radical potential for affirmation that offered. They were some of the first people my age I'd met who had tattoos. They contradicted so many of the stereotypes I had inherited from my parents about people with tattoos, or piercings, or who engaged in gender variance of all sorts. And now, I was following in their footsteps.

I watched the artist work, adding new inscriptions to my body that I had chosen myself. Even these deeply personal inscriptions were created not by me alone, but by a collaboration between me and him—I described what I wanted to the artist, but he's the one who created the final design. It wasn't exactly what I had envisioned; it was even better. The final design was a transgender symbol—a blending of the "Mars" astronomical symbol to represent men and the "Venus" symbol to represent women—done in bold black lines. Inside the symbol's circle was a rose in full bloom, done in a traditional tattoo style and flanked by a pair of bat wings. I loved the design and what it represented. When I unveiled it to the world, my nonbinary friends were among the first to admire it.

Studies have shown that this sort of validation, from people who share our identities, is crucial for LGBTQ+ youth. In 2002, Cornne Mufioz-Plaza, Sandra Crouse Quinn, and Kathleen A. Rounds conducted a series of interviews with LGBT high school students aimed at discovering how they felt about their social support networks. They found that many LGBT students they talked to identified fellow LGBT students and adults as important sources of support. These individuals offered them both appraisal support—"positive feedback or

affirmation"—and informational support, including advice and shared knowledge (54). Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds' findings mirror my own experience with fellow nonbinary people. One of their interviewees viewed an older lesbian student as a "role model"; her awe-struck appreciation of the older girl reminds me of the way I saw older nonbinary students when I first came to Ursinus (55). I was amazed by their openness and confidence in their own identities. They proudly announced their pronouns and names, showed off tattoos that they found validating, and seemed fearless in experimenting with their presentation to find what felt right for them. Acquiring information and support from them gave me the courage I needed to begin my own explorations. Additionally, my perception of them meant that any form of affirmation they gave me had an even greater impact. A compliment from one of these students about my appearance or my clothing (or now, my tattoo) felt like a tacit validation of my queerness: a microaffirmation that perhaps seemed only like trivial praise, but meant so much more to me as I explored my own identity.

Students in this study reported difficulty in discussing their LGBT identities with heterosexual students, further highlighting the need for community with other LGBT individuals who could provide understanding and forms of support not possible for heterosexual peers (55). In this project, I contend that it is possible for anyone—straight or queer, transgender or cisgender—to participate in microaffirmations. However, the ways in which different communities do this are important. This chapter focuses on the ways in which members of nonbinary communities validate each other. These validations are often dependent on a nonbinary person's knowledge of another individual's struggles, as well as their shared history as members of the same community, as this gives them a connection on which to build and an understanding of some common issues they may both have faced.

For much of Western's society's recent history with transness, it has been assumed that trans people should seek and find validation through "passing". We have seen examples of this in media throughout the later 20th century and into this one. We can find a number of blatantly transphobic examples, such as what Julia Serano calls "the deceptive transsexual," present in films such as the 1994 *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective.* This archetype shows a trans person—usually a trans woman—who successfully passes as their gender, and uses this to deceive and sometimes prey on others (Serano 36). In *Ace Ventura,* the character's transness becomes a shocking plot twist when it is revealed that the villain of the film, police lieutenant Lois Einhorn, is actually an ex-Miami Dolphins kicker plotting against the current Dolphins quarterback. Her transness is revealed when film's hero forcibly strips her down in front of twenty witnesses, causing them to vomit—not at the inhumane treatment she is suffering from, but from the mere fact of her existence (Serano 37). In this film, the trans character was using femaleness as a "disguise" to commit crimes. Clearly, this is an extremely transphobic portrayal. However, even seemingly sympathetic films situate passing as the ultimate goal. Think, for example, of the 2011 French film *Tomboy,* in which a young child who was assigned female at birth moves to a new town and introduces himself to the neighborhood children as a boy named Mikhael. Throughout the film, Mikhael goes to great lengths to maintain everyone's belief that he is a cisgender boy, including molding himself a small clay penis to put in his swim trunks when the boys spend a day at the lake. When his deception is discovered, the consequences are disastrous.

For binary trans people (trans individuals who identify entirely as either women or men), passing usually refers to those who are read at first glance as their gender—that is to say, trans women are read by others as women, and trans men are read as men. Kessler and McKenna, who conducted a series of studies exploring how we determine others' genders, provide a good

definition for this: “to be successful in one’s gender is to prevent any doubt that one’s gender is objectively, externally real” (176). And in today’s transphobic society, with its deeply entrenched notions about an unbreachable gender binary, having a gender that is “real” is often synonymous with having one that is cisgender[1]. So a trans person who passes is one who conforms to the ideals of cisgender standards of normativity for their gender. Essentially, people believe they are cisgender.

We have been trained through a lifetime of socialization in a binary-obsessed culture to associate certain physical traits and presentations with certain genders, and as soon as we see another person we automatically assess them and make a determination about what gender we believe them to be. According to Kessler and McKenna, this is done not through any concrete list of criteria, but through a “schema” that takes into account all the gendered cues we perceive this person to possess. They report, “the schema is not dependent on any particular gender cue, nor is it offered as a statement of a rule which people follow like robots. Rather, it is a way of understanding how it is that members of Western reality can see someone as either female or male. The schema is: See someone as female only when you cannot see them as male” (176). That is to say, many characteristics seen as exclusively male ones, such as facial hair or a penis, will override other characteristics associated with women. We can connect this, as Kessler and McKenna do, to the idea of male as the “default” gender. It can also explain some of what Serano notes about the hypervisibility of trans women in media—because a trans woman who displays any signs associated with “maleness” in this schema will fail to pass, they bear the brunt of the media’s fascination with those who transgress the rigidity of the binary system.

[1] “Cisgender” refers to individuals who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, usually by a medical professional examining their genitals when they are born, and codified by notation on their birth certificate.

Furthermore, "the conditions of failure are different" for men and women (Kessler and McKenna 176). Women fail to pass if they show any "male" signs, while men fail to pass if they *fail* to show any male signs. In either case, passing is aligned with the presence or absence of maleness, which clearly reflects the misogyny of our society.

Fascinatingly, once people have made a gender attribution, they seem to believe they automatically know what genitals the person possesses. For example, Kessler and McKenna presented adult[2] participants—960 in total—with drawings of people to which they had randomly assigned a series of gendered cues, such as long or short hair, a penis or a vagina, and breasts or a flat chest. Some of these figures were clothed in a unisex shirt and pants, while others were partially or wholly unclothed. The researchers then asked the participants to attribute either a male or female gender to the figure and recorded their responses. In some cases, they also asked participants what they would change about a male figure to make it female, or vice versa. Some of these participants responded that, to make a male figure female, they should remove the figure's penis, even in cases when the figure was clothed, and therefore the penis was not visible to begin with (173). Theoretically, these participants couldn't know if the figure even had a penis, and removing the appendage they envisaged would not have changed their appearance at all. However, these participants were convinced, not only that the figure had a penis, but that they could see it and that it influenced how they attributed gender to the figure.

[2] While Kessler and McKenna do not discuss the age range of adult participants, they do note that children's ages can have a large impact on the gender attribution process. In other studies, adults incorrectly labelled girls "male" twice as often as the other way around. Preschoolers did not show a significant difference in whether they incorrectly labelled boys as girls or girls as boys, but kindergarteners, who the authors state "hold the most rigid and stereotyped ideas about gender," were five times more likely to label girls "male" as they were to label boys "female" (170).

We see this effect play out time and time again, although most of the time we don't even realize it. When someone makes a gender attribution to a person, they presume a great deal of information about a person's body and identity. Reduced to its most basic logic, gender attribution in our cisnormative society is essentially saying to someone, "I know what your genitals look like" within the first few seconds of meeting them. This may seem like an exaggeration, and is almost certainly not what most people consciously think, but it's the underlying assumption that gives weight to the entire system. From a theoretical standpoint, we may understand the difference between gender and sex, but practically, even feminists often equate the two when making a gender attribution. Furthermore, we assume that a person's genitals will match what we expect based on whatever cues we can see, just as Kessler and McKenna's subjects believed a clothed figure had a penis based on their perception of it as male. This ignores the complexities of modern identity and embodiment, especially with regard to trans people. Features previously believed to constitute incontrovertible proof of a person's sex can be altered with hormones or surgeries; therefore, the entire system on which we base gender attribution is inherently unstable.

It also means that any gender attribution a person makes about a nonbinary person is going to be wrong. As Kessler and McKenna point out, the categories of male and female are considered "mutually constitutive" in our society (176). Therefore, if someone decides during the gender attribution process that "this person is not male," the (seemingly) obvious conclusion is that the person is female instead, and vice versa. For nonbinary people, this is incredibly inconvenient. It means that, no matter what, we will always be misrecognized within the first moments of meeting someone. And, after these first moments, "almost nothing can discredit a gender attribution once it is made" (Kessler and McKenna 177). Once someone has decided, not

with their conscious mind, but with the subtle and subconscious set of protocols we all are taught from birth, what your gender is, it's almost impossible to convince them otherwise.

Since nonbinary people cannot "pass" in the traditional sense, it is difficult to find validation in this way. Indeed, some trans activists—both binary and nonbinary—are moving away from passing as the presumed goal of all trans people. Leslie Feinberg, for example, argues that it upholds cisgender norms and creates a hierarchy within society that values trans people differently depending on how well they pass. Feinberg argues:

> Transgendered women and men have always been here. They are oppressed. But they are not merely products of oppression. It is passing that's historically new. Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility. Transgendered people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or threats of violence. But that is not the case today. There are legions of women and men whose self-expression, as judged by Hollywood stereotypes, is "at odds" with their sex. Some are forced underground or "pass" because of the repression and ostracism they endure. Today all gender education teaches that women are "feminine," men are "masculine," and an unfordable river rages between these banks. The reality is there is a whole range of ways for women and men to express themselves. (Feinberg 207)

Feinberg proposes making room for a greater range of gender expressions for people of all identities. Likewise, nonbinary people should not have to balance precipitously on the narrow edge of androgyny in the hopes of being recognized. Therefore, nonbinary individuals find other ways to express themselves, especially within our own communities.

One powerful tool for this is humor. In *Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication*, John C. Meyer describes the ways in which humor is crucial to communication and an essential part of group formation, as its relies a great deal on audience reaction and can therefore help to build a cooperative form of communication between speaker and audience. Meyer analyzes humor through a series of functions it can perform in

communication, two of which are evident in my interactions with fellow nonbinary people. The first of these functions is what Meyer calls "identification." Identification humor "invokes an issue very familiar to the audience, as well as placing the target of the humor in a position of sharing meaning or perspective on that issue" (319). Meyers argues that this works primarily because of humor's ability to relieve tension; in a difficult situation, using humor to release nervous energy can allow for the formation of an even stronger bond between communicator and audience. As a nonbinary person, it sometimes seems as though there is an almost constant low-level tension in my life, resulting from our culture's marginalization of identities that fall outside prescribed gender binaries and roles. Therefore, using this type of humor becomes a powerful act of microaffirmation, since it temporarily releases that tension while reminding me that others also understand the pressures I am feeling.

During the course of this project, I interviewed my friend Tara—a nonbinary, transfeminine individual who I've known since my freshman year of college. Tara speculated that the importance of trans and nonbinary communities came in part from our ability to understand the tension-releasing power of certain jokes, particularly through what Tara referred to as "millennial dark humor." This kind of humor, associated with the younger generations steeped in social media and Internet culture, makes light of our inner demons with quips about depression, existential dread, and the apocalyptic future of a world ravaged by climate change. By joking about such serious topics—often ones we are relatively powerless to do anything about—we can temporarily release the constant anxiety and tension they cause. Tara points out that "millennial dark humor" collides uniquely with trans and nonbinary communities in jokes about dysphoria. They noted, "Like, you know, like making a joke about dysphoria in general is

like… like around cis people, they'll just look at you like, "Oh my God, you feel that way?" But other trans people will just be like, "Lol, same!""

The DSM-5 describes gender dysphoria as "a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender" (Zucker 34). Many, though not all, trans and nonbinary people describe feelings of dysphoria, especially related to the appearance of their bodies. They may attempt to alleviate this dysphoria by accessing medical transition such as hormone replacement therapy or gender-affirming surgeries (Roehr 2). As Tara pointed out, gender dysphoria can be painful for trans and nonbinary people, and difficult for cisgender people to understand. Therefore, dark humor becomes a way to relieve this pain. For example, a transgender meme-themed Twitter account recently posted an image of a blue and pink frog (perhaps representative of the trans pride flag, which is blue, pink, and white) bearing the text "Hippity hoppity, my body is an atrocity."

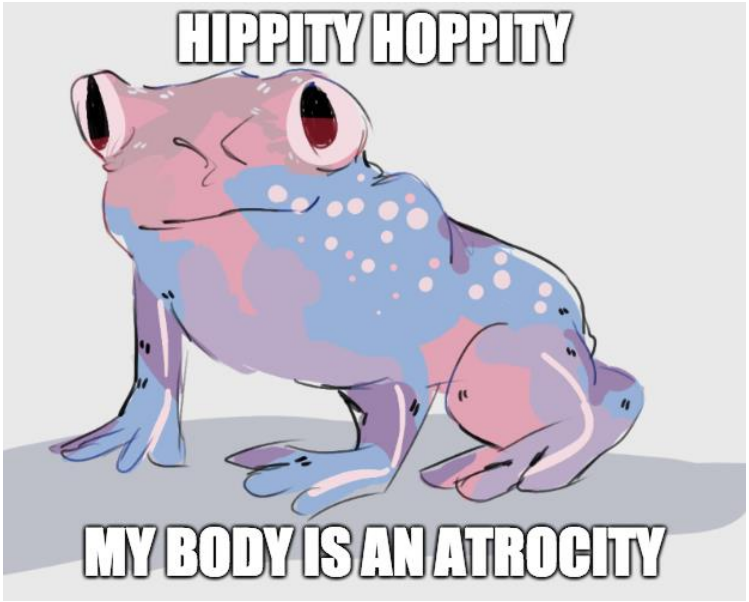

Figure 1. Meme taken from trans-themed meme Twitter account @traaaaaannnnns

This meme makes light of the incongruence and distress caused by dysphoria, while also signaling to trans and nonbinary individuals that they are not alone in these feelings. I would argue that even comments that seemingly reinforce the negative aspects of trans and nonbinary experiences can also serve as microaffirmations. Tara's comments show the power of expressing these sentiments to others who you know will understand your distress, rather than simply expressing pity, horror, or disbelief.

In a similar interaction, a fellow nonbinary individual once described to me their desire to take a deli slicer to their chest to alleviate their dysphoria over having breasts. Many people might have a viscerally horrified reaction to such a statement. I would argue that this type of joking fits into a category of humor/horror as discussed by Noel Carroll, who addresses how concepts and characters native to horror genres can quickly become humorous with just a slight change:

> Since apparent incongruity is a matter of the transgression of standing concepts, categories, norms, and commonplace expectations, the relation of horror to humor begins to emerge, since in the previous section it was argued that a necessary condition for being horrified is that the emotional state in question be directed at an entity perceived to be impure-where impurity, in turn, is to be understood in terms of violations of our standing categories, concepts, norms, and commonplace expectations. Thus, on the incongruity theory of humor, one explanation of the affinity of horror and humor might be that these two states, despite their differences, share an overlapping necessary condition insofar as an appropriate object of both states involves the transgression of a category, a concept, a norm, or a commonplace expectation. (154)

Carroll compares the incongruity theory of humor—which claims that we laugh at unexpected juxtapositions and contradictions—to the incongruity of the monstrous figures of the horror genre, such as vampires and zombies that are simultaneously alive and dead, and therefore erode

the boundaries between those supposedly contradictory categories. In nonbinary forms of humor, we are dealing with several types of incongruity: firstly, the incongruity of one's body and gender when suffering from gender dysphoria, and secondly, the incongruity of a desire to inflict pain on oneself in such an oddly specific manner. While Carroll stresses that he only applies his theory to art-horror such as films and novels, I believe a similar theory can be used here to observe how trans and nonbinary individuals convert the stuff of horror into the stuff of humor as a form of community-building.

In an episode of the TV series *Gotham,* a heavily horror-tinged crime drama that tells the origin stories of a number of *Batman* villains, one main character finds herself trapped in an island prison controlled by a sadistic doctor who is harvesting prisoners' organs as spare parts. As a warning, this doctor shows the main character an experiment in how much of someone's body he can replace before they become an entirely different person: he has operated on his former office manager and replaced the vast majority of his body with other people's parts, many of them female. The office manager awakens from the surgery, looks down at his reshaped body, and begins to scream. It's one of the most viscerally upsetting scenes in the show, in large part due to the sheer magnitude of the violation committed against something that is supposed to belong to us alone: our body. The idea of looking down and seeing a body that is not your own, that is undeniably *wrong,* is understandably terrifying to most people. However, for some trans and nonbinary people who experience dysphoria, that is exactly what it feels like. This is undoubtedly the stuff of horror. Additionally, at the core of many horror tales lies the fear of not being believed—fear that, when the main character shares their terrifying experience being haunted or possessed or stalked by some horrifying monster, the people around them will think they've somehow imagined it all. Again we find an analogue with trans experiences here, as

many trans and nonbinary people fear that, when they do come out, people they know will dismiss their experiences as a phase, a delusion, or a mistake.

Carroll proposes that, in order to count as horror rather than humor, "monsters had to be both fearsome and loathsome, where the basis of that loathsomeness was impurity borne of categorical transgressivenes" (156). However, by removing or neutralizing either the fearsomeness or the loathsomeness of the monster, we can transform it into a figure of humor instead. In our case, the fearsomeness is derived from the anxiety that our experience of our own gender will not be believed. However, by telling these experiences to other trans and nonbinary people who *will* believe us, we can effectively disarm this fear, making the incongruity of statements regarding dysphoria and desire for transition humorous rather than horrific. Sharing these statements thus becomes a form of relief humor, derived from the release of tension generated by the fear of not being believed.

Another common type of relief humor takes the form of a reclamation of language and ideas used to stigmatize queer individuals. In one oft-repeated interaction among my friends, one of us will declare—seemingly out of nowhere—"Guys, I'm gay." This is followed by performative shock and horror with one or more individuals crying, "What? You, a gay?" In this interaction, the tension derives from the fact that we know some people some people would genuinely react with shock or outrage to such an admission. We diffuse that tension with over-the-top reactions; the sarcasm validates the speaker's queerness by implying that of *course* they're gay, while simultaneously mocking the pearl-clutching attitudes of homophobes and transphobes. This mockery of an outgroup coupled with affirmation of an ingroup also calls up the other humor function I have frequently observed in my own community: differentiation.

According to Meyer, "[differentiation] humor is used primarily to attack or blame and thus to divide one group from another, yet supporters within one group can be united behind an effective humorous attack" (Meyer 324). It is important to note that the impact of differentiation humor depends on the ingroup and outgroup in question. Meyer identifies it as based in a "superiority" theory of humor—when we use this sort of humor, we wish to feel superior to the subject of the joke. However, superiority theory-based humor is also tied to identification, since it can reaffirm bonds within groups that are *not* the subject of the group. A more harmful example of superiority humor would be a group of white individuals making jokes about black people. Such jokes may reinforce an idea of racial hierarchy and engender an us-versus-them ideology. However, differentiation jokes can also be fairly value-neutral, as in the case of jokes about lawyers. While they may rely on an assumed universal hatred of lawyers, and may offend lawyers unhappy with the public perception of their job, lawyers are not generally considered a marginalized group, and these jokes are unlikely to change their status in society. On the other hand, jokes by members of a marginalized community against a privileged one can serve as a powerful form of morale-boosting and solidarity.

We find a compelling example of this in the nonbinary community with the phrase, "Are the cis okay?" which is typically utilized in online communications, though it can migrate to conversations in real life as well. This joke relies on an understanding of several common issues within the trans community. The first of these is a linguistic one: the incorrect use of the word "trans" or "transgender" as a noun, which often has a dehumanizing effect. We see this when people talk about "the transgenders," usually in a derogatory way. It's similar to racist deployments of "the blacks" and homophobic uses of "the gays." In this joke, the linguistic microaggression is turned back on cisgender individuals by referring to them collectively as "the

cis." Humor of this sort also feigns concern for cisgender people in a way that parodies often-expressed fears by transphobes that trans people are mentally ill, damaged, or somehow "not okay." The phrase is often deployed to express disapproval with certain highly gendered aspects of our culture, such as "gender reveal parties" that allow parents to discover the sex of their child in a "fun" way, by eating cake filled with pink or blue frosting (pink for girls, blue for boys, obviously), opening a box full of pink or blue balloons, or, memorably, shooting a box full of colored smoke. Practices such as this have been criticized by trans activists for their coupling of gender and genitals, not to mention their often gender-essentialist themes (such as "rifles or ruffles," "touchdowns or tutus," and "boots or bows"). In an article published on the online platform *Everyday Feminism,* nonbinary and intersex activist Pidgeon Pagonis wrote, "these parties wrongly support the notion that gender is intrinsically synonymous with genitalia. […] In this binary way of thinking, genitals are allowed to trump our internal sense of self – also known as our gender identity." The question "Are the cis okay" also recalls the transphobic argument that trans people are obsessed with genitals or sex, and turns that back around on our culture's current obsession with such parties.

Figure 2. Screenshot captured from Twitter account @traaaaaannnnns, depicting an ad for "gender reveal" mozzarella sticks featuring cheese colored pink or blue to represent the baby's gender.

As it turns out, gender reveal parties reveal a lot more about our own values than they do about any given fetus's gender. Anthropology professor Lynn M. Morgan discusses the political associations we hold about embryos in her book *Icons of Life.* She observes the ways in which images illustrating the fetus often "encourage viewers to notice the continuity between tiny embryos and full-time newborns" and, from there, to full-grown adults (14). Works like *Nova*'s educational film *Life's Greatest Miracle* do this by focusing on the most identifiably human features, such as "pristine unopened eyes, golden fingertips, [and] perfect lips and toes" (13). The adjectives used here—"pristine," "perfect,"—highlight the notion that these fetuses not only already represent fully-formed human beings, but also represent human beings as yet untouched by the forces of the outside world. However, even in this state they are not untouched. Already our Western cultural expectations are reaching their fingers into the womb to twist these embryos to fit their own beliefs. In trans circles we talk about a person's "assigned gender at birth"—whatever went on their birth certificate—but often fetuses are assigned a gender before they even leave the womb. Morgan informs us that what she calls "the embryological view of

development"—our view of how embryos develop based on scientific observation and cultural norms—"encourages us to see in every embryo a tiny, telescoped image of our present selves" (11). This exaltation of the embryo encourages us to attempt to *stay* in that "pristine" state supposedly represented by fetal development, untouched by the outside world, our bodies remaining "uninscribed." It's an ideology that contributes to negative views surrounding medical transition—the idea that it's a "mutilation" to acquire gender-affirming hormones or surgery, to seek something we were not born with. The gender we were assigned at birth is an inscription we did not seek and do not want. Surgeries, hormones, and tattoos are all inscriptions that allow us to assert some control over our bodies, and remind ourselves that we are not obligated to obey the labels society has given to us.

In some cases, we rebel against our assigned gender by propelling ourselves towards the other widely-recognized binary gender, even if we do not fully identify with that category, or with that category alone. In the spring of my sophomore year of college, I experienced a striking example of this with a fellow nonbinary person. I was helping several members of the college's Gender and Sexuality Alliance with a craft project, and arrived in the common room of their house wearing the men's jeans that I had bought from Goodwill, a t-shirt, and a fairly androgynous pair of shoes. When I sat down to begin work, Althea, a fellow afab[3] nonbinary individual who had been making sketches on a sheet of poster board, turned to me and said, "When you sat down next to me I thought, 'Woah, when did this guy get here?'" I felt my heart lift, and I beamed and thanked zer. Ze continued, "I know I always feel good when people say I look like a guy, so I figured you'd want to know." The feeling of elation carried me through the

[3] Afab is an acronym for "assigned female at birth. A synonym is dfab, for "designated female at birth." Its complement is amab or dmab, for "assigned male at birth" or "designated male at birth."

rest of the afternoon. While I don't identify as a man, my happiness was derived from the idea that I could be identified as anything other than a woman—the only thing I had been permitted to identify as for the majority of my life—if only for a brief moment. Althea's comments indicate ze might feel similarly.

When I interviewed Val, another nonbinary afab individual, they described the importance of microaffirmations through certain compliments. They recalled that a nonbinary friend of theirs had a tendency to tell them "You look very handsome today." For Val, this compliment carried a significant weight because it's one usually applied to men. Although Val identifies as nonbinary, society does not acknowledge the masculine aspect of their gender, and most people perceive them as female. Therefore, having their masculinity affirmed was especially validating. For Val, this is one of the reasons having nonbinary communities is so important. According to them, "I think that just being around people, like being around nonbinary communities is like, you don't have to explain to them, because they already know."

While Val found their community on their college's campus, nonbinary communities can exist anywhere—even in cyberspace. In some cases, we seek refuge from inscriptions we did not choose by going online. Tara described their experiences in online spaces largely tailored to—and inhabited by—trans and nonbinary individuals. They discussed in particular their interactions on a Discord server established for trans and nonbinary individuals. Discord is a web application that describes itself as an "all-in-one voice and text chat for gamers." Users can set up their own servers, which allow them to converse with a specific group of people invited to the server, and to establish channels (different chats) for different sorts of conversations. Tara described the Discord server they were a part of as "really affirming," for several reasons. "It's interesting because like… it contrasts heavily with the community that I've already met," they

told me. Part of this, they believe, comes from the relative distance possible to achieve during online interaction: “For some reason, [when you’re online] it suddenly becomes a bit like… easier to open up about uh, embarrassing sit- well, embarrassing, I mean, anxious matters, things like sexuality, things about some of the weirder sides of transness.” Even when discussing difficult issues, they could maintain a degree of anonymity, and if something went wrong in an interaction it would be much easier to sever that tie than it would during a face-to-face conversation. Roser Beneito-Montagut notes a similar phenomenon in their study of online interactions, in which “some participants report that it is easier to have intimate conversations online than face to face” (546). Because of this, online forums such as Discord can become ideal places to seek affirmation and support about being nonbinary.

Social networking sites can be valuable resources for identity construction in adolescence, according to Sonia Livingstone and Leslie Haddon (85). Some of their reasoning behind this is fairly self-explanatory, such as these sites’ accessibility and user-friendliness. They also cite the platforms’ “controllability of self-presentation,” both through their asynchronous character and their potential for personalization (86). Tara and I discussed similar patterns within the Discord server as well. One commonly-noted difficulty with online communications is the extensive social cueing we miss when writing messages to each other online versus speaking face to face. Facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice all play into the way we interpret our interactions with others. When speaking online, these cues are not available to us. However, online communities have overcome this through a collection of new rules and options for communication. One prominent example is emoticons, which allow individuals to convey facial expression or mood without the need for visual interaction (Park 150). This goes hand-in-hand with the ability to control one’s self-presentation online. In the first place, because

messages are not exchanged verbally in real time, you have more of an opportunity to craft the words you use, the tone you take, and the emoticons or other graphical representations you include in a message. Additionally, you choose the information you share with others. We all construct our identities online through the information we choose to share. The power of this ability to choose first struck me when I realized that people in the Discord server were some of the first who knew me only by my chosen name, and who had never heard my birth name used. Additionally, users on platforms like the Discord server choose what (if any) pictures of themselves they wish to share. This can be important for nonbinary individuals because, rather than the fear that others will not see you as your true gender, you can choose to share only those pictures that you feel display that gender, and only in ways that you are comfortable with. Additionally, online spaces can be crucial for identity validation. Livingstone and Haddon note that "while identity construction on these sites entails to some extent the presentation of idealised parts of the self, the positive feedback of others endows this self-presentation with social legitimacy" (87). While some aspects of one's online identity may be "idealized," the ability to present an idealized self can be a crucial form of microaffirmation online, as it allows nonbinary individuals to express a version of themselves they could be if the current obstacles to nonbinary people did not exist. Furthermore, having other nonbinary individuals "[endow] this self-presentation with social legitimacy" can be validating in that it reveals that who one wishes to be is not wrong or bad. This is especially helpful for nonbinary people who may be isolated from other members of their community, for whom social networking sites may be their only ties to their identity.

In the end, our online interactions become a sort of electronic body, and our text direct messages and status updates become yet another form of inscription upon that body. While we

can find our own communities and find validation there, it is not enough to outweigh the ideas that have been imprinted on our bodies and minds from birth and before. We are all immersed in an extremely binarist culture, and pockets of nonbinary solidarity are not enough to overturn this. Fortunately, other nonbinary individuals are not the only ones we can turn to for microaffirmations. These are also offered by cisgender individuals who know us and care to learn from our experiences; we'll discuss these individuals in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Gender is a Broken Theremin

Whenever a spooky, quavering, electronic instrument that sounds almost like a voice appears in a soundtrack, that instrument is a Theremin. It appears in the original Star Trek theme song, and as the ubiquitous spooky ghost or mysterious extraterrestrial sound in science fiction and horror films. The instrument itself looks like something out of a science fiction film; in fact, it's not immediately identifiable as a musical instrument at all, consisting of a large wooden block with one side covered in knobs and switches, with one metal antenna sticking straight up and another sticking out to one side. The first Theremin I ever saw in person had a broken volume antenna. When switched on, it emitted a constant electronic noise. Unique among instruments, this Theremin could not sound in a void—but would play as soon as it was put in contact with anything else, triggered merely by being in proximity to an object or being.

Gender is like a broken Theremin. In a void, we might not have one, or at least, might not be able to perceive its presence. However, as soon as you put us in proximity to other people, ideas, and conventions, our gender begins to sound—like the electronic tones of a broken Theremin. Any person or object or circumstance will react with our gender in some way, and usually not in a way we can predict. If you're nonbinary, most people and ideas will interact with you in a way that is somehow jarring, whether intentional or not. Their interactions mirror the frantic hand-waving of a Theremin novice, producing only discordant shrieks from the instrument. As we've already seen with microaffirmations, sometimes the subtlest acts produce outsize feelings of validation, just as it takes only a slight movement of a finger to render a crystal-clear note on the Theremin.

In this way, the body is an outward-facing part of ourselves. We see this in psychoanalyst Paul Schilder's concept of the body image: the idea that we do not have unmediated access to

our bodies in any physically "true" sense, but can only perceive them through an image of our body that we construct over time. As Gayle Salamon explains in *Assuming a Body,* "the body image is always contextually situated, in relation to other bodies and to the world, and its construction is a social phenomenon" (30). This means that the concept we hold of our bodies and ourselves cannot be removed from their context in our culture and our relationships. Who we are and how we view ourselves is dependent on the culture around us and constantly influenced by other people, concepts, and objects. Currently, much of the culture around us is obsessed with gender. We give everything around us a gender—not just people, although my explanation of Kessler and McKenna's work on gender attribution in the last chapter has hopefully revealed just how problematic and deeply ingrained the gendering of people is to us—but also clothing, toys, colors, and even professions. We clearly see the divisions between things that are supposed to be "for men" and "for women." Infants are coded at birth, with pink for girls and blue for boys. When new parents go shopping for clothing for their children, the division continues, with certain clothes marketed to boys vs. others marketed to girls, despite the fact that there is very little difference in the shape or requirements of infants of any gender. When people buy children toys, girls are encouraged to play with dolls and kitchen sets while boys are encouraged to roughhouse and play with action figures. Of course, these toys foreshadow the professions these children are expected to show an affinity for, with girls going into more "nurturing" fields like nursing or teaching kindergarten, while boys dream of being soldiers or sports stars. Books, blogs, and pop psychologists have spent countless hours trying to enumerate and explain the differences between men and women, such as the famous *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* by relationship counselor John Gray. Naturally, existing in this type of culture, with so many thoughts and ingrained beliefs about gender, means that gender has a large impact on

our body image. My own body image was greatly affected by my knowledge that these ingrained beliefs prevented many people, including myself, from being able to recognize my identity.

My tattoo was an attempt to redefine how the world around me—and I, myself—saw my body. Including the transgender symbol within it was an affirmation of my transness, and a way to render myself "visibly trans" even when so much of our culture refuses to acknowledge that part of me, since I am neither androgynous nor masculine enough to be perceived as anything other than a woman.

"This is gonna be powerful," my artist told me as he continued inking the design into my skin. "I love stuff like this, totems and things."

"Yeah," I reply, trying not to move my arm under the pain of the needle. "I guess it's really important to me, just to show who I am. It is really important to me to affirm this part of my identity."

He nods. "Yeah, it's gotta be tough. You know, I have a brother, and he's not always the most enlightened about some things. And sometimes I wonder if he's gonna have a gay kid, because of karma and stuff."

I wince as the needle works towards my back, where there's less muscle and fat to insulate me from the pain. "I'm really proud of my brother," I say, distracting myself. "He used to not be great with some things, but he's worked really hard to learn about them, and be open-minded. He's really listened to me and learned from stuff we've talked about."

"That's great, man."

I close my eyes for a moment and wonder what my brother will say when I tell him about the tattoo. Whatever he says, I know he'll support me, as he has for years. That support was one reason I knew I had to interview him for this project. I conducted this interview at his apartment, seated at his dining room table. At six-foot-four, my brother towers over me, and he had bought his furniture to match his height. My legs dangled from my chair as I set up the microphone on a diagonal, with me sitting at the head of the table and him on one side. If I didn't know him better, it would be easy to find him intimidating; in addition to his size, my brother has a bushy beard and long hair he keeps in a ponytail. He's told me others have characterized him as "scary," or read him as standoffish when to his mind he was simply not going out of his way to seem friendly or nonthreatening. While I can understand how some might think that, it seems almost silly to me. "But you're a teddy bear!" I exclaimed when he complained about the reactions he provoked. After all, this was the guy who sometimes drunk-texted me just to tell me he loved and appreciated me, who talked me through some of my worst depressive episodes by phone, who invited me to play video games with his friends and got me set up with the best gear. He was the first member of my family—and the first person outside of my college—who I ever told I was trans. From the moment I decided to focus on the ways in which others affirm nonbinary identities, I knew I would have to talk to him about this.

Sitting in his apartment over spring break, I recalled to his memory one of the first things he said to me about being nonbinary, and one of the first interactions that sparked my interest in microaffirmations. He remembered the nighttime drive when he picked me up from school; as he put it, "driving late at night is when all serious conversations seem to happen." In another car ride, I would come out to my mother as well. As difficult as going to school five hours from my hometown could be, I always enjoyed the long car rides there and back. The car became a sort of

liminal space, and with our eyes on the road, it became easier to talk about things that were hard to fit into our busy schedules. I especially looked forward to times when my brother came to get me. With him living in his own place, and me away at college, there never seemed to be enough time to spend together. We had grown closer over the past few years, as we'd both matured and learned more about the other's perspective. We were still learning how to relate to each other as adults, and these drives were perfect for discussions that deepened our understanding of each other. That's how he described the revelation of my nonbinary identity: as "some pretty big, perspective-changing information." I can't argue with him there. Studies in communication might actually back up our affinity for road trip confessionals—Michael Argyle and Janet Dean studied eye contact during one-on-one conversations, and found that people were less likely to make eye contact when discussing sensitive or intimate topics (290). Furthermore, they propose that eye contact is one component of intimacy in conversation, with others being physical proximity, conversational topic, and amount of smiling, among other things. If one of these factors is altered, the subjects will then alter other factors in an attempt to maintain the same level of intimacy (293). So, for example, if two people move further away from each other while speaking, they may make more eye contact to compensate for the decreased intimacy due to distance. Perhaps that explains why, while discussing this extremely intimate aspect of my life, I felt the need to stare out at the dark road as I told him, "so I'm not a boy or a girl, I'm just some… weird… thing, and I don't really know what that is yet. I'm, you know, a… whatever." My brother nodded sagely, a habit of his when he's carefully processing information, particularly when he's trying to see things from another perspective. Finally he said, "Well thanks for telling me. Gonzo."

I couldn't help but crack a smile. Gonzo was one of my favorite characters from the Muppets, famous for his wild antics and indeterminate species, which frequently led his fellow cast members to describe him as a "whatever." Poignantly, in the film *Muppets from Space,* Gonzo discovers that he's actually a space alien, and is reunited with his family, who share his distinctive interests and appearance. He realizes he's not alone—he just didn't previously know about this group of people that understands him on a fundamental level through shared identity. It's hard not to see a parallel there between this furry blue puppet and my own experiences coming to college and meeting other nonbinary individuals. And, just like Gonzo, while I do need the support and validation of other people like me, I also need the love and company of my cisgender family and friends.

Just as the rest of the Muppets struggle to understand Gonzo, my brother may not understand me perfectly, but interactions like the one I just mentioned show his desire to do his best. He described the "Gonzo" quip as an attempt to set me at ease and use humor to deal with a difficult and tense situation. However, examining this joke further reveals that it contains multitudes. The Muppets were a large part of our childhoods, and this seemingly offhand remark made an appeal to that sense of nostalgia, our shared pasts, and the reassurance that we had been through so much together, my new understanding of my identity could not interfere with that bond. This history is crucial not only to understand the context of the remark, but also to examine my relieved and emotional reaction to it. We can examine this joke through the lens of Meyer's discussion of "teases":

> A tease is viewed as humorous and aggressive at the same time, as it "makes a potentially negative statement about the recipient, but is framed as humor or play" (Alberts, Kellar-Guenther, & Corman, 1996, p. 337). Thus, the receiver is left to decide, based primarily on the prior relationship to the teaser (Alberts et al., 1996), whether

> the message is primarily a tension-relieving mood lightener or a lightly disguised critique. (Meyer 328)

Meyer describes a tease as a joke that can be taken either as a humorously critical form of bonding or as a personal dig veiled in humor. Teases—like every form of humor—rely a great deal on the context in which they exist. In this case, the microaffirmation of my brother's playful nickname for me could just as easily have been taken as a microaggression that dismissed or poked fun at my identity. However, I knew my brother. I watched him learn and grow and seriously take into consideration everything I talked to him about regarding gender, LGBTQ+ issues, feminism, and social justice. I saw him realize that our experiences of the world were different, and be willing to take me at my word of how I lived my life. I found that talking to him often gave me a different perspective as well, challenging me to understand how he saw the world and realize my own blind spots. Therefore, when he called me Gonzo, I trusted him. I felt confident that, after all the work he had put in to learn about me and respect my views, and after everything I had come to learn about the kind of man he was, he wouldn't ridicule a sincere and difficult expression of my identity. Just as a Theremin reacts not only to the hands that play it, but the rest of its environment as well, so our sense of self depends not only on the people we interact with, but on the context surrounding that interaction. In this case, my previous relationship with my brother caused me to take this joke as an affectionate rather than passive-aggressive quip.

The "Gonzo" reference may be the first joke my brother made about my identity, but it certainly wasn't the last. He also adopted a term that I had begun using myself as a form of teasing: he began to call me a goblin. The term was one I found validating due to my ability to use it to divorce myself from traditional notions of human gender. For me, it put the focus on my

idiosyncratic and sometimes goofy nature, the strange faces I made and my periodic social gaffs. It reminded me that I didn't have to be broadly socially or sexually appealing—after all, goblins aren't terribly well-known for attractiveness or social graces. Months after I began using the term, I also realized that a children's book called *Goblin Heart* was one of the first trans narratives I'd seen in media.

I first encountered it in high school at a street fair in Troy, New York, entitled "Queen Mab's Enchanted City." For a day, Troy's River Street transformed into a kaleidoscopic wonderland combining faerie and steampunk aesthetics. Vendors sold jewelry, costumes, candles, and homemade soaps along the pavement, and patrons were encouraged to dress up in their best fairy wings or Victorian-inspired wear. At one booth, we found an individual selling a self-published children's story called *Goblin Heart.* The author explained to us that it was designed to teach children about trans and gender-nonconforming people, and I was struck by his decision to use no gendered pronouns in the text, referring to each individual only by their name. I was surprised to discover that I wanted to be able to categorize the characters by gender, and that his refusal to use pronouns frustrated this desire. My mother bought the book for some younger friend or relative, but I quickly stole it away to read. The story's protagonist was an individual named Julep, who lived in a society populated by fairies and goblins. Fairies grew wings and tended to the leaves of the tree, while goblins grew claws and dug around the roots. Julep was born as a fairy, but felt like a goblin. Julep asked to be assigned to the same work as the other goblins. Eventually, Julep made a pair of gauntlets with claws to do the work the other goblins did as efficiently. Julep is accepted by the clan, and begins to sell these invented claws to other, similar individuals. At the story's end, Julep meets a young goblin who feels like a fairy, and agrees to make this individual a pair of wings. The story isn't exactly a revolutionary trans

narrative—after all, children's books rarely provide the most nuanced critiques of society, nor should they have to—but it's the sort of thing that offers just a slight pushback against transphobia in the world, and that can make all the difference. After all, perhaps others would read the book and realize, just as I had with the book's treatment of pronouns, that they had some biases they needed to question.

My brother adapted the term "goblin" to replace instances when he previously might have referred to me as a woman. For example, whereas before he would have remarked on my carrying something heavy as being "a strong, independent woman who don't need no man," he began to call me "a strong, independent *goblin* who don't need no man." After all, the two words scanned the same, and it was a shorthand way to reference both my feminism and my gender all in one go. He's started using it so much, in fact, that both he and his girlfriend have started sending me comics, pictures, and artwork associated with goblins whenever they see it. It's a powerful microaffirmation because it feels like them saying "I recognize who you are and how you'd like to be referred to." Even my mother has started using it, although it took her a little longer.

I made up my mind to come out to my mother as nonbinary over the fall break of my junior year of college. I knew I couldn't hide it forever, and I didn't want to continue concealing an important part of my identity from the most important person in my life. I tried to come out during that break, I really did—but somehow I kept putting it off, telling myself the timing just wasn't right. The day my father was supposed to take me back to school, I was so anxious about not being able to have that conversation with my mother that I threw up. The only other time I'd ever had that sort of anxiety reaction was Election Night, 2016. Hopefully that gives you some idea of the stress this was inducing.

I wasn't afraid that my mother would lash out or turn me out of the house. I was a little worried she would be doubtful of my identity, labeling it as some sort of phase brought on by my college environment rather than a true expression of myself. Mostly, though, I was afraid that by coming out, I would hurt her. I was afraid that she would worry she'd done something wrong, or that she should have seen it sooner, or that she would feel guilty for not being able to support me earlier, even though these things would have been impossible as I was barely conscious of my transness for a large portion of my childhood. I put off saying anything as long as I could. There were so many times over various breaks that I considered doing it, but I never had the courage. But when I realized I was definitely interested in medical transition, and wanted it sooner rather than later, I knew I'd need her help. Things like that require doctors' appointments and insurance coverage, and, more importantly, my transition would involve decisions I knew I had to talk over with her, because that's how I've made almost every major decision in my life.

So as we approached my college campus, feeling sick to my stomach and barely able to breathe, I asked, "Hey Mum, could I talk to you about something?"

She replied, "Of course." We turned off the car stereo, leaving silence to hang heavy in the air as I prepared myself.

Finally, I began. "So the thing is, I've been thinking about it for a while, and I've sort of started identifying as nonbinary."

For a moment she seemed almost frozen, staring straight ahead. Her voice was carefully measured and emotionless as she asked, "Okay, so what does nonbinary mean for you?"

"Um, for me it means I don't really identify as male or female, like I'm something else outside of the binary."

That's when she started tearing up.

"Are you okay?" I asked. She nodded.

"Are you sure?" She nodded again.

"Now I know why you were always so between the worlds," she told me, her voice breaking.

"You'll make me cry too," I said, tears already stinging my eyes. I wanted to ask her what she'd meant, but I also felt like I knew.

We both sniffled and wiped our eyes, and then we talked. She held out her hand, and I clutched it tightly as we worked through one of the most difficult discussions we've ever had.

"I can't imagine how hard it's been for you to feel like this," she told me. I can't help but wonder if there's a tinge of self-recrimination of her voice, wondering if there was something else she could have done to support me. More than anything, I want her to know that she did a great job raising me, and that I didn't expect her to know about this sort of thing. After all, she'd come from a generation in which trans people were discussed mostly as caricatures and punch lines, and in which nonbinary identities were hardly acknowledged at all.

"It's okay," I said—a woefully inadequate response to convey everything I wanted to say. "I've got a really good support network at school."

She sniffed, and we pulled ourselves together a little. "Does your brother know?"

"Yeah, I told him over the summer. That's actually why he started calling me Gonzo—cause I'm a whatever!"

She chuckled at the reference. "Leave it to your brother…."

I was grateful for my mother's understanding, but still a little unsure of how she felt until the following winter. It was my twenty-first birthday, and she came into my bedroom early, just as I was waking up.

"Happy birthday, sweetie," she said, handing me a small package wrapped in ocean-themed wrapping paper. "We're going to do presents later, but I wanted to give you this one now."

I tore open the paper, and a tan piece of spandex fell into my lap. It was the new chest binder I'd asked for—an undergarment commonly used by trans and nonbinary people that compresses the chests of afab people to give them a more masculine appearance. This one was a half-tank, unlike the full-tank I already had, which was uncomfortably hot.

My mother explained, "I wanted to give it to you now so you wouldn't have to answer any awkward questions about it."

This was a crucial microaffirmation for me for two reasons: firstly, it showed that my mother was willing to support me and help me access resources I needed to feel comfortable in my own body. Secondly, she made sure to give the binder to me in private, which protected me from questions that would have been difficult to answer from people I was not yet out to. Subsequently, my mother has been one of my most consistent supporters, particularly when it comes to clothes, whether that meant helping me figure out my size in men's pants or buying me my first men's blazer.

My mother's support through buying me a binder is clearly an example of an intentional and purposeful microaffirmation. However, several incidents I've discussed so far raise an interesting question about microaffirmations: do they have to be purposeful? When I spoke to

Val, a nonbinary freshman at my college, they ascribed particular meaning to microaffirmations by nonbinary people because they know what other nonbinary people are going through. On the other hand, microaggressions, from which my theory of microaffirmations was based, are very often unintentional. Additionally, several incidents I've recorded, particularly when it comes to cisgender friends and family members, involve unintentionally validating statements and actions, or actions that validate far more than the speaker intended. My brother, for example, expressed surprise at how much his "Gonzo" comments had impacted me, as to him they had merely seemed like a spur-of-the-moment, tension-diffusing quip. One of my best friends, Sam, who is also cisgender, expressed similar surprise. Shortly after I changed my name, I realized that Sam had begun to yell *"Haunt!"* in the exact same faux-exasperated tone she had previously used when using my birth name. When I pointed it out to her, she said she hadn't even realized it was something she did. While it may seem small, for me, it represented a sort of continuity, as though she were acknowledging that my new name were just as real and valid as my birth name, and that the revelation of my new name had not significantly impacted our friendship.

Is it possible for an interaction to count as a microaffirmation if the speaker has no idea what they're validating? To me, it's dependent on a mixture of intention and reception. In my interview with Val, for example, they described an interaction they found validating in which the others involved were likely unaware that Val was nonbinary. While taking public transportation, a young girl traveling with her mother looked at Val and asked, "Is that a boy or is that a girl?" Val explained, "Her mom looked at me and like, apologized, she was like, "I'm so sorry," and I was like, "no, no, it's perfectly fine!" For Val, knowing that they were able to generate gender confusion was validating, even though the girl who spoke to them likely had no idea it would be. Experiences such as this suggest that microaffirmations can be unintentional—after all, two

people do not necessarily experience the same conversation in the same way. However, I will not go so far as to suggest that any interaction that is validating in any way should be counted as a microaffirmation due to a strange subset of interactions that are intended to have the exact opposite effect; for example, transmasculine friends have optimistically stated that when the men screaming at them from car windows called them "faggot," at least they were validating their masculinity. Although trans and nonbinary people may reclaim a degree of validation from such comments, we cannot ignore that, in contrast to the previous example of the little girl's questions, these interactions are not intended to be positive or even neutral, but rather outright malicious. Even to read these statements as positive requires an intentional act of inverting their meaning as a form of trans resistance. I would argue that such interactions would be better analyzed through a separate term altogether—perhaps as "aggression inversions," to highlight the work of reclamation done by trans and nonbinary people to defy the speaker's intentions.

Last chapter, we discussed humor between nonbinary individuals. However, as we've already seen with my brother, humor between nonbinary individuals and cisgender friends and family can also be a crucial form of microaffirmation. Fine and Wood note that "Because of jokes' often tendentious nature—the fact that jokework often treads on topics that societies feel are too sensitive to be treated seriously—jokes have a delicate politics" (301). That is, jokes can often be used to address difficult ideas that we struggle to talk about in other ways. However, as we discussed before with teasing, this has positives and negatives to it. After all, someone could use jokes about sensitive topics to form a bond between different people or groups of people. On the other hand, however, the idea of "only joking" can too easily be used to disguise offensive ideas and rhetoric, especially in these days of Internet trolls and the rise of the alt-right online.

Tara shared a dynamic they experienced with a group of mostly cisgender friends in Japan that managed to toe the line and provide affirmation rather than invalidation:

> "Chase and Reed would make jokes about being from the South. […] What they did do was the like, sarcastically sounding like Bible thumpers. They would put on the accent and say random things […] and it would be like, some random-ass homophobic stuff, but of course it was all like, within that realm of humor, and… you know, stuff like, "Well I don't think two gays should be touching hands in public, it's oppressing us!""

This type of joking relies heavily on the pre-existing relationship between the individuals involved, which "permits speakers to say things that they "don't really mean," distancing themselves from the implication of the jocular remarks as a "truly held" belief" (Wood & Fine 306). If Tara knew these individuals less well, they might feel some trepidation about this type of humor, perhaps fearing that these statements did reflect some truth of their feelings. However, as it was, they felt comfortable joining in by:

> "campily taking the role of, you know, the aggressive tran that's like, "You see, I think it would be so much better if y'all just turned trans right now" […] And then they were just like, "You see? It's the trans agenda in action! This is what we've been warning our fellow straights about!" So they would play along with the humor after a fashion, but they would always do it like, within the role of being straight people."

In this way, while the humor may have involved parroting exaggerated versions of homophobic or transphobic attacks, Chase and Reed managed to place stereotypes about their own demographics at the center of their humor, while allowing Tara to take the lead on making jokes that referred to transness. Because of this, I would argue that this sort of teasing falls into a category "that, rather than stigmatize or denigrate a targeted group, recognize the group's inclusion as part of civil society" (Fine & Wood 308). That is, rather than alienating Tara or making them feel excluded, the fact that these jokes existed within a framework of people

making fun of themselves reaffirmed Tara's inclusion in the group, and their nonbinary identity as something worth joking about; they did not consider it something embarrassing, tragic, or in other ways beyond the reach of humor. To continue our Theremin analogy, they did not wave their hands around the antennae, hoping to get lucky and strike a note that sounded good—instead, they essentially did the work of plugging in an amplifier that allowed Tara's voice to be heard on their own terms. This idea, of the voice, humor, and gender of one's own terms, is crucial to the ways in which cisgender individuals provide validation.

In fifth grade, I began learning to play the violin. My parents brought me to a tiny and fiercely talented older woman who tutored me every other week. One of her first actions was to place a shiny, metallic smiley-face sticker on the bridge of my violin, right where my first finger was supposed to be. The idea, of course, was that I could use that sticker as a starting point. I always knew where to put my first finger, which made it much easier to determine where all the other fingers were supposed to go. If I took my hand off the strings or shifted position, or fumbled with the instrument in the way all new musicians do, I knew there was always one note I could play clear and true—at least, as clear and true as any 10-year-old novice.

As I fiddled around with a Theremin in an overheated practice room in the basement of my college's music building, I couldn't help but wish for some marker to show me at least one good note I could hit. A Theremin, however, has no keys, no stops, no frets, no strings to section off with stickers. What's more, there is no possibility for standardization. You see, as I mentioned before, the Theremin reacts to anything or anyone that comes within range—and it reacts to everything differently. It must be tuned specifically to its space and its player, every time it is used. No two people or spaces will have the exact same frequency with the Theremin. I was struck, as I played, by how difficult it was to find my way to any clear note, how just

standing a few inches closer or farther away could change my entire relationship to the instrument. For most of my life, I had believed that gender was like a violin—you might wander away from your first state for a while, but you could always find your way back, and there were only so many possible permutations. No matter what, you were always bound to the structure of the instrument—itself carefully crafted by human hands for an optimal look and feel, and to satisfy some rule of what we felt was acceptable music. Embracing my nonbinary meant that my gender became much more like a Theremin: there were no rules, no starting point or clear marker, and no way to find my way back if I wandered away. Unlike the violin, there were no standard positions or hand gestures that were absolutely required for "proper" playing, and what worked for one person might not work for another. It became something profoundly personal and unique to each individual, and something with infinite possibilities. It offered so many exciting ideas, and yet was often incredibly difficult to muddle through. It was confusing, and often counter-intuitive to what I had been taught.

For centuries, Western colonialist societies have poured their efforts into constructing very particular sorts of instruments. They failed to consider the possibility of other sorts of instruments even existing. Gender is just as constructed as a violin or a piano—shaped by human hands into a specific form and concept. To further the analogy, we regard musical notes as something intrinsic, natural, and intuitive, but these too are constructed. We had to decide that a standard A note was going to be 440 hertz. It hasn't always been so, and there isn't necessarily a reason for it to be this way. As Leslie Feinberg remarked, "simplistic and rigid gender codes are neither eternal nor natural. They are changing social concepts. […] The problem is that the many people who don't fit these narrow social constraints run a gamut of harassment and violence" (Feinberg 205). Each of us has a role in upholding the "social constraints" Feinberg describes,

and each of us can choose to reject them. This is one of the most vital ways in which transgender and nonbinary individuals rely on cisgender people—to help normalize and explore gender and how it can be expanded. They can do this, in part, through one of the most well-known forms of microaffirmations today: the use and maintenance of pronouns.

Pronouns are perhaps one of the best-known issues of the nonbinary community. After all, pronouns in English are heavily gendered, so some nonbinary people prefer to use gender-neutral pronouns rather than "he" or "she." Others may ask to be referred to by a different binary pronoun, for example, being referred to as "she" instead of "he." It is important to note that the social role of pronouns used by a nonbinary person can be a little different from those used by cisgender individuals. Most cisgender people, after all, rarely seem to contemplate their own pronouns. They are simply words that have been arbitrarily assigned to them. We rarely even consider how we assign pronouns to people, or the biases present in how we do so. In a single moment, we assign someone a gender, then use whatever pronoun we feel is correct based on that assumption. While these simple, two- or three-letter words may not seem worth all the trouble they've caused at first, it's important to remember that using a gendered pronoun essentially says "I know what gender you are based on the way you look, and my perception of that is more important than the way you identify yourself." Some people would say, "Who cares? It's just a word." However, language has power, and when society in general has a tendency to dismiss your identity, the words you choose for yourself become even more important. Leslie Feinberg noted that the ability to choose what words describe us is of particular importance to the trans community, since historically we have been labelled by society with pejorative terms that we had no hand in choosing. Zie argues:

> We didn't choose these words. They don't fit all of us. It's hard to fight an oppression without a name connoting pride, a language that honors us. […] Within our community is a diverse group of people who define ourselves in many different ways. Transgendered people are demanding the right to choose our own self-definitions. (206)

Using gender-neutral pronouns shows that you recognize me as something other than male or female, that you understand that I fall outside the binary, and, perhaps most importantly, that you are willing to listen to what I tell you I need. Conversely, being persistently misgendered—when someone uses incorrect pronouns to refer to me—can be very invalidating. On occasion, cisgender people make the argument that *they've* been misgendered before, and they didn't find it terribly damaging, so why should it be different for trans and nonbinary people? I would argue that the two are completely different phenomena. I've already discussed how my pronouns feel more directly linked to my sense of self as a nonbinary person, whereas for cis people they often seem to be mere grammatical conveniences. Additionally, when someone misgenders a cis person, if the cis person points out their mistake the other will generally apologize and be absolutely mortified at their blunder. Moreover, everything else in that person's life generally works to confirm their gender. They know what gender they are, society knows what gender they are, and being misgendered is a fairly rare phenomenon. Nonbinary people, however, are often told that our genders do not exist. My own sense of my gender is frequently invalidated by society at large as well as by the limitations of the English language, which makes asserting the language I use for myself even more important.

A crucial act of microaffirmation with regards to pronouns involves simply putting the needs and comfort of a nonbinary person first. Tara shared an anecdote about taking a class in which they wrote their pronouns on a survey they took on the first day but did not verbally announce them to the class. Several weeks later, the professor inadvertently misgendered them,

then pulled them aside after class to apologize and clarify how Tara wished for their pronouns to be handled during class—for example, whether Tara wanted them to correct others who used the wrong pronouns in class. Affirmations such as this recognize our agency and our right to choose who knows about our identity and when. Additionally, the professor's willingness to correct others reflects a crucial aspect of allyship towards trans and nonbinary people: being willing to act as our advocate when we are uncomfortable speaking up. One of the most valuable forms of allyship I have seen from my friends has been the creation of a culture of gentle correction when it comes to pronouns. This means that we've all agreed to correct each other if someone makes a mistake about another group member's pronouns. For example, if someone refers to me as "she," the rest of the group will respond with some variation on, "it's they," allowing the speaker to correct themselves with minimal fuss. This not only serves as a reminder should anyone forget someone's pronouns, but it also saves the individual who has been misgendered from having to speak up for themselves, since they can feels secure in the knowledge that their friends will speak up for them.

Pronouns can be an important source of validation, as they allow people to choose how they wish to be referred to. However, it's not the only form of linguistic transition a nonbinary person may choose to go through. In addition to changing pronouns and descriptors—such as Val's preference for compliments like "handsome" that validate their masculinity, discussed in the first chapter—trans and nonbinary individuals may also choose to change their name. A wide variety of factors go into this choice, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Cyborgs, Monsters, and Other Imperfect Humans

In the previous chapters, I've discussed the idea of my tattoo as an inscription—one of my own choosing, to combat the inscriptions impressed on me by assumptions about my gender. Its use of the transgender symbol was a kind of reminder to myself and others of who I was, and how my identity was important to me. The rose and wings tied into concepts of the Gothic and monstrosity that were crucial to my own identity formation. However, it's not the only important example of an inscription I chose myself. Another one was my name.

Evren, Sev, Seraph… I considered all of those as possibilities. Of course, not every trans person decides to change their name. I spent quite a bit of time debating whether I wanted to keep my birth name or not. However, I eventually realized that it was the right choice for me. Most of the names I considered were unusual, at least in the United States. Part of this was due to my desire to find a name that's androgynous, as I believed that people were less likely to identify a name they've never heard before with a particular gender. I compiled a list on my phone of dozens of names, carefully selected from a name website I've used frequently in the past to name my own fictional characters. Given how much time I've invested in naming imaginary people, I was surprised at how difficult I found the task of naming myself. All I could think of was the pressure to find a name that perfectly encapsulated who I felt I was, and the fear that any name I chose for myself would seem silly or trivial.

Sometimes I found myself whispering names to myself in the darkness of my dorm room as I struggled to sleep, imagining what it would feel like for someone to address me by those names. One night in October of this year, I lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, which was obscured by a large swath of fabric covered in a pattern of haunted houses silhouetted in the light of the full moon. *Haunting* came into my head, perhaps coaxed there by the approaching

Halloween season. *Haunt* for short. It's a name that would be mine and mine alone. I pictured looking at myself through someone else's eyes, looking at *Haunting's* back, then calling, "Hey, Haunt!" I pictured Haunting turning to answer a question, confident in possession of my new name. It was a name I couldn't picture myself having, but one I could picture for the type of person I wanted to be, and that seemed like a good start.

There was, of course, still the fear that others would find the name strange or silly. I guarded it like a secret for several weeks, held close to my chest like a precious jewel all my own. While no one else knew, there was endless potential and hope for the name's future. When I told anyone, I would have to deal with the reality of their reactions.

As it turned out, I needn't have worried—at least about the first people I told. I soon realized that I needed to push myself to tell other people. After all, I'd never know if I liked being called Haunt if I never asked others to use it. My anxiety and perfectionism wanted me to keep it to myself until I was absolutely sure it was the name I wanted to keep. On the other hand, a small voice in my head kept reminding me of the advice I'd read on a number of trans blogs: it's okay to experiment in order to find out what makes you feel validated. So, I asked a few friends via text to call me Haunt. The first response was from my friend Ace—their words meant even more to me since they had chosen their own name during the time that I had known them. They simply replied, "Sounds great!! I'll use it!! Also love the name."

Perhaps one of the greatest microaffirmations I experienced with regards to my name is how quickly the people around me seemed to adapt to it. Professors who had known me for three years under my birth name switched quickly once I introduced myself as Haunt. Some reached out to ask which name I wanted to use on various forms of official documentation. Friends and

even acquaintances quickly adjusted to the change, and anyone who slipped up apologized swiftly and corrected themselves.

This validation from others was naturally important to me, as it affirmed my choice of this unusual name. However, the name itself represented an important way in which I validated myself. Despite the difficulties inherent in describing gender, I have always sought language as a way of understanding the world, and this was no different. It did, however, pose some unique challenges. Some words I've used to describe myself initially seem to have nothing to do with gender—words like "purple," "goblin," or "queer space pirate." I've been part of workshops that asked us to describe our gender as weather patterns, textures, or houses. I have jokingly described my gender as "a trash fire" and shared Internet memes with my friends, dramatically announcing, "That's it—this is my gender now." For me, capturing a sense of my gender is a serious and often frustrating pursuit. However, it's also an irreverent journey, and one that is often playful even as it acknowledges the many ways in which nonbinary people face marginalization for these explorations.

With very little to act as a framework for talking about gender outside the concepts of masculine and feminine, we must often create our own language to describe ourselves. Sometimes this takes the form of new labels for genders, from umbrella terms like "nonbinary" and "genderqueer" to more specific names like "ambigender" and "genderfluid." Other times, it results in specific words or phrases that somehow seem to encapsulate a feeling related to gender that we feel is important to express. For me, one such term is "queer Gothic monstrosity." I first began using it almost as a joke, but soon realized it reflected my own idea of myself quite well. I discovered the term when doing research for an English paper. In studies of literature, it refers to the queer-coded characters that show up in Gothic narratives, often as some sort of monster,

abomination, or thing outside nature, with all the simultaneous revulsion and attraction that goes along with it in such stories. It's a character type I've always identified with, usually in the form of male villains or side characters I thought were more interesting than the hero. It was only later that I realized part of the reason I found these characters so intriguing was precisely because villains are so often queer-coded. According to Ardel Thomas, who has analyzed a number of Gothic texts through this lens, "'Gothic' and 'queer' are aligned in that they both transgress boundaries and occupy liminal spaces, and in so doing, they each consistently interrogate ideas of what is 'respectable' and what is 'normal'" (Thomas 143). The Gothic is often concerned with taking environments and situations that are supposed to be safe and ordinary and making them strange and sinister. There's a lot of potential in there to critique and destabilize systems and orders that were previously considered beyond reproach—systems like the gender binary, for example. The "monstrosity" part of this label goes back to a certain sort of trans-humanism I've seen in myself and other nonbinary folks. For me, it ties into the idea of transcending binary concepts of human gender by becoming something other. And while it may seem like a strange idea, it's certainly not new to the trans community. Susan Stryker utilized it in 1993 with a conference performance piece that would become "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix." In this powerful piece, Stryker asserts:

> The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (245)

Stryker notes that she is not the first person to compare trans people to Frankenstein's monster; in fact, when she wrote this piece, trans communities frequently faced vitriolic attacks from gay, lesbian, and feminist activists and academics who believed trans people to be, quite literally, monstrosities[4]. However, Stryker urges a reclamation of monstrosity, viewing it not with horror, but with pride, and mobilizing transgender rage so that "the stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power" (253).

Thinking of myself as this type of monstrosity is profoundly empowering. The Otherness it implies frees me from living up to society's standards of respectability, allowing me to explore myself and my gender in whatever ways are most comfortable for me. My connection to the term queer Gothic monstrosity may also help explain my current choice of name. "Haunting," after all, has quite a few Gothic implications. Does it refer to the verb form, as in, "to haunt," or the noun, as in, "an incident of haunting"? When people ask for clarification on the name, I've told them, "Haunting, like a haunted house." In some ways, it's easy to view myself as a haunted house of sorts. There's a disconnect between my body and my mind that makes it easier to view myself as a spiritual entity that's merely in temporary possession of this physical vessel. Even so, this apparent connection between my name and my animosity seem to make it clear that this disconnect with my body is still an important part of my identity, however much I may wish to disregard my physical self.

Since I can't simply escape my physical self, however, I have instead found ways to make myself more comfortable in it—I'm ripping up floors and putting up wallpaper in my

[4] Stryker directly references two such academics in her piece—Mary Daly, who described trans people as a "necrophilic invasion" of women's spaces, and Janice Raymond, who stated that the best way to deal with "the problem of transsexuality" would be "by morally mandating it out of existence" (Daley 69-72 and Raymond 172, cited in Stryker 245)

haunted house of a body. The first way I began doing this was through my hair. Since I began college four years ago, my hair has almost always been some sort of vibrant color. For me, the bright colors became a visible sign of difference, a way to signal my difference from the norm while also imposing my will on my own body. There was always something reassuring about the idea that I could purchase a few bottles of bleach and hair dye and radically alter my look overnight. Some changes, however, were a little more hard-won.

My skin is still sticky and hot from sweat as I strip out of my damp clothing, my lungs and legs still aching from my run. I glance into the mirror on the bathroom door and something stops me in my tracks. I stare, transfixed, at my naked reflection in the glass. My hips…. They look smaller somehow, and straighter. Still rounder and wider than I'd like, but they don't seem to bulge out as much. My heart leaps as I wonder if this change could be the result of my frequent four-mile jogs over the past few weeks. I'm cautiously optimistic—after all, what if I'm just imagining the change—but if I'm right, this could be proof that my body *can* change, that I can mold it into the type of vessel I always wished it could be.

I step into the shower, luxuriating in the feeling of the warm water washing the sweat from my skin. I run my hands over my hips and swear I'm not imagining the difference. For the first time in a while, I feel proud of my body—not quite the unconditional love I'm told I should feel for it, but a sense that maybe, just this once, we're on the same team. If I needed any more motivation to stick with my new exercise routine, this is it.

Later that night, I bring it up with my mother, leaning against the door frame in the kitchen as she does the dishes. It's a frequent site of conversation for us, and sometimes a safe place for difficult ones. I cross my arms over my chest and begin, tentatively.

"So… I might be imagining it, but I think my hips have actually gotten smaller since I started working out."

Mum glances at me. "I don't think you're imagining it, I've definitely noticed it too."

"Yay!" I say, quietly and a little awkwardly. I try not to betray how happy her confirmation makes me. "It's really neat, because that's always been an area I kind of struggled with."

My mother knows this; we've discussed it a number of times since I came out to her, sometimes here, sometimes in the car or in my bedroom when she comes in to say good night, sometimes calmly, sometimes with me in tears. She encourages my new exercise routine, knowing it helps with the dysphoria and the anxiety. In future discussions, I begin to wonder if she's hoping this will be enough—that if I can reshape my body with exercise, my desire for top surgery will someday disappear. I know she's worried, but I'm not sure how to bring it up without sounding accusatory, and I don't know how to make her understand why this is so important to me.

And yet, there's still an aspect of this new routine that has less to do with appearance and more to do with the feeling of having a body that can work, and move, and stop being anxious for an hour or two, and improve, and change, and grow stronger. There's pride in watching my pace increase, and in feeling my body as something other than an inconvenience for once. This is tied into more than just my transness. It comes from that in part, of course, but also from the

oppositional relationship it's all too easy to develop when your body just doesn't seem to want to work "right." It's a relationship derived from my dysphoria, but also my anxiety, my depression, and the chronic health issues that have plagued me with migraines, kidney stones, and Celiac, among other things. While I realize that logically there's no actual connection between these things, they all seem to add up into a body that's determined to spite me. Perhaps that's just one more reason why the idea of body-as-haunted-house appeals to me so much, because my body sometimes seems so disconnected from my sense of self—almost as though it's determined to chase me out.

Part of my transition, therefore, is an attempt to make my body more of a home. In her piece *The Cyborg Manifesto,* Donna Haraway discusses the idea that, in the modern era, we are all cyborgs, which to her means a blurring of the boundaries between human and animal, organic and technological, and physical and non-physical (105). "The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense. […] The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (Haraway 105). The cyborg does not require wholeness, and therefore does not need biological origin. In chapter one, we discussed Lynne M. Morgan's *Icons of Life,* which describes the ways in which embryos are represented as "pristine," "perfect" miniature humans, as yet untouched by the world (13). This idea of the cyborg, however, contends that there never was such a state of perfection, and rejects even the idea of unified biological origin represented by the fetus. Because the cyborg refutes this idea of pristine wholeness, it does not fear mutilation or the artificial—both ideas that have been used to criticize or invalidate trans experiences and transitions. We can use this concept of the cyborg to argue that we were never truly whole in the first place, and that we must instead learn to move forward as fragmented beings, in whatever way allows us to do that.

The cyborg clearly has connections to Susan Stryker's transgender rage and the queer Gothic monstrosity. All of these concepts ask us to embrace liminal spaces, the slippage between identities, and the impossibility of wholeness or holiness, and urge us to acknowledge our own fractured selves and embrace them. These may seem merely like high-minded philosophical theories, without any grounding in praxis. However, I have seen the utility of these theories throughout my transition. My tattoo, for example, I've started referring to as my "queer Gothic monstrosity" tattoo. You can almost see those three words reflected in the three facets of the design: "queer" embodied by the transgender symbol, "Gothic" by the rose, a time-honored symbol of both romance and darkness, and "monstrosity" by the bat wings springing away from the center, representing the fearsome creatures of the night. Together they remind me that I am not obligated to abide merely by the inscriptions left on my body at birth, that there is no inherent purity to that supposedly "natural" state, and that what might be regarded as a mutilation of my flesh is in actuality just a representation of the fracturing that characterizes all humans.

Gender studies scholar Ricky Frawley is examining the ways in which things seemingly unrelated to being transgender, such as tattoos, can actually represent important aspects of transition. They call this idea "trans technologies." Frawley points out that medical forms of transition, such as hormone replacement therapy and gender-affirming surgeries, are often highlighted in trans narratives to the exclusion of all else. However, this fails to take into account that some trans people cannot undergo some forms of medical transition, for a variety of reasons. In some cases, trans medical care is heavily gatekept, making it difficult for everyone who needs or wants it to gain approval for these procedures. Some people may also not be able to afford forms of medical transition. Additionally, some people have medical conditions that make medical transition risky or impossible. Frawley urges a shift to examining both medical transition

and non-medical forms of transition and self-affirmation—things which they believe "make trans lives more livable."

Of course, while there are definitely overlaps between Frawley's "trans technologies" and Haraway's cyborg, Frawley isn't necessarily referring to high-tech gadgets. Instead, they're going back to the idea of technology as an art, craft, or skill. A technology, to them, could just be "using crafts in a skillful way" (Frawley). This expansive definition allows them to include art forms like writing, drawing, or dance, all of which can be used as forms of self-validation. They also discuss "technologies of the body," from tattoos and piercings to makeup to specific items of clothing. Drag, as well, is a trans technology, because it "hacks the linearity of gender transition"—that is, it disrupts the way we believe transitions are "supposed" to happen, and allows performers to appear as any gender or combination of genders and presentations.

Some nonbinary people do find validation in medical transition, of course. Journalist Bob Roehr spoke with doctors at clinics in the United States that focus on transgender care, to see what medical transition looks like today:

> "Not everybody identifies with the binary or really wants hormones," Celenza explains. "I have quite a few patients who identify as non-binary and they actually don't want hormones; that is part of their identity and part of how they dress and present themselves. "I also have some patients that do request hormones, who want peace with their body. It is definitely a spectrum that we are seeing more and more of." (Roehr 2)

Another doctor commented, "we see people who identify as trans masculine but they don't identify as men. They are just more on the masculine side of the spectrum and have a lot of dysphoria about their chest. They want to have top surgery but don't necessarily want the bottom" (Roehr 2).

To understand the implications of this, we must first talk a little bit about the group of medical procedures and treatments referred to under the umbrella term of "medical transition." One common aspect of medical transition is hormone replacement therapy, sometimes referred to by the acronym HRT. HRT is the use of specific hormones to alter one's physical appearance. Amab trans and nonbinary people may choose to take "feminizing" hormones like estrogen, while afab trans and nonbinary people may take "masculinizing" hormones like testosterone. These hormones help reshape the body in certain ways—people who take estrogen may notice softer skin, breast growth, loss of muscle mass, and redistribution of fat towards their hips and buttocks, among other things. Those who take testosterone may acquire thicker body hair, a deeper voice, thicker skin, greater ease in building muscle, and a redistribution of fat towards their stomach.

Another common form of medical transition is what's commonly called "top" and "bottom" surgery. Top surgery seems to be a term mostly used by afab trans people who wish to get a mastectomy to remove their breasts and reconstruct their chest in a more masculine form. Amab trans people on hormones usually grow their own breasts, but they may also opt for top surgery by getting breast augmentations. Bottom surgery refers to either vaginoplasty or phalloplasty—procedures which are collectively referred to as gender affirmation surgery or genital reconstruction surgery, or sometimes genital reassignment surgery. While these two procedures are usually what's imagined when discussing surgical aspects of medical transition, they are certainly not the only forms of surgery a trans or nonbinary person might undergo to help themselves feel affirmed in their gender. Some people may opt for facial feminization surgery, while others might choose to get liposuction to reduce the size of their hips.

It's important to acknowledge the evidence Bob Roehr collected from transgender clinic doctors because of the way transition narratives have typically been presented in popular culture. As Ricky Frawley notes, there is usually a heavy focus on medical aspects of transition to begin with. Additionally, trans narratives that have gained popularity in recent years, such as Janet Mock's memoir *Redefining Realness,* show a similar, linear idea of transition. Mock, for example, describes sharing estrogen pills with a fellow trans girl as a teenager, then later undergoing bottom surgery in Thailand. This type of story—undergoing hormones, then surgeries—has become the de facto transition narrative. It's also much more common to see women's transition narratives. Of course, there's nothing wrong with Mock's transition happening in this manner, or with her desire to share her personal story. However, the danger lies when Mock's transition narrative—or anyone's, for that matter—becomes the standard by which we measure the validity of all transition narratives. Many trans scholars, including Dean Spade, have criticized the ways in which trans individuals are expected to conform to a particular narrative in order to access medical transition. Spade uses Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to analyze the problems with such a situation. According to Foucault, we construct norms about how individuals should behave, by repeating actions and behaviors deemed to be normative and rigidly policing anyone who does not conform to these standards. The more we enforce these norms, the more incentive people have to obey them to avoid punishment, and the more they seem natural and correct. Spade proposes that, in a similar manner, the medical field uses gender norms and a rigid standard for trans narratives to control who can access gender-affirming care (318). He writes:

> Such an analysis requires seeing the problem not as fundamentally lying in the project of gender change or body alteration, but in how the medical regime permits only the production of gender-normative altered bodies, and seeks to screen out alterations that

> are resistant to a dichotomized, naturalized view of gender. An alternative starting point for a critique of the invention and regulation of transsexualism is a desire for a deregulation of gender expression and the promotion of self-determination of gender and sexual expression, including the elimination of institutional incentives to perform normative gender and sexual identities and behaviors. This understanding suggests that the problem with the invention of transsexualism is the limits it places on body alteration, not its participation in the performance of body alteration. (319)

Spade discusses the ways in which trans narratives have been policed by medical institutions to reinforce the idea of normative gender roles. In the previous iteration of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the DSM-IV, the condition listed in reference to transgender individuals was not gender dysphoria, but gender identity disorder (Spade 320). One prominent symptom for gender identity disorder, or GID, was described as "childhood participation in stereotypically gender inappropriate behavior" (Spade 320). This could include girls refusing to wear dresses and engaging in "roughhousing" and other masculine pursuits, and boys who enjoyed dolls, drawing beautiful women, or television programs about female characters. The diagnosis of GID allowed medical professionals to acknowledge that transgender people exist while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that two binary, "natural" genders exist, and that a clear division can be drawn between the two. Of course, in order to preserve this binary system, medical professionals could only acknowledge transgender individuals who truly acted like the gender they identified as. Therefore, if trans individuals did not fulfill the stereotypes of their gender well enough, they could be—and frequently were—denied access to medical transition (Spade 322).

This system automatically forecloses on the possibility of nonbinary genders, or of nonbinary concepts of transition. Take Val, an afab, Latinx, nonbinary individual I interviewed

for this project, for instance. Their stated wish was to achieve a status where their gender became perfectly inscrutable, and people were completely unable to identify them as either male or female. Under the restrictive standards of the DSM-IV, this would be considered unacceptable, because Val refuses to neatly move from one normatively-produced binary gender to the other. Of course, nonbinary individuals are not the only ones challenging the ways in which transition narratives are constructed in the medical community. The doctors Roehr interviewed noted that even binary trans people often elect to only undergo certain procedures for medical transition (Roehr 2). This shift is crucial because it allows more people to access forms of medical transition that they desire without having to present a version of their transness that the medical community deems acceptable.

I encountered first-hand the power and validation of such an experience when I decided to begin taking testosterone. I first began the process in upstate New York, but after a few false-starts due to my returning to college in Pennsylvania and a prescription for testosterone patches that would have cost me three hundred dollars to fill, I eventually wound up seeking testosterone from a Planned Parenthood in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, about 20 minutes from my school. When I walked into their office, my brain a roiling mass of anxiety and the feeling that if I wasn't able to start testosterone soon I would no longer be able to function, the first thing I was struck by was the inviting feel of the office. The walls were a pleasant cream color, and the floors a warm, golden wood. Photos of happy couples—of all genders and races—hung on the walls, and there was a trans pride flag sticker stuck to the door, a reassuring sight that seemed to welcome me in immediately. The receptionist had me fill out a brief form, and when she took the rest of my information she was sure to ask for my preferred name and pronouns. It was a level of cultural

competency that I had not come to expect from medical professionals—or from any professionals, really.

A brusque, older nurse took my vitals and asked a few questions about medical history. With that out of the way, she told me, "You have a choice to make. You'll have to come back in a week for your injection training, but you can either get your first shot today from the clinician, or you can do your first one next Monday yourself. You don't have to decide right now." My heart leapt. After some of the horror stories I'd heard, I had been terrified that one wrong move might disqualify me. I know a great deal of the positivity of my experience was due to the fact that Planned Parenthood operates by a standard of informed consent—that is, they tell you the effects the hormones will likely have on your body and the possible side effects, and if you understand and agree that this is what you want, they'll give you the hormones. They assume you've thought fairly critically about whether or not you want to radically change your appearance and the chemicals in your body, and are the best person to make decisions about that choice. As someone who had wrestled for months with whether I even wanted to begin testosterone before I made my first appointment, I appreciated that.

After speaking with the nurse, they sent me to chat for a few minutes with a counselor. He asked about my social support network and whether I was in therapy, while also making it clear that my answers to those questions would not disqualify me from receiving my hormones. I told him about my supportive mother, my wonderful friends, and the fact that my roommate was also a trans man, and had actually driven me to the appointment. The counselor seemed happy to hear that I had so many people in my corner. Finally, I met with the clinician. We discussed dosages, and she asked if I'd like to start that day or in a week. I quietly responded that I wanted to start that day, hoping I didn't sound too eager despite how much I wanted it. She nodded and

carefully narrated each step she took while preparing the syringe and extracting the precious medication from its tiny vial. Then she drove it into my thigh, the entire needle immersed in my skin. It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. I thought to myself, *I could do this.* From where I was sitting, the momentary pain seemed well-worth it.

Taking testosterone has been a powerful form of self-affirmation for me, quite aside from the validation I received from the workers at Planned Parenthood. In a way, the hormone seems to have heightened many of the things I found affirmation in before. I've noticed that, when I go to the gym now, I tend to sweat more, and there's a distinct, masculine smell on me that goes beyond just the deodorant working overtime. It has allowed me to share even more experiences with my fellow transmasculine friends, as we swap stories about how long we've been on it, and what effects it's had. My biggest supporters have noticed the change, with my brother commenting that he noticed my voice had deepened during my last radio broadcast.

I've noticed new forms of affirmation since I began taking it, as well. The shot itself is a powerful act of validation, as each injection reminds me that I'm moving one step closer to the person I'm meant to be. I've spent more time than ever singing, tracking my progress by the lowest note I can hit in each song. My voice has become a powerful force for self-affirmation in that regard, and in one unexpected moment, as well. The moment came during a class discussion on the castrati. We had been discussing Bollywood music, the nasal quality of Bollywood singing voices, and how we could see that style mirrored in other musical forms around the world. My professor brought up the castrati as another example of a voice with an unusual timbre not often heard in modern Western music. The castrati are quite an extraordinary group: for several centuries, people engaged in the practice of castrating young boy in the hopes that they would retain a pure, "angelic" soprano voice. If they did, they could earn more wealth and

fame than most other routes available to them, and perhaps even gain a chance to sing in the Papal choir. Their voice is not a woman's voice, however. It has a unique quality that could be counted as androgynous, neither a man's voice nor a woman's. Similarly, the castrati often acquired some feminine traits due to their castration and subsequent lack of testosterone, placing them in a space between male and female. They have been variously interpreted by modern scholars, with some shying away from their bodies and refusing to acknowledge them at all (Freitas 199). Others, like Roland Barthes, eroticize the castrato voice at the same time as they disregard their bodies, seeing the body as "sexless" and the voice as "an incarnation of the phallus" (Freitas 200). For many academics, then, the castrato is an embarrassing secret—a problematic representation of blurred gender lines that's best hidden away and skirted around. It's easy to see some parallels there between the castrati and nonbinary individuals, who are often viewed as similarly problematic or even embarrassing. I had learned about the castrati in previous classes, but something struck me differently that day. Perhaps it was due to the fact that it was several days before I started testosterone, and I had been thinking a lot about my voice. I had always been a soprano, and had delighted in trying to hit the highest notes I could. I knew, however, that as soon as I started testosterone that was liable to change. I felt caught in some space in between, beginning to embrace my own masculinity, but mourning as well for some feminine aspects of myself I was about to leave behind.

There is one extant audio recording of the castrato voice. It was made at a terrible confluence of times—the beginning of recording technology, before the invention of the microphone, requiring singers to project into a large horn that failed to capture the nuance of the voice. It was taken at the tail-end of Alessandro Moreschi's career, as his voice began to crack and fade. Moreschi was known as 'L'Angelo di Roma'—the Angel of Rome (Ravens 187). He

was the last castrato in the Papal choir, retaining tenure after the practice had been effectively banned. Therefore, whenever I listen to it I am always struck by the tragedy of it, with this man well aware he's past his prime, struggling to put on his best performance, possibly knowing this is the last and only chance anyone will have to document his kind. John Rosselli laments, "we cannot hear castrato voices; the few recordings made in the infancy of the gramophone only hint at a sound now lost" (143). As I said, the sadness always struck me, but that day was a little different. I couldn't help but feel a strange kinship with this other soprano man, caught precipitously between male and female, between modern and antiquated, between youth and maturity. In that moment, I made up my mind that I had to move forward with HRT—but I also knew that being a soprano, and striving for those high notes, did not make me any less of a man.

If there is any one thing you take away from this chapter, or from this work, I hope it is this: validation in one's identity can come from unexpected places, and in unexpected ways. Some, like receiving compliments that validate one's gender, can be easily traced back to their source. Others, like being called a goblin or hearing an old recording, can seem bizarre and completely disconnected from one's gender. The most important thing, however, is to listen to yourself, and to those around you, and, once you've discovered what works, to follow that rather than what you or anyone else thinks should work.

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