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girl pee: an autohistoriaⁱ

Taylor Sherritt

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Master of Humanities Project at Wright State University

girl pee: an autohistoriaⁱ

Submitted to the
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By

Taylor Sherritt

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Introduction

“Gender is slippery... it’s nebulous. You can’t hold on to it and find meaning. Gender is an illusion, an illusion we cherish because we think we’ll ultimately find something clear and meaningful. And we don’t, we won’t.” (Bloom 6).

Influenced by queer theory, comic studies, and Gloria Anzaldua’s theorization of *Nepantla*, this project attempts to interrogate causation as an underlying principle of queer narrative and further explore how the need to justify transgender (trans*) existence works to preserve pathological ideologies around the trans* body. Specifically, I acknowledge and resist the common use of tropes such as *“Born in the wrong body”* and *“I’ve always felt like the opposite sex”*, as they are reproduced in and through trans* narratives as methods of justification for trans* existence. I argue that these tropes are etiological and grounded in biological determinism, as they emphasize gendered innateness as reason or cause of trans*existence in contrast to sociological forces (Rohy 25).ⁱⁱ The failure to balance biological *and* sociological factors of gendered existence allows these tropes to become etiological quips that contribute to a binary of biological “rightness” and “wrongness” (natural/unnatural) that maintains trans* experience as a *medical condition*ⁱⁱⁱ and perceived gendered coherence as inherently organic. In other words, the attempt to justify trans* existence with biological causation actually renders itself pathological by refusing to acknowledge the social construction and maintenance of all gender structures and variabilities of human behavior. I argue that these tropes attempt to establish gendered coherence within the queer body by adhering to the “us” versus “them” ideology that permeates hegemonic gender discourse (i.e. men are from mars, women are from venus, etc.). Though these tropes are attempting to make trans* existence intelligible, I suggest

they unintentionally reproduce harmful ideologies of binary opposition (i.e. us versus them) and ultimately “reflect our investment as social subjects in eliminating what’s queer” (Edelman). Here, the desire to eliminate queerness, *to smear it*, is acted out through attempts to define and regulate difference in its relation to sameness (the perceived ordinary) and presents itself as a contradiction—the desire to exclude *is also* the desire to connect, to fit, to make sense. It is within the throws of this contradiction, which this project has been formed.

It is imperative to note here that I do not attempt to discover an overall truth or “authentic” trans* narrative; the very foundation of this project relies on the unassimilable nature of queerness and inherently discards monolithic conceptualizations of being. Resisting the fixity of the self, I question causation rhetoric’s production of trans* embodiment as a coherent identity structure and look toward new avenues of self-narration. Queer-chicana-activist Gloria Anzaldua suggests that identity is “an ongoing story” that “grows out of our interactions, and we strategically reinvent ourselves to accommodate our exchanges” (185). In this way, identity creation can be read as a continuous conversation with our present/past selves, others, and the worlds these selves exist. Anzaldua theorizes the formation of identity as being “in nepantla”^{iv}—a psychological, spiritual, and material space—that is always shifting (Anzaldua 186). According to Anzaldua, nepantla is “a liminal space between the way things had been and an unknown future,” (17). Theorizing this space, Anzaldua suggests that nepantla is where we undergo shifts in perspectives (transformations) that can lead to alternative ways of relating to ourselves and the world or the creation of new worlds/realities (17). A simple reference can be made here, connecting the physical, emotional, and spiritual transformation of trans* existence to being in nepantla. Taking another step further, I suggest that the transformation of how we engage with and rediscover trans* narrative is also a liminal space in which can be perceived as nepantla.

Through detailing my own conversation with trans* becoming, I explore the process of self-making as a gender-nonconforming body within hegemonic binary discourse and practices. I draw specific attention to the rigid, either/or ideologies of gender construction that maintain liminal existence as impossible and thus, invisible. By rewriting myself and my experiences as both/and, this project attempts to dismantle the necessity of oppositional identity formations by disrupting common belief structures and broaden conceptualizations of trans* narrative (Anzaldua 84). Using illustration, I reimagine memories of gendered traumas, blending notions of fantasy with reality as a means to bring the invisible trans* body into a physical, visible space. Through the use of images, I am able to physically reshape my own narrative and further challenge the fixity of identity through a continuous positioning/repositioning of the self. I attempt to blur the lines of ourselves (who I was/who I am) and those around us (us versus them) in order to bring awareness to an unfixed, boundless interpretation of self-understanding and reconceptualize trans* autobiography.

Through the use of theory, personal narrative, and illustration, this project takes on a multimodal structure that reflects what Anzaldua terms *autohistoria-teoria*; an interpersonal form of autobiographical writing that interweaves personal and cultural narratives with self-reflection through the process of storytelling (Anzaldua 242). Through autohistoria, I reconceptualize the gendered traumas of my past, map out the self-narratives that have been molded by hegemonic rhetoric, and rediscover a history of my body and the world it carries through reconstructing a narrative outside of pathological shame. Taking fragmented memories and scenes from my embodied past, I explore the heteronormative spaces that impacted my self-understanding as a child who experienced the internal and external effects of gender non-conformity. I rely on the liminal and inconsistent properties of memory as a bastion of nepantla;

many of these scenes are written outside of linear chronology and do not possess a clear beginning/middle/end. Through illustrating and reshaping the images of my past, I work to my internalized pathology, my shadow, and untangle oppositional ideologies that have positioned my queer body as other.

The Etiology of Trans* narrative

“The queer child appears only in retrospect, never in the present tense, as the past of the [queer] adult whom he or she becomes: ‘I was a [queer] child,’— only after I decide that I was born gay can I know that I ‘always believed’ it” (Rohy 52)

*“Queerness is by definition unassimilable, resistant not only to hegemony—identity, law, the symbolic order, narrative closure—but also to the fixity of its own meaning.” (Valerie Rohy, *Lost Causes*)*

Burdened with a dense archive of psychiatric and clinical diagnosis, trans* literature is rooted in a discourse of disorder that has historically been used to confirm trans* existence as an “inadequate” biological condition (Bloom 4). Contemporary activists and authors have used autobiography as a tool to reclaim the trans* narrative from this pathological framework of medical analysis, allowing the trans* body to be written away from the psychologically unstable object, and instead be read as a living, breathing, human subject (Halberstam 95). Scholar Jay Prosser describes this form of writing as “body narrative,” which allows the trans* body to be

read as “real” through the intimate articulation of embodied experiences (Prosser 101) Here, the process of writing one’s own trans* experience redirects ownership of identity stories from the grasp of cultural containment and oppression, and into the hands of trans* people themselves. According to Foucault, reflective writing aids in the production and maintenance of the self, encouraging an “ongoing assembly and disassembly of subjectivity” that mirrors the discourses that a person has engaged and/or struggled against (Baker 134: Foucault 208). In this way, narrative can be read as a conversation between one’s own embodied experiences and the culture which one’s body exists; exploring transgressive aspects of identity and the discourses that shape and maintain concepts of the self (Anzaldúa 166). Thus, the reflexive, creative process of body narrative allows the trans* author to engage intimately with an internal and external history of the body that is often erased through the lens of cissexual assumption. Here, trans* body narratives can be read as stories of reclamation, rooted in self-enquiry and self-transformation, prompting readers to engage with and question cultural assumptions of gender, sex, and human development. By “exposing the ways in which genders are produced in/by discourse”, trans* narratives have the potential to challenge biological determinist ideologies that maintain binary gender categorizations as innate and consider the sexed body as fixed and unchangeable (Baker 135).

Of course, some queer scholars suggest that autobiographical trans* narratives have the adverse effect, further “rendering their status pathological, depoliticizing identity issues, and enforcing binary notions of gender” through prioritizing medical transition from one perceived social category to another (Alexander 31). The concern here is that a consistent, linear depiction of medically-induced transition narratives may give way to an illusory chronology of self-making—perpetuating heteronormative narrative structures and ways of being—by centering

binary gender as a natural, inevitable signifier of self-growth and progress (Prosser 116). This criticism implies that despite efforts to stray from the pathological, contemporary trans* narratives simply regurgitate internalized narrative structures that immortalize the gender binary and unintentionally maintain trans*bodies as “other”. Through tropes like “*born in the wrong body*” or “*boy trapped in a girl’s body*”, the trans* narrative can appear to centralize the task of justifying trans* causation through binary ideology. At first read as an attempt to counter the effects of biological determinism, these frameworks seem to unknowingly serve to validate the hegemonic gender structures they inherently try to dismantle (Rohy; De Beauvoir). Through the use of “wrong”, an unspoken “right” is dichotomously assumed, maintaining the notion of an appropriate gendered experience, and further encouraging a binary interpretation of trans*experience. The common trope suggests: though I may not have been “born this way”, I was born with the desire to be/ always acted a certain way; consequentially reproducing biological determinist ideologies that attempt to naturalize queer existence without considering the ways in which all notions of gender are culturally reproduced (Rohy 20). By claiming these justifications as authentic experience, trans* narratives can easily misinterpret cultural determinism as biological determinism and further “obscure the ways in which prevailing ideologies shape what we take to be personal experience” (Rohy 48).

In this way, the trans* narrative reveals its own assimilative potential, in that it can unknowingly uphold dominant heteronormative assumptions rather than contest or disrupt them. Thus, maintaining, “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them” (Rohy 4). In her book, *Lost Causes*, Valerie Rohy raises a concern with the relationship between causation and queerness. Specifically, she investigates the etiological foundation of queer narrative (4). Though her emphasis is primarily

focused on the pathological representation of homosexuality, I believe her concern is also applicable to trans* narrative. She argues that what is needed is not a better or more precise etiology, “but a fundamental change in this discourse- a change in and through etiology itself” (4). In order to change the discourse, Rohy suggests that we must embrace the homonormativity of these abject tropes in order to understand them and thus, relinquish their hold on queer narrative altogether. In other words, these tropes can be read as signals of change that “reveal aspects of yourself (shadow) that you do not want to own” and call for us to take action, to reclaim ourselves from their individual and cultural grasp (Anzaldua 132).

Traces of these tropes present themselves in contemporary trans* narratives as methods of self-understanding and social security. In *Gender Queer: A Graphic Memoir*, author Maia Kobabe guides us through the physical and ideological landscapes of eir lived experience with gender non-conformity. Attempting to come to terms with eir own queer existence as nonbinary, Kobabe illustrates a scene in which e is introduced to philosopher Patricia Churchland, whose work details genetic implications of identity formation. Kobabe responds:

[panel 1]: “A huge part of who I am is due to the suite of hormones and neurochemicals present in the womb as my cells developed.”

[panel 2]: “So lady gaga was right—I was born this way.”

[panel 3]: “What a relief.” (203)

Though an innocent depiction of a lived experience, Kobabe’s use of biological determinism serves as a window into how trans* narratives attempt to naturalize queerness without questioning the perceived naturalness of cis-assumption. This claim toward the

biological promotes a dangerous illusion of subjectivity that renders identity as un-socialized or unpenetrated by cultural mores in order to secure the validity of queer experience (Rohy). This perception of trans* experience disregards influence and choice; where as its rhetorical counterpart “born in the wrong body” seems to justify the naturalness of choice. This contradiction of causation is an effect of queer etiology and presents itself in trans* narratives through childhood narratives that “map” or “trace” the lineage of a person’s queerness. Skeptical of the pathological roots of biological determinism, McBee states:

“The idea of being born in the wrong body just feels inherently very shameful. It’s also rooted in medicine; it’s the thing trans people had to say in order to get their hormones. It’s become this cultural expectation that has been passed down in our community. It’s so hard to pull apart how many people made up that story themselves, how much of that is just medical access issues, and how much of it is an oversimplified trope for people who don’t understand what it means to be trans”
(McBee)

Of course, I am aware of the political and institutional implications that implicitly force trans* folx to engage with assimilative rhetoric (i.e. diagnosis of gender dysphoria) in order to gain access to basic human rights, such as personal safety and health care. It is not a secret that trans* people, particularly trans* people of color, are targets of personal and institutional violence on a daily basis across the world; finding the balance between assimilation and authenticity is a contextual survival mechanism (Stryker; Halberstam; Rohy). I acknowledge that the ability to question and analyze trans* narrative structures comes from a position of privilege; I am not attempting to dislodge the significance of existing structures, as I am able to exist as I

do today precisely because of them. The object of my analysis is not to invalidate personal experiences or claim one true “authentic” trans* narrative; the goal is to question the structures of causation in which trans* narratives are reproduced. Though this project discloses the ways in which my trans* body has learned and internalized pathology through day to day language/behaviors, it also traces the connective tissues between self and other; my experiences are not just my own. Like a stone in water, the ripples of our experiences expand and oscillate, touching external realities—the experiences of others— combining to form a wave. As I become aware of the ways I resist pathology, I open myself to acknowledge the ways we have all digested it; the queer and the queer basher alike. In order to heal from a history of pathology, I must engage intimately with individual and collective ties to etiology and re-envision the purpose of trans* narrative. By rerouting the narrative away from the abstract, we shift the perspective around what it means to be and to have a body, allowing new narrative structures to endure and new methods of reading those structures to form.

Theory: Nepantla; reconceptualizing stealth and the in-between

“Nothing is fixed. The pulse of existence, the heart of the universe, is fluid. Identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition, always in nepantla” (Anzaldua 135)

Gender is a cyclical, continuous embodiment of experiences that are constructed through individual and collective social realities; there are as many genders as there are people in the world. Post-structuralist feminists argue this is also true about sex, claiming neither gender or sex

are inherently *natural*, but instead constructed through the available discourse of a particular place and time (Butler, Delphy). Instead of perceiving the two oppositionally—where sex is a fixed container for a fluid gender presentation—sex and gender are read as coexisting entities that are threaded together and *inscribed* with social meaning (Butler 1993). Thus, the human body becomes a social object that receives meaning, “not from their own inherent properties, but from an always emerging complex web of social meanings and contexts” (Zimmer 6). Of course, this is not to say that sex does not exist or to claim that bodies do not matter. Instead, this perspective explores the multidimensional aspects of sex and gender, encouraging the investigation of the various ways we create their meaning through language. This conceptualization has been used to “redefine the body in the face of compulsory gender and sexual normativity” and is most notably seen in contemporary trans* scholarship (Halberstam 75; Zimmer 7).

Judith Halberstam uses “trans*” as a linguistic tool that “modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate in relation to a final form.. the asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis” and, “makes trans* people authors of their own categorization” (Halberstam 75). Thus, trans* is a political and philosophical effort that emphatically rejects the fixity of gender, sex, and identity, blurring the boundaries between the natural and constructed body— not to flatten, or rob the material body of its value, but to exhibit the immense variations of human embodiment (Halberstam 65). Not only is this an attempt to dismantle binary gender categorizations of male/female, but also to disrupt cis/trans opposition by reinterpreting the space *between* genders as the space *beyond* gender classification itself. A rhetorical and aesthetic shift, Halberstam’s use of the asterisk, broadens the physical and metaphorical potentiality of the queer body and absolves the usefulness of dualistic identity structures. Throughout this project, I will

use trans* to draw consistent attention to the vast, multidimensional, intersectional, and transitory realm of trans* embodiment in order to challenge the generalization of queer experience and the essentialist ideologies that attempt to define it.

Despite the idealistic desire to pull away from the gender binary and absolve all opposition, material reality delivers a hard truth; trans* bodies live and breathe inside the binary framework of cissexual assumption. That is, the prevailing expectation that all bodies which appear gender normative are cis-gendered, often rendering the trans* body invisible or inconceivable in both rhetorical and material spaces (Bradford 307). Consequently, trans*bodies both consciously and subconsciously move in and out of “stealth”, a liminal space and/or experience that characterizes a body as intelligible according to binary gender norms (Edelman 4). Stealth can be read as a necessary means of protection from physical and psychological harm in circumstances where visible trans* bodies are not safe, as well as a means to be externally perceived in congruence with internal gender (Leonardi 100). Alternately, stealth has been read in homonormative spaces as a deceptive tactic used to withhold ones “true self” in order to gain cis-privilege (Seidman 92). These particular perspectives can serve as a “double bind”, conceptualizing stealth as “an empowering, yet sometimes oppressive, way of living” (Edelman 4). Rather than a static positionality, I read stealth here as a “discursive practice that navigates a myriad of complex and oppositional ideological positions,” that is, “enacted through embodied modes of doing and being” (Edelman 10). Therefore, trans*bodies navigating this space are required to reconcile with and move across multiple worldviews at once, in full awareness of their internal and external movements across thresholds of gendered experience, in order to engage intelligibly in hegemonic social practices.

Anzaldua describes the movement between contemporary society's worldview and non-ordinary worldviews as a form of traveling across dualistic visions and into the realm of nepantla—a liminal space that, “simultaneously exists and does not exist” (28). Anzaldua describes those willing to traverse this space as *las nepantleras* or “threshold people”, who move between numerous worlds and encompass contested, contradictory belief systems, nepantlera's question hegemonic realities and “break partially away from the cultural trance and binary thinking that locks us into the status quo” (Anzaldua xxxvi). Anzaldua's theorization of nepantla and nepantlera are often used in specific reference to marginalized people of color living among cultural borders, focusing primarily on the ways in which they engage in resistance strategies of survival (Keating; Chavez 300). Yet Anzaldua suggests the term broadly encompasses various contested spaces of transformation where people cross lines of gender, class, race, culture, etc. (56). Anzaldua explains, “Nepantla is that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another; when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another; when traveling from the present identity to a new identity” (56). Here, I read the embodied experience of moving within and across stealth as traveling within and across nepantla; the trans* body travels the thresholds of gender and sex as *las nepantleras*.

As my body traverses the liminalities of stealth, I am overwhelmed with the surge of binary conditioning. Immediately, I am forcefully engaged in an intimate conversation with my insecurities and fears of disclosure, where I become reliant upon external responses to tell me how I am perceived in certain spaces. Depending on my level of safety, this perception determines the way I choose to move through that space. Growing conscious of my material body and the social sphere in which it gathers meaning, I attempt to maintain some static version of embodied truth: “Who am I *here*?” As I am perceived as “one or the other” i.e. cis man or

woman, I find that although there are opportunities to disrupt the expectations of binary gendered behavior, my trans* body ultimately rendered invisible until declared otherwise. And yet somehow, my trans* body is very much material, very much present in the physical realm. I am visible and invisible, I am here and I am not here, I am stealth, I am in nepantla.

According to Anzaldua, these contradictory spaces are nepantla—where I actively engage in a vulnerable discussion with individual and collective shadows in my life and “scrutinize my wounds, touch the scars, map the nature of my conflicts, croon to las musas (the muses) that I coax to inspire me, crawl into the shapes the shadow takes, and try to speak with them” (Anzaldua 4). Being in nepantla allows us to write and read ourselves as the oppressed and the oppressor, providing us with a perspective that illuminates the fluid conceptuality of identity (Anzaldua 127; Chavez 320). Anzaldua urges herself and those reading her to, “use pain as a conduit to recognizing others suffering, even that of the one who inflicted the pain” (253). This ability to shift breaks down the perceived immutability of binary opposition, locating common wounds and discovering potential ways of healing and connecting. Through embodying nepantla, the process of rewriting my personal experiences of living within and across stealth becomes a transformative healing process; by tracing old wounds, I transcend their grasp on my life- I am able to move them and reshape their meaning. Each memory detailed in this project has, at some point in my life, served as a pillar for world-making and self-understanding.

In his memoir, *Amatuer: A True Story About What Makes A Man*, McBee notes, “People sometimes think that being trans means I live ‘between’ worlds, but that’s not exactly true. If anything, it has just created within me a potential for empathy that I must work every day, like a muscle, to grow” (57). McBee’s exploration of liminal embodiment deconstructs binary concepts of man/woman and cis/trans, working to rewrite receptions of transitional spaces. Further, he

challenges himself and his readers, “to see the full spectrum of humanity in ourselves and others” (60). By bringing the inconceivable body to the surface of daily existence, his personal narrative fundamentality questions the continuation of rigid, binary conceptualizations of moving through the world. The desire here is not to ignore, or erase lived “cis” experiences or render them “obsolete”. The goal I believe McBee is suggesting, is to become aware of the seam we unconsciously/consciously sew around our bodies and the bodies of others in order to fit rigid rules of intelligibility. When the seams are worn the different “identities” do not detach, instead, the illusion of ordered categorization fades— the differences of bodies themselves become “a series of interconnected webs” that allow us to cultivate a broader sense of connection between ourselves and our world.

McBee's work on masculinity details how masculinity is learned, navigated, and reproduced in public and private spaces and brings awareness to the impossibility/invisibility of trans bodies in binary spaces. His willingness to be vulnerable in his personal experiences offers insight on trans experience as much as it uncovers various taken-for-granted myths and illusions of what it means to be a man by today's standards. This unique window into a seemingly unspoken realm of being and knowing, allows readers to contemplate their own binary assumptions of gender and the ways masculinity and femininity are individually and collectively constructed and reproduced through certain practices and behaviors. Echoing Butler's theory of performativity, McBee explains that everyone is passing as something; not because we are consciously trying to fool people about who we are, but because we are constantly navigating external assumptions and expectations being projected onto our bodies (McBee). Here, he describes “passing authentically” not as a measurement of one's adherence to heteronormative behaviors, but instead, a genuine depiction of one's own boundaries with safety and security.

This concept breaks away from rigid, binary conceptualizations of visibility/invisibility and reveals the complex balance between personal agency and assimilative power. Here, we can question the purpose and authority of full disclosure in any and all aspects of our identity; what pieces of ourselves do we share in order to be read as “real”?

Process/autohistoria

“The effort to think one’s own history might free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.” (Foucault, history of sexuality)

This project is born from my gendered experience as a white, queer, trans* masculine person growing up in middle-class, rural America. Attempting to construct my personal narrative, I found myself circling around an explanation as to why I was trans— as if the answer would somehow justify my existence and make sense of my gendered “confusion”. At first, this revelation was alarming and caused a tail spin of unorganized and painful self-inquiry: How do I justify my trans-ness? What causes a person to become queer? Why did I feel obligated to justify my own existence in the first place? Sitting with these questions, I felt myself shift from a state of paralyzing pathology—where I existed as the victim of the world and of my own mind—and into a realm of open surrender; past acceptance, and ultimately, past the need for acceptance. Slowly, a realization: my narrative was not a lesson for queer youth, nor was it a declaration for approval of my younger self: this was a conversation between myself and my shadow, the ways in which I learned to embody “other”.

This is not an autobiographical “guide” to trans* experience; I do not desire to aid in the objectification and commodification of queerness and further the pathology of trans* bodies. I

am not interested in narrating my own causation in order to display a complete, “finalized” transition, as this would promote an elusive, linear production of the self through the classification of what I was/always have been/am now. Instead, I write to explore (and disrupt) the traces of biological determinism that have seeped into contemporary trans*narratives, as well as my own. These ideologies attempt to provide a justifiable answer to trans* causation and are often present themselves in subtle, day to day discourses and serve to maintain the essentialist perception that gender and/or sex are either pre-social or entirely constructed. Through narrative, I attempt to build a bridge between these binary conceptualizations of the body and explore the potentiality of trans* existence has to mediate the boundaries of physical and metaphorical realms of human experience. The goal is to illustrate the impossibility of a fixed, gendered experience, through restructuring the trans* narrative; there is no before and there is no after, there is only transition.

Skeptical of linear narrative structures and fixed notions of identity, this project engages in a multimodal comics narrative format, enacting autohistoria-teoria, which functions to bridge connections between internal and external realities or ways of being through a non-dualistic lens, serving to uncover new pathways toward self-growth, cultural critique, and individual and collective transformation through a writer’s search for personal and cultural meaning (Anzaldua 241). Incorporating personal and cultural history, autohistoria allows the author to “invent a history from experience and perspective through art rather than accepting our history by the dominate culture” (Anzaldua 62). Anzaldua primary used this term to describe the ways in which women of color redraw narratives from traditional western autobiographical forms (241). I am aware that my use of autohistoria has the potential to read as an appropriation of Chicana culture. However, my intention to use autohistoria is in direct conversation with this potentiality, as much

of the embodied history I wish to disrupt is molded and shaped by hegemonic, western ideology. It is through a deliberate use of autohistoria that I can expose the borders of oppositional binary discourse and “create new stories of healing, self-growth, cultural critique, and individual and collective transformation” (242).

The storytelling properties of comics medium are congruent with the functionality of autohistoria, as they both encourage reflective writing practices and work to connect experiences across space and time. Comic scholars suggest the semantic and graphic complexity of comics medium is, “particularly well-suited for stories that deal with issues of embodiment, autobiography, and memory” (Rys 5). In her book, *Why Comics?* Hilary Chute explores the overarching scope of comics as a, “medium in its own right—not a lowbrow genre of either art or literature,” that can, “be about anything,” (2). Using the umbrella term “comics” as opposed to “comic”, Chute attempts to encompass the multiple ways in which the medium has been produced and perceived over time (similar to Halberstam’s inclusive use of trans*). In search of how “comics” came to be, she locates its current status as being, “connected to how the term cartoon came to take on new meaning in the nineteenth century,” (6). Tracing a lineage from 1870s newspaper comic strips, to comic books popping up in the 1930s, to the birth of the graphic novel in the 1970s, Chute shows how form and meaning has shifted over time; the medium itself is born from transition (Chute).

Coined in 1964, the term *Graphic Novel* was methodically used to emphasize prestigious literary quality over the perceived “low art” of its counterpart, the comic book (Chute 16). This request to be taken seriously is what Halberstam suggests is “precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production” (Halberstam 6). Though I do not disregard the graphic novel as powerful narrative structure, I am skeptical of the purpose in

labeling this project (or any) as such. By remaining ambiguously defined under the all-encompassing form of comics-as-medium, this project fails to follow the rules of any one precise genus, thus blending genres into a multidimensional, multimodal form.

Unlike prose, comics form is not read linearly. Instead, it's "all-at-once-ness" or "symphonic effect" allows comics to be read in all directions (Chute 25). Here, words and images work together to move the narrative in different ways, requiring the reader to actively engage with the story, creating what is and is not there based on their own experience and perspective. Queer Comic Alison Bechdel^v observes, "if language was unreliable, and appearances were deceiving, then maybe by triangulating between them, you could manage to get a little closer to the truth" (Chute 382). This triangular "between-ness" is represented through "the gutter," or the space between comic panels that serves as "an absent space that is part of the story," she explains, "comics is as much about what is outside the frame as what is inside it—what can be pictured, and what cannot be or won't be pictured" (Chute 23). Here, I read the gutter as *nepantla*—an ambiguous, transitional space which the reader (*nepantlera*) can "see through the larger symbolic process" being consciously constructed through each panel (Chute 50; Anzaldúa 56). Not only can this form be seen as an embodiment of theory, but it is simultaneously a psychological and emotional space which I am in full awareness of when illustrating each panel. The liminal space from which I recreate the narrative is somewhere between memory, reality, and act of drawing itself; this is *nepantla*. I am no longer that child and yet as I draw myself, I become myself *again and again* with each detail of the illustration. The creation itself – drawing and writing simultaneously— demands that I remain in constant contradiction with myself *as I am* and myself *as I was*. As an artist, the very space in which I engage with these images and transform their form is in fact, *nepantla*.

Not only can Anzaldua's theorization of nepantla easily be read through the fluidity of comics form, the transitional nature of comics allows it to be read and written in multiple ways; using form to interrogate fixed notions of identity. The yes/and nature of comics forms allows the narrative to flow naturally- breaking in poetry, prose, illustration, theory, the narrative blends with the natural ebb and flow of what it means to know yourself, to find your way, and to connect with others and the world. In this way, the very structure of the narrative itself works to dismantle binary perceptions of either/or, cis/trans, us/them by blurring the lines between whose story is being told.

During my writing process, I have found it increasingly more difficult to delineate between the academic, the personal, and the desire to keep/perceive them as separate. I am aware that autobiography and narrative are not traditionally valued in academic writing; this understanding is one of the reasons why I choose to engage with autobiography in the first place. However, through this process I have found myself on multiple occasions writing *for* academia and not the work itself, out of fear of not being taken seriously. Engaging with this fear alongside my shadows, I have attempted to throw myself into vulnerability, examining their current ties on my life; this has been an intense and traumatic experience that has intrinsically impacted my mental and physical health. At times, I have experienced severe blockages, an extreme unwillingness to write and engage what can be described as “periods of extreme depression, dissatisfaction, and despair, coupled with self-doubt and feelings of complete inadequacy” (Keating xxvi). The beginning phases of this project were being mapped out during my recovery from a double mastectomy; an experience that literally ripped me open and left scars in which my shadows seeped out of and into my daily life. The physical reconfiguration of my body impacted my perspective of the material world and my own ability to interpret reality; who was

I? Who had I been? What is different? What have I created? I was flooded with insecurity and old shame, despite the underlying sense of freedom, I could not escape the process of shedding old skin.

This experience unexpectedly flooded my conscious and unconscious awareness with memories I did not intend to write about when starting this project. During this healing state, I cycled in and out of dream-like hallucinations; I would be sitting at my desk in my apartment drawing a picture of myself as a child and suddenly be overwhelmed with the sense of being somewhere else; the present moment and past memories became one moment that I could experience together and separately. My current reality blended with scenes of “past” selves; I was here and/ everywhere I once had been simultaneously. The sounds of this moment—the neighbors TV through my wall, the hum of the refrigerator –became sounds I *remembered*, moments that had happened and were still happening, although I could not say when or how. With a growing awareness budding inside of me, I contemplated the body as being strung out through time, vein-like, connected through a web of moments and realities that never leave, never cease to exist, only transition into alternative realms of perception. This embodiment of perspective influenced my desire to use fragmented memories as a way to challenge linear narrative structures by depicting my own inability to track a precise memory or to locate it in coherent time and space. This disordered construction of my own memories and interpretations of my own narrative, allows me to further explore the ways in which we create and recreate ourselves over time, space, and circumstance.

Chapter briefing

“The intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (Foucault 208)

The chapter titles are intentionally homonymous, further underscoring contradictory concepts and challenging the fixity of perception. Each chapter represents a distinct memory that has been used (by myself or others) to explain or define when my queerness became intelligible i.e. “that’s when I knew you/I were/was gay”, “I felt like I was in the wrong body”, etc. Each chapter is a memory that engages with internalized tropes and my own gendered expectations of bodies. These moments are written as I have remembered them; they are intentionally incomplete and do not follow chronological order as an artistic method to challenge the authenticity of linear narrative production. Much of what I have remembered is in pieces or fragments, making linear comprehension almost impossible. I use photographs as a way to tie the memories to a specific time frame, however, the relation between the photographs and the memories themselves are often lost. I intentionally use the instability and uncertainty of memory to detail the impossibility to locating a specific moment of queerness or trans*ness. As a resistance the justification of trans* experience, the following chapters do not illicit a cause or precise positions of queerness. Instead, they are ambiguous, chaotic maps that rebel against the restrictive rigidity of binary opposition.

In Mikey’s Underpants, I engage with my first experiences of gendered shame through detailing a memory in which I steal my neighbor’s underwear and am forced to return them. In this chapter, I identify my own inability to remember the moment in which I stole the

underpants or even how I was caught, playing with the illusive nature of memory and challenging the need to detail moments of rupture and give them critical meaning. I shift between narrative styles, blending self-questioning narrative and external dialogue, erasing the line between what I tell myself and what I have been told and how I remember the moment entirely. The meaning of the underpants themselves is tied into the moment of rupture, the moment of getting caught and the shame of having to return them. I resist the urge to tell a comprehensible story around the underpants; I do not tell you I am a “girl” wearing “boys” underpants in direct resistance of linear narrative structuring. Instead, I attempt to direct the focus toward the carpet on the front porch—not to locate the shame of that moment, but to explore the ways shame is carried through intimate details of our experience.

Chapter two, *Smear the Queer*, maps my experiences navigating binary gender production through my experiences with football culture. Here, I use movement between narrative and dialogue to explore how my body learned and internalized scripts of masculinity. The title can be interpreted as a reference for the childhood game, further indicating physical violence against the othered body. However, as the context shifts, so too does the conception of the other. I am aware that my gender non-conforming body can be easily read as the “queer” in this title, yet I argue it can also be read here as the “smearer”. Not only do others attempt to smear me, I also smear the queer in myself and the queer in others. The motivation for this chapter is to reveal the learned self-regulation of social expectations of the binary body.

Chapter three, *Barn sour*, illustrated moments of isolation where I engage with concepts of bodily safety and security. The term “barn sour” is often used to describe a horse who experiences anxiety when they are away from the barn; I use the term here to explore stealth as a space of comfort and a space of fear. I explore how masculinity is reproduced in western

culture through the construction of the cowboy and the ways in which these narratives are consumed and digested often unconsciously. The chapter begins with a reflection on generational queerness as a method to engage with how silence and shame may serve as the foundation for stealth and stealth practice.

Chapter four, *Girl Pee*, shares its title with the full work, meditating on the cyclical nature of memory and the body. Here, I give specific attention to the discourse around the act of peeing. I use personal reflection and prose alongside dialogue and imagery to translate the individual and collective meaning of these behaviors. This chapter provides a lens of transformative healing and is motivated by Anzaldúa's reading of *nepantla* as a paradoxical state, "the knowledge that exposes your fears can also remove them" (132). Here, I illustrate the process in which embodied shame is transcended *and* simultaneously reproduced through the contextual reclamation of the act of peeing.

Conclusion

"If all life is illusory and your life is also illusory, use those illusions. Read the present moment; whatever you need to learn about life is written there." (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark*)

Initially, the motivation for this project was sparked by my inability to find relatable narratives on trans* experience. I felt that many of the narratives I read bought into binary conceptualizations of gender and reiterated the power dynamics that maintained queer as 'other'. The early stages of this project were dependent on my eagerness to write a book for young

people like myself who struggled to make sense of and navigate the in/external conceptualizations of queerness in an oppositional, binary world. Perhaps by sharing my lived experiences, I could help ease the suffering of someone else. Romantically, I thought my story might provide a life-saving mantra for queer youth: *you are not alone*. Yet, as I began to write my experiences, I slowly realized that my perspective on my past was tainted with doubts, insecurities, and un-relinquished resentments. Everything I did not want trans* narrative to be, somehow existed inside my very own interpretation of my own queerness. Despite my trans* experiences, I still relied on the system of binary gender categorization to describe and make sense of the world; patterns of hegemonic thinking existed inside of my body. As I allowed myself to be vulnerable with the ways in which I “failed” to be and think queer, the way I perceived trans* narrative shifted; the foundation in which we speak to and about our bodies *is the narrative*. The significance of rewriting trans* narrative was not simply to explore new ways of telling queer experience, but to trace the conversation between hegemonic narratives and queer narratives themselves.

Reflecting on my own internalizations of the aforementioned tropes, I engage with a selection of personal narratives which I have consciously and unconsciously constructed (and continue to construct) that attempt to justify and give cause to my perceived queerness. The intention is to acknowledge the history of my own engagement with “us” versus “them” self-story, mapping out social scripts on gender, and showcasing a shift in perspective that allows me to reinterpret my past beyond causation narrative. This exploration of personal narrative serves as a lens into the broader gender culture in which we all exist and begins a conversation between individual and collective internalizations of bodily “wrongness” (pathology) and the complex effects of gendered shame. Anzaldua contends that the artists job is “to bear witness to what

haunts us, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair (the damage)” (10). Through interrogating these tropes within my own narrative, I witness my own ties to the gender binary and constructed masculinities as well as those around me—I am introduced to my own desire to justify trans* existence and uncover the ways I have learned and carried pathology in and through my body. Here, I allow myself to become all sides of the gender story in order to forge the language necessary to reinvent what is possible (gender-based or otherwise). Therefore, not only do I contend the etiological foundation of trans* narrative should be interrogated and reconceptualized, I also attempt to show how in which it may be carried out artistically as a method of individual and collective healing—a way to restore power within silenced/manipulated narratives and unveil the ceaseless need for transformation.

By engaging in a conversation with my past selves, old conceptualizations of reality bubble up to the present moment and I am forced to rearticulate the world, how I interpret my place in it. Acknowledging my own susceptibility to dualistic thinking, I allow the questions: *who have I positioned myself against in order to make sense of who I am? Who has positioned themselves against me?* The answers reveal a continuous shift in orientation; I am never other, and yet I am always other. Here, I am interested in what oppositions can be learned and how they are carried in the body. This project intends to investigate the transformative power of narrative, blending academic insight with personal reflection in search of new pathways of understanding that reach beyond binary constructions of the self, the other, and the world. *How do we describe ourselves outside of the binary and what form can it take?* I am not sure if this project answers this question—there may not be an answer at all. If anything, it invites more questioning that demands new language and broader perspectives on gendered narratives that impact us all.

My use of Anzaldua's theorization of nepantla within this project serves to illuminate the potentiality of expanding conscious thought beyond black and white ideologies on gender and reconfiguring a perceivable worldview away from oppressive and restrictive realities. Nepantla is not only a transitional space that allows for this shift, but it is also a delicate attention—to be in nepantla, you must be exactly where you are, *even if you do not know where that is*. Anzaldua explains, "Nepantla is the point of contact where the 'mundane' and the 'numinous' converge, where you're in full awareness of the present moment," (128). This is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of Anzaldua's theorization of nepantla as a contradictory space that I carry throughout this project; to exclude what is queer (from yourself or others), you can no longer connect. In terms of narrative, this interpretation of nepantla suggests that our life stories are not one thing and then another, but that the narrative itself is the present moment; transitional, temporal, material, psychological space. In this way, linear narrative actually becomes impossible—you cannot write a past that does not exist, you can only rewrite the present moment. The use of linear narrative maintains *things are what they say they are* and yet, in nepantla we are able to shift from this fixed reality and instead acknowledge ourselves as surrounded by a world of unfathomable opportunity and growth; *I am here and there, self and other*. Linear narrative becomes so fascinated with its own fixity, that it fails to incorporate the unveiled possibility of multiple realities. Resisting this structure, I maintain that the very space the narrative lives, as ordinary as it may seem, is everywhere all at once; multifaceted and tied to a complex web of realities that cannot be fully delineated—*narrative itself is queer*.

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Notes

ⁱ The final project title is illustrated in full capitalization with each chapter title in lower case lettering; my use of the lowercase title here serves as a creative response to Gloria Anzaldua's work, where she shifts her use of uppercase/lowercase lettering to emphasize geographical and metaphoric meanings of a word i.e. B/borderlands, where the lower refers to physical region and the upper represents non-material, spiritual/psychic/sexual Borders. My shift in lettering represents the malleability of meaning and identity of gendered language and social structuring. The fluctuation from 'girl pee' as a noun to an adjective to a verb, explores the blending of multiple perspectives at once and further carries out the projects underlying theories.

ⁱⁱ Historically, the reliance of biological factoring has been a crucial element to social and political activism in securing trans* rights within the confines of heteronormative cultures (Feinberg 56, Halberstam 15). I do not wish to take away from this significance by claiming it is "wrong", but to use it as a stepping stone toward broader understanding.

ⁱⁱⁱ Defined as "Gender Dysphoria" by the American Psychiatric Association, which assumes gender to be biologically assigned

^{iv} A Nahuatl word that literally means "In-between space" that has been theorized by various scholars alongside Anzaldua. Anzaldua's use of this term represents temporal space and liminal spaces (psychological, spiritual, emotional, material) and is often used in relation to identity formation, which is how I intend its use throughout this project.

^v Bechdel is known best for her comic series, *Dykes to Watch Out For* and graphic memoir *Fun Home*. Her work engages with concepts of sexuality, politics, and growing up queer. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel writes about the death of her father, uncovering her own series of gendered traumas while confronting her father's closeted homosexuality—Bechdel's blend of humor and intellect is a perfect example of how rewriting trauma narratives and reconceptualizing reality/time serves as a method of personal and collective healing.