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Tight Coils: Black Transfemininity, Transhegemony, and Identity Formation in The U.S. South

by

Vic Kennedy

Under the Direction of Daniel Coleman, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

Often without question, we are tasked with understanding gender as inherently predicated on the assumption of whiteness and understanding that Black trans women and other transfeminine people belong at the bottom of a silent “hierarchy” of sorts. How then do Southern Black transfeminine people form their genders under such tightly coiled restraints? To elucidate these questions’ answers, I interviewed 5 Southern Black trans women and/or Southern Black transfeminine people to discuss the issues facing those that find themselves often spoken about but rarely spoken to. After these interviews, I utilized both my own understanding of Southern Black gender theory as well as the works of Black gender and Africana studies theorists to parse out how hegemonies within Southern trans communities are leading to Black trans women’s alienation and brutalization through narrative analysis. I aim to let these interviewees’ stories act as a catalyzing force for further Black transgender theorization.

INDEX WORDS: Transfemininity, Black Trans Theory, Transmisogynoir, Qualitative Interviews, The South, Narrative Analysis

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2023

Tight Coils: Black Transfemininity, Transhegemony, and Identity Formation in The U.S. South

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May 2023

DEDICATION

It's cliché to say “where to begin,” but it's said commonly for a reason – there's so many people to dedicate this work to, and so many people I need to thank. I want to first and foremost thank my parents, Jackie and Ray, who did everything in their power to raise me to be a conscientious and unjudging member of society. This rings true of my personality in everything I now do, even if it's exhibited in ways they might not have anticipated. I love you both dearly.

I want to dedicate this work also to my two closest friends I made in this program, Alex and Sierra. Thank you both for dealing with my midnight ramblings about Black gender theory, the frantic Facetime calls, the frequent and vent-heavy happy hours, the late nights and early mornings writing in Switchyards and in the WGSS suite, and all of the moments in between. Love y'all lots, and good luck with all of your future endeavors (even though you don't need it)!

I want to thank the many people in my life, primarily strangers, who took the time (and I'm sure the patience) to educate and correct many assertions I made in the past that were based in fear, transphobia, homophobia, and bigotry. I cannot thank you enough as your kindness is the sole reason that I've pivoted my mindset to be able to theorize in the manner I do today. No, this isn't a case of “oh, so *now* you respect LGBTQ+ individuals because you realized you're one of us” or anything. I needed to shift my mindset actively prior to even going down that road of introspection. With not even the slightest hint of sarcasm, THANK YOU.

I also must dedicate this work to my life partner, Bennett, who continues to love and affirm me, both my intellect and my identity, every day he is able. *ad meus amor, meus amor aeternus*: thank you so much for pouring your time/effort/care into me. I don't know if there's anyone more intimately familiar with the hours I spent studying and constructing this work, and how irritable wrangling it all together made me. My appreciation to you is infinite, and I love you more than words can express.

And, possibly more importantly than any of these dedications, I want to thank Black transgender women generally, including Black trans femmes, and Black transfeminine folks both within and outside of my community, as this thesis never would've existed without y'all welcoming me into your spaces and allowing me the time to speak with you. As I state, I do have personal investment in this project, but this project is first and foremost a love letter to you and your many transcestors. You are not just admirable, but you are all the blueprint. Continue to thrive.

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I want to acknowledge my committee consisting of Dr. Jennie Burnet, Dr. Stephanie Evans, and Dr. Daniel Coleman. You know intimately how difficult it was for me to get this thesis done (especially Dr. Coleman!) and you stayed firm on your criticisms about it, regardless of any objections I lobbied your way. That is true critique and true scholarship, and I thank you for providing me with this guidance unapologetically. I appreciate all of your insights on Black female identity formation, Afropessimism, and feminist methodology. There's no way I could have finished this without each of you. We all make quite a good team if I do say so myself.

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1 INTRODUCTION

We find ourselves now, as gender studies scholars and gender skeptics alike, at a troubling juncture in our ideology. We are at a point of no return, as some may say, where scholars are still at odds with “the woman question¹.” Simultaneously, we are faced with some of the most violent anti-trans rhetoric yet as a nation-state. So, while some are still attempting to come up with a globally-palatable definition of “woman” or of “womanhood,” transgender women are still being brutalized en masse. When we factor race into this frightening truth, we see an even bigger disparity, as Black transgender women and other Black transfeminine people are brutalized at a disproportionate rate in comparison to their counterparts of other racial backgrounds. I hypothesize that this is due to Black transgender women’s theoretical situating as hypervisible and as inherently abject to the norms that U.S. society has established and perpetuated for its nearly 250-year history. Establishing this, I also must acknowledge that the brutalization of Black trans women and Black trans femmes² only intensifies as you travel further beneath the Mason-Dixon line. This is true, despite the U.S. South housing the most

¹ The “woman question” here is no longer one of women’s suffrage or of women’s capacity for rights and representation, as many 20th century feminists have theorized it to be. Instead, the “woman question” I am invoking here is the one that is asked frequently both by radical feminists and critics of feminism alike: “what IS a woman?” Here, they are not attempting to engage in a philosophical debate, but rather argue against the womanhood of transgender women. I think of Lori Watson’s 2016 “The Woman Question,” in particular, and I share her summation about trans womanhood, reproduced here: “...feminism, as I understand it, is the theory and practice of dismantling male power, gender hierarchy, and women’s subordinate position as structurally and institutionally manifest. This requires a women’s movement, a political movement. This we all know. This movement can’t occur while marginalizing, refusing to recognize, and denying the existence of our trans sisters. Recognizing our differences as women has always been at the center of feminism done right. Not all women are women like me or like you, and restricting the category of “woman” in this way keeps us all from further building the movement we so desperately need” (Watson 2016, 252).

² “femmes” is a contentious word; there are lesbians who feel that the word should not be used outside of lesbian communities (e.g., denoting the relationship between a butch partner and their femme counterpart), but the word is often used in (primarily Black) spaces to describe those who identify with femininity but do not identify as women. I have critiques of the growing use of the word myself, as someone who has been described by many as a “femme” without my vocal aligning with such (see my interview with Devin for this). I used it here particularly because I am trying to specifically here point out how individuals who are assigned-male-at-birth that engage with femininity are brutalized.

Black people as well as the most trans people per capita than any other region in the nation. We are also aware that, on average, Black people within the U.S. and trans people within the U.S. tend to align more with left-leaning ideologies and politicians than their nonBlack and non-trans counterparts. Thus, the South, teeming to the brim with Black, trans, and Black trans people, should hypothetically be the most welcoming space imaginable for Black trans people, should it not?

If you, like me, have ever had the pleasure of traveling (or living) down south, surely you scoffed or chuckled at the logical fallacy, but again, why? What is it about the modern-day South that remains so trepidatious to women like these? And, assuming that such hazards remain in the states in this area, why do so many Black transfeminine people A) form their specific gender manifestations around a sense of Southern femininity and B) remain in the South as it is (seemingly) becoming more and more legislatively treacherous for them to do so?

In this thesis, I aim to answer these questions and others related to them utilizing both my own discernment of Black transfeminine history in the South as well as parsing out the direct accounts of several Black trans women and Black transfeminine people currently living in the South. Over the course of four months, I had the privilege of speaking with nine Black trans women and/or transfeminine people, and here I will present the findings derived from five of these discussions.

This thesis is divided into five key sections: an introductory section that establishes from biases and worldview the author is speaking from, a section reviewing related literature, a section that identifies key terms of engagement and methodology, a section that unpacks some of the relevant narrative lines of the selected interviews (separated by individual interviewee), and a conclusive section discussing what can be gathered from all I've discussed here.

The introductory section pertains to the background information that “sets the stage” for this thesis to take place. I begin this work with narrative that elaborates further on my personal investment in research around Black transfemininity, something that I feel is especially important to highlight, not only because I myself am not transfeminine, but also because stating one’s personal investment in research conducted is a key element to differentiating feminist research from non-feminist research (Beetham & Demetriades 2007, 200)³. Within this section, I also highlight the South’s gradual development into a geography defined by legislative restriction and emboldened transantagonism. I aim to explain how the establishment of the monolithic “South” erupted from the remnants of chattel slavery and upon the cultural zeitgeist developing culturally-acceptable racism to a compounded version of racism imbricated with culturally-acceptable transphobia, trans people became one of the most acceptable scapegoats for lawmakers and conservative pundits to hyperfixate upon publicly. I also intend to stress how this hyperfixation is even more focused upon Black trans women and other Black transfeminine people.

The second section of this thesis includes a review of literature that is vital to the framework of the theorizing that I am performing here. This thesis heavily depends upon the work of several Africana studies scholars and their contemporaries, such as Marquis Bey, Hortense Spillers, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, and Calvin Warren, to name a few. Here, I establish the current clashes between developing trans/queer theory within the realm of

³ There are several methodologies that are encompassed by the label “feminist” research, and one of the core tenets to deciding if research is feminist or not is that there must be “...analysis of the relationships between and among all research parties” including assertion of the researcher’s biases and positionality. (Beetham & Demetriades 2007, 200).

eurocentric⁴ academia and the equally significant (yet, often elided, interestingly) assertions of the status of modern Black (trans) gender from the aforementioned theorists and their affiliated peers. As I am identifying the divisions present, I also identify the “coils” that I believe bound Black trans women and other Black transfeminine people up as they attempt to live their lives in Southern Black America. I use the word “coils” here interchangeably with the limits that Black transfeminine people have on their personhood and gender identities such as transphobia, transmisogyny, and transmisogynoir as an extended metaphor. This is not only because I am invoking imagery of a person literally being bound by one of these many restrictions, but also, the word “coil” is often used to describe Black women’s hair texture. I am thinking here specifically of hair like mine as a young Black girl: 4C texture, kinky, nappy, and unruly. Like a young Black girl’s many coils, I am proposing here that there are several interconnected systems that serve to interweave themselves when it comes to Black transfeminine identity in the South – some unrulier than others, and some entirely unpredictable. Though not every Black woman possesses hair with a “coily” texture, texturism and colorism are both concepts that affect every Black woman in America. Like Black women in America as a collective dealing with discrimination inherent in texturism but making art of their hairstyles despite this, Black transfeminine people in the South collectively and individually make choices regarding their gender presentation daily despite others’ perceptions of their embodiment.

One of these coils that I identify is a phenomenon that I refer to as *transhegemony*, and part of this section is dedicated to defining this term and parsing out how it and other coils restrict and limit the ways in which Black transfeminine people are able to present their genders. I then speak here about the specific ways in which The South has transformed into a space

⁴ The capitalization of the “B” in “Black” and the “uncapitalization” of words such as “eurocentric,” “white/whiteness,” and “America” are both intentional in this work.

ontologically fertile for Black transfeminine identity in america to grow and thrive, and in what specific ways the inhabitants of this area resist the narratives assigned to The South despite the government's best efforts.

In the methodology section of this work, I establish the methods of data collection and data analysis that I am using for this project, as well as delving a bit deeper into the history and current use of many of the trans community-specific terms that I engage with in this thesis. I used semi-structured qualitative interviews to collect the data, and here I discuss the importance of using interviews in qualitative work, how I came to establish parameters in my interviews, the interview vetting process, and I discuss the feminist forays of this work. For the data analysis, I decided to use narrative analysis for this thesis. While somewhat controversial, I explain in this section why I decided upon this methodological choice and how the choice shifted my thesis work.

The selected interviews of this thesis follow the methodology section. I decided upon these five interviews out of the nine conducted based not only on the quality of the interviews conducted, but also on some of the varied ideas that I noticed amongst all five of them. Each interview section is named after the interview subject, alongside a quote that the interviewee stated during the discussion. I did this somewhat in homage to E. Patrick Johnson's 2018 book *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.*, as I found his decisions about chapter organization very useful for my study. His chapters are divided by theme with each chapter

I end this thesis with a conclusive section that may read as a call to action. Though I varied the question I asked each of my interviewees, one question ended each of them. I finished each interview with a question regarding the thesis research itself, asking each participant individually what they think would be best use of the research that I am conducting as a non-

transfeminine person. In this section, I compare and contrast the answers I received from each participant to see what exactly it is that Black transfeminine people in The South wish to derive from research such as this.

1.1 Reflections on Black Girlhood

When I think of the word “destitute,” my mind cannot but wander to the summer of 2018, as a lack of money was nearly synonymous with the time. Columbia, South Carolina. It was a hot and humid summer, like all summers in the South usually are. I had just lost my job on the nearby Army base, Fort Jackson, and I was staying with my younger brother in a raggedy old house right on the border of the city. The “Welcome to Columbia” sign still rusty by our chain-link-fence, far before the gentrifiers in the area thought to spruce it up for the transplants settling around town. My parents technically owned the little house we called home, so thankfully they only charged me a portion of the rent that the current housing market would’ve required, but upon losing that job, I was unemployed. It was enough of a squeeze that I knew I needed to find new work, and fast.

My mother had a friend from a previous workplace who I’ll call Tia. Tia had a daughter, Mia, who was four years older than me. My mother, knowing my situation was starting to look rather bleak, talked Mia into allowing me to babysit her child for a day. As the job I just lost was in childcare, I was pretty thrilled to seemingly have a gig where I could apply some of the soft skills I had picked up while working on base.

Taking care of Mia’s baby was easy enough. He was a bit fussy, but save for the few crying fits, he was a manageable baby. Taking care of him primarily consisted of rocking him back to sleep and entertaining him with a few toys strewn about the small apartment Mia left me in.

After eight hours, Mia returned with lunch for herself and took the baby from my arms. She told me that I did a great job, and I should stay over for a bit. I didn't really feel comfortable doing so, but I obliged as she hadn't yet paid me for the babysitting. I sat and watched her eat while she ranted to me about everything: work, exes, and her ambitions to leave Columbia someday, the latter with which I wholeheartedly agreed with. During my stay over, however, there was a knock at the door.

Mia told me that I could answer her door for her, and she turned to entertain the baby some more. I was nervous to do so because this neighborhood was foreign to me, but I obliged. With the door half-way ajar, I peered outside and let out a meek "hello?" to the person who had knocked.

She wasn't very tall, but she was definitely taller than my 5'6 stature, and she had her hair pinned up in a bun. The most distinctive thing I remember from her face other than her Monroe style piercing, was the frantic look in her deep brown eyes. Her eyes told a clear story, albeit a quick one. Anger, then surprise, then confusion, then realization. She had knocked on the wrong door.

"Oh, I'm sorry," She laughed to herself. "I'm looking for..." and she said a man's name. Presumably her boyfriend. "This ain't his place. Apologies."

"Yeah, no, sorry about that." I said with a tight smile. She left quickly after that.

The interaction was virtually nothing. I shut the door and turned around to Mia standing directly behind me. I nearly flinched from her proximity, but I held the urge in and stammered out, "Oh, it was just some woman looking for her boyfriend. Wrong door."

"Okay," Mia had said. A beat went by, and then she said. "That wasn't a woman, you know."

“What?” I said, pretending not to understand what she was saying.

“That wasn’t a woman,” she said again, plainly. “That was a faggot.”

I remember just staring in her eyes at this moment, trying hard to understand the frenzied manner in which she said this to me. She said it to me so matter-of-factly, not only like she knew this for sure to be true, but also that she needed me to be convinced as well. As if I was being deceived by a force greater than both of us, she repeated it again when I didn’t respond. “That’s a faggot,” she said again. “Understand?”

“Okay,” I said, both dejectedly and defeatedly.

The thing about this interaction that was particularly memorable was that 2018 was the year that I started openly referring to myself as non-cis, as my gender dysphoria had become so bothersome that when people referred to me as “she” or as a “woman,” a stabbing twinge of distress would lunge into the space right above my solar plexus, an aching feeling of *stop* or *this isn’t right*. I surely was not at the level of comfort that I am now at with myself with proudly referring to myself as a *transgender* person, as making an assertion that politically-loaded at the time felt too commanding, and far too real for me to stomach.

Mia couldn’t have known all of that, and I wouldn’t have expected her to assume as much. How could she? There was nothing in my gender presentation that would have communicated this to her, and as far as she was aware, she simply made the mistake of uttering an anti-gay slur to someone who finds the slur inappropriate.

It would be hypocritical of me to assert that I “knew” that the woman was a trans woman, as I have no way of verifying this information and I did not go out of my way to have her disclose her gender identity to me. Simultaneously, however, *I “knew” she was a trans woman*

in the sense that there are very specific ways in which a Black woman and/or effeminate person in the South asserts said femininity. My mother passed down such assertions to me, to ensure that there would be no confusion of my gender identity (I suppose, other than my own). She would always flat-iron the coils in my hair when they weren't in a protective style, and "bump" the ends, as the style exuded a sort of effeminate innocence associated with young Black ladies. I was always forced to wear a slip under the few dresses I would wear as a child, so that if my dress ever flew up, what's underneath would be obscured, preserving my chastity and purity in the eyes of others. And my ears, pierced when I was no older than half a year, always donned the largest earrings imaginable. Bonus points for earrings that had dangles with fringe, frills, or floral patterns. This rule was especially pertinent to abide by once I cut my hair in high school voluntarily, because without them, I was indistinguishable from a man on the street, and that's never aspirational for a young Black lady of my caliber, of course.

That being said, the person at Mia's door was nearly identical to the archetypal "Black woman" that I've grown up with knowing to be the True Black Woman – people who look like my own mother, or one of my aunts, or my grandmother. Perhaps an eye more dedicated to emboldening transmisogynoir would have more critiques of the gender assumptions I've made, asserting that True Women do not possess bodily traits that the woman at the door had, but I do not possess such an eye. Yet, despite this, Mia not only felt the need to mentally clock⁵ this woman as an imposter, to use a colloquial phrase, but she also felt it was her civic duty to alert

⁵ Explained simply from Merriam-Webster's dictionary, to "clock" someone is an act that is seen as rather offensive within trans(gender) community, as it is seen as a disruption to the wellbeing of a trans person attempting to live in stealth. This article on the many uses of the word clock states that the word "...carries that connotation of detection, referring to the action of recognizing another person as transgender. As Dawn Ennis notes in *The Advocate*, this action is regarded as hurtful within the community...the term "clocked" is used to reflect that someone transgender has been recognized as trans, usually when that person is trying to blend in with cisgender people, and not intending to be seen as anything other than the gender they present"

me to my own “failures” in clocking this woman. It was clear in my demeanor that we did not share the same convictions on this topic, yet she felt moved enough to attempt shifting my view anyway, to maintain a sense of social order within her own apartment, a microcosm compared to the gender variant and wholly-diverse world outside her door.

I reflect upon this anecdote to say that very little has changed in the five years since I stared into that woman’s eyes. Now that I am not an undergraduate, I surely have more money in my pocket, but I would argue that the country in which I reside is still destitute – we are utterly bankrupt of couth or of grace that is vital to the betterment of any developed society.

Transgender people and, by extension, the state of transness are frequently on the minds of people within this country, and for those who discuss transgender people at length, they may try to get you to believe that they have little to no interest in the group. Of course, anyone with an iota of brain power can understand that this is not true. In fact, like many sex or gender-related panics from the United States’ lurid history, there actually exists “...an institutional incitement to speak about [gender and sexuality] and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (Foucault 1990, 18) as trans identity is often misinterpreted as a sort of sexual fetish⁶ or as a playful manner in which one may openly “exhibit” their sexuality to the unacquainted. Surely, there must be, as the “trans question” has occupied a large majority of the 24-hour news cycle in the states as of late, especially when it comes to the existence of transgender female youth. As of April 2023, 494 bills have been

⁶ In Azani et. al’s 2021 study on fetishization and sexualization of transgender and nonbinary individuals, the researchers concluded that many trans and nonbinary people often described objectification/their gender identity/their embodiment being equated to sexual fetishism as inherent to transgender identity, regardless of if the individual perceived the fetishization as positive or negative (Azani et al 2021, 12). What I’m concluding here with this point is that cisgender people often incorrectly perceive transgender and nonbinary people’s identities as either a mode through which the trans individual is exhibiting their sexuality or as a vehicle to exhibit deviant sexual proclivity.

considered by 47 states across the country in 2023 alone⁷. One bill passed this month, in Kansas on April 6th, 2023, authorizing physicians to inspect the genitals of young female athletes to “ensure” that they are not transgender. Upon this bill’s passing, Mallory McMarrow, Michigan’s State Senate Majority Whip criticized it on Twitter, pointing out that “...The Republicans who claim to care about protecting children voted for forced genital inspections of children because they’re afraid a trans kid might want to play on a team with their friends” (Phillips 2023). What’s even more chilling is that the sudden explosion of anti-transgender bills across these states has now provided a segue for the introduction of national legislation, such as the proposed US HR115. Supporters of this bill refer to US HR115 as “The Women’s Bill of Rights,” a harrowing blow to transgender women in the United States, as it suggests plainly that those that are assigned female at birth are immutably female and those assigned male at birth are immutably male by law. Within this bill, it asserts that “...recent misguided court rulings related to the definition of ‘sex’ have led to endangerment of spaces and resources dedicated to women, thereby necessitating clarification of certain terms.” In summation, the American government that possesses an inane infatuation with the concept and term of “freedom” desires to forcibly operationalize womanhood for American citizens, making it such a narrow definition that many cisgender women are not able to fit into the parameters required. The bill argues further that “males and females possess unique and immutable biological differences that manifest prior to birth and increase as they age and experience puberty.” Putting aside the fact that gender is a social category that cannot be simplified to biological factors alone, this assertion blatantly disregards intersex individuals or those with differences in sex development (DSDs), meaning that it is banishing an estimated 1-2% of all Americans to be considered nothing more than

⁷ I retrieved this information on April 13th, 2023 from the Trans Legislation Tracker, which can be accessed via <https://translegislation.com/>.

statistic anomalies. Biologists like Dr. Anne-Fausto Sterling don't even agree with such a strict differentiation between the sexes, as she believes that pseudoscientific assertions such as the ones reflected in this bill's language⁸ "...marches backward in time...[and]...flies in the face of scientific consensus about sex and gender, and it imperils the freedom of people to live their lives in a way that fits their sex and gender as these develop throughout each individual life cycle" (Fausto-Sterling 2018). Despite this, our government continues to promote and endorse legislative transphobia in the form of constant statutes that harm trans people, people such as the woman I met that day back in the summer of 2018. The lone instance of transmisogynoir that Mia exhibited that day does not exist in a vacuum. Sure, individuals such as Mia hold no real institutional power over people like me or the woman at her door, but the issue remains that people who do hold that power think similarly to Mia. People with mindsets such as these—especially those with more violent intentions—exist around the country, and they are being emboldened by the media's obsession with transphobia and the government's fixation on bodily control.

I will not posture as if I have words in this thesis that will completely absolve the United States of its determination to control trans people and their bodies, because simply put, I just don't have words with that type of power. However, upon reflecting on that day in 2018, the thing that sticks with me most isn't Mia's comments, but my silence in the matter. I stood there and let her say what she wanted to say out of fear. I did not want to attract possible repercussions that might accrue if I had spoken up. I allowed my cowardice to trump what I knew would be the best thing to do; I should have, at the very least, told Mia to stop using the pejorative she chose

⁸ In Fausto-Sterling's New York Times' Opinion piece "Why Sex Is Not Binary," she is specifically referring to the American Department of Health and Human Services under former president Trump's wording, but their wording is identical. Back in 2018, they too attempted to legally define sex as "a person's status as male or female based on immutable biological traits identifiable by or before birth." (Fausto-Sterling 2018).

to use. In this thesis, I wish to expiate for my lack of words in this instance. I want to explore Southern Black femininity from a perspective that I myself am not able to represent on my own: from the perspective of Southern Black trans women and Black transfeminine people. I want to speak directly with Southern Black transfeminine people and hear about their perspectives not only on the perceived legislative precarity that they find themselves in recently, but also their perspectives on Black femininity, transgender embodiment, and on Southern identity as a whole.

1.2 The Modern Transantagonistic South

Regardless of gender identity or modality, identifying as transgender is something that continues to be considered abject in comparison to the “ideal” person in Western contexts. The ideal person in the dominant view is one who is cisgender, of course, as well as gender-conforming, adherent to the status quo (read: heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian, white). Many have vested interest in maintaining this ideal within these contexts due to what can be gained. Rigidly aligning with the status quo in Western contexts can come with immense amounts of political influence, economic advantages, and further solidification in the hegemony that dominates broader Western society. Individuals can benefit from this ideal as their bigoted ways empower them to assert their way of life over vulnerable groups of people. Even more sinister, corporations can utilize this ideal to enact socio-economic violence on said groups. If you are deemed an illegitimate person in these contexts dominated by capitalistic value, you can easily lose your livelihood very quickly just by not looking the part. With your livelihood, so too goes your shelter, your access to community, and any chance at protection from further intolerance. That being said, there has been an increased sense of fear perpetuated amongst those living in the United States of America of trans people and trans youth. The narrative surrounding these individuals has been relatively resounding: something must be done about widespread

cultural acceptance of trans(gender, transitioning, transsexual, etc.) people, as this rhetoric is harmful to our nation's children and they are being led to "mutilate" themselves as a result.

This rings especially true in the American South (henceforth referred to as The South), a region whose government leaders are in blatant denial of the diversity of said region's constituents. Southern politics, despite the area's diversity, are steeped in expectations that align with the Christian church and hegemonic conceptualizations of masculinity. It remains a space that is "...haunted by a long history of repressive and disciplining practices related to race, gender, and sexuality that are intertwined in the current culture" (Williams 2021, 27). Anything that threatens this framework is methodically and openly diminished as if to tell The South's diverse population to not even consider dissenting. Look no further than America's finest, the state of Florida, and you'll see controversial legislative pushes such as the Stop W.O.K.E. Act or the Parental Rights in Education bill, both parented by Republican governor Ron DeSantis in a desperate attempt to gain notoriety amongst an already treacherous political party. Both statutes, interestingly, attack school curricula and are worded intentionally innocuous. The Stop W.O.K.E. Act intends to prevent children from kindergarten to twelfth grade in Florida public schools from learning about critical race theory, a framework born from legal academia that is not taught in grade school as it is far too obfuscating for children to comprehend. It is not hard to imagine the motivations behind preventing children from learning about the deeply horrific racial issues that the United States is built upon, but the fact remains that this is not in any way being taught to children. The vagueness of this statute allows for lawmakers to find issues with the smallest integrations of race in the classroom, such as discussing Martin Luther King Jr. Day or celebrating Black History month. The Parental Rights in Education bill, more commonly referred to as the "Don't Say Gay" bill by its critics, makes it punishable by law to discuss topics relating

to sexual orientation or gender identity in Florida public schools with students in or below 3rd grade. It's important to emphasize that this law does not make an exception for LGBTQ+ teachers referring to their partners, nor are either "sexual orientation" or "gender identity" operationally defined by federal or state law.

Understanding this is nothing new, especially to those who live in The South; these ideals and their defendants are exactly why waves of liberatory movements grow in popularity and continue to proliferate with and without intervention from academia. These are the very reasons that we see phrases like "#BlackLivesMatter" trend on internet forums frequently⁹, or why it's now considered commonplace to introduce yourself with your gender pronouns in most progressive settings. Often, though, the material realities of the cultural war being waged politically are the war's casualties. Most of these casualties are not those asking for your pronouns or those making laws that are obviously intentionally provocative. Most of these casualties are those who have very little say in what happens institutionally, and often they are victimized by practitioners of violence. Let's reflect on the example of Governor Ron DeSantis. The Florida official went on the record expressing his opinion about University of Pennsylvania swimmer Lia Thomas after she, a transgender woman, won the 500-yard freestyle competition during the 2022 Ivy League Women's Swimming and Diving Championships in May of that same year. He lamented¹⁰ that "...you have a swimmer that swims on the men's team for three years and then, all of a sudden, says they're gonna identify as a woman swimmer and swim

⁹ The portrayal of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the media has often been contentious...Despite the fact that the Black Lives Matter movement has been associated with a number of policy successes, it is unclear that it has ever gained much traction from mainstream media sources, and it remains an online movement. Indeed, research demonstrates that Black Lives Matter has largely been maintained online through Twitter and other social media platforms" (Bordonaro & Wiltis 2018, 103). This passage was written in 2018, before the George Floyd riots, and while mainstream coverage of #BlackLivesMatter has seemingly stayed on the same message, public response to the movement has gradually improved amongst independents, liberals, and those that are left-of-liberal.

¹⁰ As reported by *The Florida Phoenix* in 2022. See references for full citation.

against the women, and then they give *that* [sic: emphatically, referring to Thomas] the national championship over these women who've been training for a long time...[the runner-up] got robbed of a national championship because the NCAA is really trying to make us complicit in something that's false" (Moline 2022). This rhetoric and the fact that it's being said at all, let alone by a prominent government official publicly in front of thousands, is harmful. The vitriol in the condemnation gets viler, however, when you realize that a Black transgender woman was murdered the same week of this public address in DeSantis' very state. Nedra Sequence Morris died due to a fatal gunshot wound following a violent attack just four days prior to DeSantis' speech on May 14th, 2022, in Opa-locka, Florida. She was 50 years old, and she left behind many loving friends and family. Over 100 people showed up for her vigil in the small city, and they gathered at the intersection where her body was found¹¹ (Lhant 2022). Rather than addressing the fact that his jurisdiction is one that could house such a gruesome crime or speaking out against the rhetoric that allows for crimes like it to continue, DeSantis prefers to busy himself with unfounded moral panic around transgender girls and women playing sports with other girls and women in schools. He is not alone, unfortunately, as it was clearly a careful gift: by March of last year, sixty-nine anti-trans sports bills were proposed, and forty-two of them targeted Southern states specifically (Williams 2021, 19).

A relentless and deliberate cultural war rages on that its pawns aren't even able to participate in. Transgender people in The South as a whole, particularly Black transfeminine people, are often used by cisgender bigots and their apologists as props upon which they launch their horrific enactments and fearmongering attitudes. It's not enough that transgender people, transfeminine people, and Black people are subjugated within a broader Western framework.

¹¹ As reported by the *Human Rights Campaign* in 2022. See references for full citation.

Bad (and powerful) actors must also perpetuate these ideas publicly to ensure that Black, queer, and transgender people continue to be seen as a blight on decent society. Those who are influenced by these conservative leaders must then act devilishly and stamp them out – violently, brutally, and without remorse.

The cynic’s answer to the turmoil that Southern Black transfeminine people and other Southern queers face seems simple on its face—just leave the area. If legislative pressure is making it impossible to exist peacefully, how difficult can moving away truly be? Putting aside that it is actually very difficult (and, might I add, quite indicative of one’s class privilege) to up and move away from an area that you’ve called home for so long, legislators and their adherents are actually making it much harder to take on a sort of nomadic lifestyle within the country. From proposed bills to criminalize traveling from state to state for abortion in the event that your “home state” prohibits the procedure¹², to constantly recycling the message that students with out-of-state ID cards are “external agitators” when they exercise their country-granted right to protest¹³, conservative messaging has pivoted to embracing individual state pride rather than collective American identity. This can also be observed with the excessive stress put on the notion of “blue” state identity vs. “red” state identity. The colors do not refer to the hue of the ground, but instead, they are meant to categorize individual states based on the tendency of the state’s population to vote for Democratic or Republican political candidates, respectively.

¹² “The Ensuring Access to Abortion Act... would have protected the ability to travel from states where abortion is banned to states where it remains legal to receive care. Senate Republicans, led by James Lankford of Oklahoma, have already blocked the measure, characterizing it a solution in need of a problem. ‘No state has banned interstate travel for adult women seeking to obtain an abortion,’ Lankford said. ‘This seems to be just trying to inflame, to raise the what-ifs.’” (Stuart 2022).

¹³ “Amid a planned week of action against the multi-million-dollar police training center in Atlanta dubbed “Cop City,” the Atlanta Police Department arrested dozens of protestors on Sunday (March 5th), inferring that the demonstrators were outside ‘agitators.’...some Black grassroots organizations in Atlanta have disputed the label, as they continue demands to close down construction of “Cop City.” It is “akin to a southern segregationist narrative by calling organizers and activists ‘outside agitators,’ activist Kamau Franklin tells ESSENCE.” (Jabali 2023).

Phrases like “Don’t California My Texas”¹⁴ exemplify the continued salience of this concept in daily inter-political discourse, though neither the phrase nor the forced categorization make much sense. All states are “purple,” to an extent, which is to say that they contain both Democratic and Republican voters. Also, beyond electoral politics, there exists a large population of each of these states that do not vote, whether it is because they have been disenfranchised or because they sense a deep futility in doing so. Unlike most countries with similar GDPs, America is one of the few that do not automatically register their citizens to vote upon reaching the legal age. There are also many easy ways that to lose voting access in America or have voting become severely difficult, many of these ways concentrated upon the deep, queer South.

Collectively, as we are a country now defined by neoliberalism and have a history stained with multiple human genocides and tragedies, the nation remains one of the more far-right-aligned ones. However, in every “red state,” there persists a “blue bubble,” usually a city that contains most of the state’s economic activity, so it is a misconception to strictly go by the “red state” vs. “blue state” dichotomy. It could be asserted, in all fairness, that some of the most far-left citizens of America live in “red states,” only further radicalized due to the massive amounts of suppression and the legislative onslaught that they are plagued by.

¹⁴ Along with being a song by artist Creed Fisher which I’m sure sounds amazing, the phrase “Don’t California My Texas” has essentially become the new “Don’t Tread on Me,” the phrase becoming a common catchphrase of the modern American right-wing. The phrase is saying in essence don’t apply the liberal policies allowed in the state of California in my conservative state, and that I am here in this conservative state due to the policies that are currently active here. GOP darling Greg Abbott has even taken on the slogan to promote himself politically, stating in [a petition on his website](#) “We can’t let California cash turn Texas blue. Add your name to send a message to California liberals: Don’t California my Texas!”

What left-wingers in the South and the interviewees of this project have in common is the knowledge that they are not required to vacate the South if they do not wish to. Some of these people revel in the region due to existing in what L.H. Stallings calls the “Dirty South,” a hearty “F you” to the “New South” that remains contingent on sexual terror and violence. The “Dirty South” is a recent imaginative space that many leftists dwell within that actively tears into america’s proposed “Southern” identity, characterized mainly by whiteness and exceptionalism (Stallings 2020, 3). Many of the current residents of the South that do not fit this idealized “Southern” archetype that conservative leaders and their donors alike cling to create their own essence of Southern-ness, a form of identity that excludes the “-isms” of the neocolonial “New South,” but happily celebrates the other stereotypes associated with the area – the “twang” in many of our voices, the intentional loudness with which we speak. For Southern transfeminine people in particular, this extends to their gender presentation, coloring parts of their transfemininity such as their gait, their southern sayings, and even their hairstyles.

Ironically, I’m going to adopt a sort of quasi-nationalist attitude with this next clause: I must express emphatically that these residents have just as much of a right to occupy this area as any other american¹⁵, be it ally or oppressor. They, too, are entitled to have just as complicated a relationship with the region as anyone else. Far too often in the U.S., people are driven away from certain areas because they are pushed to believe that their personal identity is inherently at odds with the regions that they dwell in. The South is notorious for this categorization, and unfortunately, conservative lawmakers and bigoted Southerners alike are trying to weaponize

¹⁵ Which, is to say, very little right at all – considering that most of america’s land was stolen and plundered from indigenous people, it is the personal opinion of the author that none of us have actual “stake” in the area. That being said, no one group of people or adherents to a particular ideology should be determining who gets to stay in any particular area.

this stereotype to pass legislation that solidifies The South and its residents as inherently transantagonistic.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Black Gender Trouble, Transhegemony, and Other Coils

C. Riley Snorton and many of his contemporaries understand Blackness as both “...a condition of possibility for the modern world...” and as “...articula[ting] the paradox of nonbeing, as expressed in its deployment as appositional flesh” (Snorton 2017, 5). Blackness is synonymized here with an involuntary rejection of personhood due to centuries of enslavement and being transmuted into property. However, from this forced nothingness brought about by rendering individuals as flesh, Snorton posits that there lies a “critical genealogy for modern transness,” as Black people of post-Emancipation times had to reconfigure their roles in society – and by virtue of this, their genders (Snorton 2017, 57). To be Black and trans is to embody an intersection of two positions that are systematically discouraged, but not necessarily contradictory. Within the U.S. South, especially, these manifestations of Black (trans) gender have been flourishing for generations. Narratives such as that shared by Harriet Jacobs of *Linda*, or *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, written by herself fame exemplify this, as Snorton insists her escape from enslaved North Carolina to New York discussed in *Linda* expounds how Black gender is polymorphic (Snorton 2017, 74). It is not something that is ascribed once and followed strictly, but rather something that shifts indefinitely according to the circumstances at hand as well as “gendered others...[who] maintain an epistemological coherence” (Snorton 2017, 74).

This project operates from an unapologetic standpoint that Black transness is not only acceptable but is also worthy of celebration and an expression of the Divine, regardless of the manner in which that divinity is perceived by dominant attitudes in society¹⁶. This stance is still

¹⁶ “...for Black trans kindred is to revel in the sacredness of the knowledge we gain by existing and coming into these embodied forms...may we honor our *powerful* divinity and enduring sense that conforming to cisgender heterosexual paranoia will not provide any of the vitality our Spirit-filled lives require” (Coleman 2020, 161).

in its relative infancy within the academy. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley understands Black queerness and black (trans) gender identity to be forces catalyzed amongst the waves of the Atlantic Ocean, though not initiated by them¹⁷. She pushes back on the idea of there being a progress narrative that can easily be traced from the ancient African diaspora to what its descendants theorize to be queerness now, and instead embraces the idea that Black queerness and Black (trans) gender has always existed, even without Western intervention, and that the Middle Passage and its horrors have only transformed these concepts' fluidity. These concepts then "...become... crosscurrent[s] through which to view hybrid, resistant subjectivities — opaquely, not transparently" (Tinsley 2008, 199). She understands conceptualizing the waves in this way as "...powerful enunciations of crosscurrents of African diaspora identity...evoke[d]...in respect and solidarity" (Tinsley 2008, 197). Though fraught with colonization and death, these waters also serve as reminders of Black fluidity, Black resistance, and collaboration with each other. I am of this mind, also, that Black gender and its catalyzing amongst the waves are divine, but also that Black gender and Black queerness have existed far before the "...repetitive, unpredictable energy, [and] groundlessness..." (Tinsley 2008, 203) of white "modern" queer theory. Calvin Warren posits Black gender, particularly Black *trans* gender, as a challenge to the ontological purposes prefaced by white gender. He offers the idea of tranifestation as a matter by which those striving for oxymoronic "Black transness" can navigate the proposed philosophical space of Black trans identity without misappropriating humanism, as humanism begets ontology, and it does not appropriately address the nonbeingness inherent to Blackness (Warren 2017, 267). Even then, however, tranifestation by definition is only able to *attempt*, and this verbiage, Warren argues, precludes its success, and "...announces its own

¹⁷ "I evoke this history now not to claim the slave ship as the origin of the black queer Atlantic. The ocean obscures all origins, and neither ship nor Atlantic can be a place of origin" (Tinsley 2008, 192).

failure...or the fractured aim of the enterprise” (Warren 2017, 270). The school of humanism is tantalizing to those peoples whose humanity is presumed with the utterance of the term, and Black people are not afforded this assumption¹⁸. This is even less so for those who are both Black and trans, especially those striving for a standardized sense of Black transness. In my view, this is what makes the conceptualization of Black queerness and Black transness as evidence of Divinity so attractive, as humanism operates on the postulate that humanity is something that all humans experience in the exact same way. For Black queer and trans people, our humanity is forcibly equated with state-sanctioned violence and ostracization; to continue replicating such narratives would only serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy¹⁹, and it is one that Black trans scholars and their allies alike wholeheartedly reject. This work is grounded not only in these ideas but in the ideas of other Black feminist authors and theorists, as Black feminist thought elucidates my thought processes here most clearly.

With the frameworks of the challenge of Black gender development in the U.S South and the understanding of divine Black transness established, a few more guiding questions arise: How are constricting frameworks, such as what I’m calling “transhegemony,” strangling Black trans women's subject formation when their racialized gender identity is already fraught within The U.S. South? How has the institution of slavery ungended Black people to the point that Black transfeminine identity in The South appears to be oxymoronic?

¹⁸ Warren offers that “...the black transgender lacks any being-in-the-world, and the lure of gendered embodiment functions as a foil to black muteness” and that “...the black is trans to gender, not transgender. The black is trans to queerness, not black queer” (Warren 2017, 271). I discuss a point further along similar to this from Bey and express that while I agree with both scholars, I still believe that there are attempts at ontology in the South amongst Black transfeminine people that deserve scholarly attention.

¹⁹ “Healing does not require a fixation upon or reinstatement of narratives—the ones we make about ourselves or those others make for us. The insistence on such runs the risk of falling into Euro-North American colonial lies about how our psycho-emotional selves should function” (Coleman 2020, 164).

I assert here that *transhegemony*, or the dominant narrative around transition that assumes trans people wish to be perceived as if they are properly trans people, serves as a detriment to gender theorists, transgender people, and cisgender people alike. Whereas transnormativity, as defined by Evan Vopond, is understood as a pressure *from* cis people (and cis-assumed trans people) to conform to the norm of trans embodiment – e.g., a proper trans person is one who has medically transitioned, and walks through the world in “stealth,” – transhegemony privileges specific transgender archetypes and gender performance within trans communities. Cisgender understandings of trans existence are not centered within transhegemony, though cisgender understandings of transness *do* influence its perpetuity. An example of transnormativity in action would be the pressure that a trans woman feels to get a vaginoplasty and conceal this surgery from the general public so that she is able to move safely as a (cis assumed) woman in public spaces. An example of transhegemony in action would instead be the aspiration inspired by intra-groupthink and hegemonic understandings of trans-womanhood to appear to be the ideal trans woman. A trans woman who is influenced by the tortuous influence of transhegemony does not walk through the world in the hopes that she is perceived as cisgender, but she does walk through the world understanding that there is a specific archetype to being a “good” trans woman, and she instead strives to perform to *that* standard. This is a form of hegemonic power that I feel influences all trans people, but I especially believe this to target Black transfeminine people and other people affected by transmisogynoir²⁰. I believe this because all Black women, cis or trans, while historically underrepresented in most of the ways that matter in america are hypervisible in

²⁰ See section 3.1 for a specific definition of transmisogynoir. Like Julia Serano, I am of the opinion that transmisogynoir does not solely affect Black trans women, despite its etymology. For an example, Black cis women who have masculine gender presentations, such as Black studs (or really, all Black women, as Black women are often forcibly masculinized in comparison to the white cisnormative gender expectations implied in western womanhood), are often discriminated against due to their perceived “alignment” to transfeminine people.

the country's media. From the small screen to the silver screen, the social media feed to the porn website's category, Black women in America face a specific conundrum of being simultaneously hypervisible and interpersonally invisible. When Black women's only representations of themselves that they are presented with are either oversexualized, in times of ridicule, or in times where their identities are synonymized with a sense of suffering, those sentiments become self-fulfilling prophecy²¹. Many Black women have reported feeling this way; either they have to grapple with the "reality" that it is futile to be a Black woman, or they have to overcome the "obstacle" that comes with being a Black woman. This feeling of futility that comes with Black female identity often drives Black women to feel a need to overperform or be the absolute best at being who they are, lest they "suck," to use a poignant way to put it from musical artist Kelela²².

With this in mind, it is easy to see why transhegemony would be an especially sinister coil for Black trans women and other Black transfeminine people. Not only are you subjected to the ills of transmedicalism and transnormativity, but you also must appear to be the most transhegemonic Black transfeminine person possible. It's not ideal to be just Black and transfeminine; you are expected instead to imitate the Dominique Jacksons and the Laverne Coxes of the world (even if you don't have a net worth similar to either of them). Black trans women and other Black transfeminine people also possess bodies that, even if they are deemed transnormative and transhegemonic, are often understood to house frequent violence and are

²¹ "The Black body comes into view, however, when conceptions of sexual-subjection or social disparities are discussed. That is, when Black women's bodies are on display to be ridiculed (e.g., the focus on Serena Williams' buttocks), or when sociopolitical agendas use Black women as scapegoats (e.g., Black women targeted in welfare reform). The ways Black women's bodies are viewed as spectacles in the general public and especially in sex industries, for the leisure and pleasure of men, is rooted in racialized gendered intersections of power, privilege, and oppression..." (Mowatt et al. 2013, 645).

²² Kelela said in an interview with FADER in 2017: "White people don't understand that the reason black people are so good is not always that we're necessarily more artistically inclined, it's more because we don't have the space to suck."

expected to be harassed on the basis of necropolitical disprivilege²³. Because of this, Black transfeminine people are forced to tiptoe between the desires of eurocentric and ciscentric societal norms, meaning they must appear beautiful and otherworldly desirable, lest they attract the attention of those who are politically and socially motivated to end their lives²⁴.

Like Calvin Warren, there exist other scholars informed by Afropessimist views of gender identity. Marquis Bey is one such theorist, and they, through a lens of gender abolition, question if Black trans identity is even feasible within the constraints that Western society holds us. Bey does not understand Black gender in the dichotomous way that Western and/or white gender adherents do; they believe that the gender binary is "...an 'arborescent' sociopolitical orchestration predicated on cisness, whiteness, and categorically disciplinary 'rigid segmentarities'..." (Bey 2022, 80). Bey also asserts that Blackness has a *trans* relationship to (cis)gender, and that the relationship is not an amicable one; they assert that understanding Blackness in the way that they do, as a critique of eurocentrism-dependent (cis)gender, can, at its best, act as a method of undoing the inherent violence of (cis)gender (Bey 2022, 25). Considering conceptualizations such as these, is it even valid (or relevant) to apply terms such as "transnormativity" or "transhegemony" to Black trans individuals? I argue that despite the futility of (cis or trans)gender, it is still important to consider these "coils," as the material realities that come with presenting with certain gender manifestations in mind still affect Black trans individuals daily in this country, especially Black transfeminine people, and that Black transfeminine people still strive for very specific ideals within their communities, whether it is

²³ "Those lives [referring to transgender people of color] also carry a productive force—particularly in death—that sheds light on the borders where biopower and necropower brush against each other in everyday life...trans women of color act as resources—both literally and metaphorically—for the articulation and visibility of a more privileged transgender subject" (Snorton & Haritaworn 2013, 70-71).

²⁴ "The discursive construction of the transgender body—and particularly the transgender body of color—as unnatural creates the precise moment...where the transgender body of color is the unruly body, which only in death can be transformed or translated into the service of state power" (Ibid 68).

purely for their own survival or otherwise. Perhaps Blackness and transness *don't* “look” like a particular thing²⁵, and perhaps there is no set threshold at which someone becomes a “cis-looking” person versus looking trans²⁶, but these truths do not prevent Black transfeminine people from striving to look like a particular “something.” From their abjection, they are forming, intracommunally, a new “type” of gender manifestation – not one that imitates “woman” or “man”, both categories that Bey stresses begets violence²⁷ – but something else entirely. Not necessarily a third gender manifestation either, but instead a space in which they can both navigate away from coercive and forced (eurocentric and cisnormative) masculinity while also toeing the line between ideal transfemininity and self-determined gender-affirming creativity. A space that is safe enough to avoid being constricted completely by the coils of the many “-isms” of the world, but not subversive enough to attract the ire of detractors. Above all, we must remember that existing as a trans person plunges you into a sort of panopticon²⁸, and it is best not to anger the viewers whenever possible.

Who is deemed a “proper” trans subject? Vipond argues that this person “...ascribe[s] to a social set of ideals that are unquestioned and presumed to be essential and unchangeable” (Vipond 2015, 23). The proper trans subject is one that intends to transition, that does not oppose transmedicalization, and that fiercely aligns with the gender binary. The proper trans subject too

²⁵ “...in other words, blackness (sic) and transness do not “look” like a particular thing; rather, they dislodge the logics that structure lookedness. Indeed, they assert other ways to be that do not quite “look” like anything in particular” (Bey 2022, 26).

²⁶ “Like sex and gender themselves, there is no transparent criteria for when one stops being cis and crosses into an unwavering transness” (Ibid, 30).

²⁷ “The aim is not just for men to ‘become’ women. (I think ‘women’ should also be in quotes...) I do not want to become a woman; that, to me, is not what gendered liberation looks like, nor is it what must occur for me to ‘be’ trans. ‘Woman,’ categorically, is also a violence. Not of the same register and tenor of ‘man,’ sure, but a violence nonetheless” (Ibid, 95).

²⁸ Hil Malatino says this of the ubiquity with which trans people must present documentation to “prove” their gender or how they must “self-police” their gender presentation: “The panopticon is real, and it is gendered, and we are constantly, constantly, reminded of this” (Malatino 2020, 27).

may justify their transition using transmedicalization, arguing that they are someone who would like to be cis, but they are not due to a mental disorder or some sort, or of a physiological failing that results in them having the “opposite” hormones. Vipond includes some assertions relating to race and gender presentation as well, stating that someone who is transnormative “ascribe[s] to the social categories white, middle class, mentally and physically able, heterosexual, and adhere to normative notions of gender” (Vipond 2015, 23). Transnormativity is dominant as cisheteropatriarchy asserts it as the norm, whereas transhegemony remains dominant in trans spaces because it is a popular stance amongst trans people.

The privileging of medical intervention regarding trans identity and trans states of being has been to the detriment of those most prone to victimization. Kadji Amin writes that while the integration of Claire Colebrook’s “trans* plasticity” into the field of ontology can lead to improvements in understanding fluidity in gender identity and can help with bodily issues that have plagued the human species for millennia (e.g., rejuvenation, de-aging processes, etc.), the current utilizations of glandular sciences and trans* plasticity have done nothing but affirm and “improve” people bodily “...according to cisnormative and dimorphic models of idealized white gender difference” (Amin 2020, 53). He argues further that if we are to understand bodily plasticity and the manners in which transness can shift the body, this “calls for...a nuanced political analysis of the power relations, conceptual genealogies, and biopolitical economies brought into play when putatively distinct orders of being are materially combined” (Amin 2020, 66). “Transing” alone cannot bring about the developments that glandular scientists and transmedicalists wish to discover. Hil Malatino argues something similar in *Trans Care*, stating that the marrying of trans identity with medicalization has led trans-affirming medical procedures to follow a very specific mold: one that “...aims to make us [sic] more passable, more

cistypical, more reprotypical” (Malatino 2020, 27). The blame is, of course, not on those who make the decision to partake in such procedures²⁹ but rather the multiply-coiled systems that allow transhegemony to proliferate and for its attitudes to perpetuate amongst trans and cis people alike.

It is not my intention to understate the importance of medical intervention for those who it is applicable to, as for many, it is medical transition-related care that “solidifies” the completion of their crossing into the gender they wish to embody. Often, transgender people seek medical care to avoid violence that is often accompanied by cisgender people perceiving their presentation. Medical transition is often necessitated on the grounds of trans survival. It is my intention, however, to point out who benefits from this dominant framework: those who do not have an understanding of their gender as racialized, and those whose genders are characterized by dominance and the subjugation of less represented genders. Here, that also happens to be the ones who are often, I would argue, overly represented in most Western trans research: white transgender men and white transmasculine people.

2.2 The U.S. South as a Geography of Radical Black Gender Creation

Southern feminine identity is a finicky institution in itself, as it is more rigid than most forms of femininity we see exhibited across Western contexts. Southern femininity is exuded both by the white antebellum mistress of the plantation tradition as well as the Black mammy figure many are so familiar with. Post-Reconstruction, we have witnessed a shift on the Black side of this dichotomy, as Southern Black cis women have had to manually recreate their

²⁹ Though, like all things, there *are* exceptions – people within trans community that knowingly promote transmedicalism and discourage those who wish to erupt such narratives. I’m not going to make any generalizations about the people who knowingly do this (often inaffectionately referred to as “truscum”) as I do not know their reasons, but what I will say is that maintaining such attitudes is wholly unproductive at best and hypocritically eurocentric at worse.

feminine identities. The modern Black cis woman in/from the South wears many hats, as the saying goes – she is expected to be somewhat of a provider for herself and her family, but also cannot fall into the trap of providing “too often,” as that is deemed a masculine trait. As Black women have been historically degendered and often masculinized, the American South and its slow economic growth in comparison to the rest of the capitalized West have made many Southern Black women teeter between the “masculine” image of “hustle culture,” and the “feminine” image of being passive. Southern Black women often have to toe this very thin line between bold femininity and overt disrespect, lest their femininity be taken away from them in the eyes of others. Southern Black girls, even prior to their adolescence, are expected “...to be articulate, to hold [themselves] with dignity,” and to suppress their urges to express disdain or have low self-esteem (hooks 1996, xiii). E Patrick Johnson argues that “...the expectations for women coming of age within southern culture dramatically diverge from those for their male counterparts, which include gendered dress codes, chores, language, career trajectory, and a whole host of other behavioral and cultural expectations” (Johnson 2018, 19). I argue here that this strict ideology is amplified for Black transgender people in/from The South, but especially Black transgender women in/from The South.

The South is also a region that is often stereotyped by its loudest bigots rather than its larger populations. In opposition to most progress narratives, this divide has actually worsened for The South over time, as Republican and other conservative pundits have weaponized the area’s divisive political environment to further alienate marginalized constituents³⁰. Though those in other regions of the United States may assume The South is completely unaware of transness or trans identity, in actuality, over half of the trans population of America lives beneath

³⁰ “The South is characterized by conservative gender politics. In 2017, red states like North Carolina and Texas tried to pass “bathroom bills” and prohibit protections for people who identify as trans” (Williams 2021, 19).

the Mason-Dixon line (Tamir 2021)³¹. A similar trend reveals itself when looking at racial demographics in The South, as over half of the nearly 15% of Black people that live in America live there (Herman 2022)³². Despite attempts to quell Black and trans futurity, antiBlack and transantagonistic legislation has not driven all of the Black people nor trans people from this region away, as stated previously. In fact, Black trans people in The South are actively creating gender formations that are exclusive to them and their communities.

3 METHODS

3.1 Key Terms of Engagement

Here, for the purposes of this project, the term *Southerner* is meant to describe anyone who has lived-in or is “from” the U.S. South. The U.S. South does not refer just to the states that are below a certain part of the U.S., even though I make numerous references here to the Mason-Dixon line. The region that I am referencing as the U.S. for the purposes of this thesis consists of twelve key states: Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia. I purposefully omitted states such as Maryland and West Virginia, despite them being under the original Mason-Dixon line, as their inclusion in The South is often joked about colloquially due to the area’s politics often aligning with Southern states, but it’s not necessarily a widely-held belief by people around the country³³. Contentious also is the omission of states such as Missouri and Oklahoma, which is also intentional: along with being characterized by their conservative politics, Southern states are often also characterized by their secession from the United States during the American Civil War. Both of these states, Missouri and Oklahoma, bordered both “Northern” and Southern states, and

³¹ As reported by the *UCLA School of Law Williams Institute* in 2022. See references for full citation.

³² As reported by *Pew Research Center* in 2021. See references for full citation.

³³ I derived this information from a 2014 poll with *FiveThirtyEight*. See references for full citation.

neither area *as a state* was an instrumental part of either the union's win nor the confederacy's defeat. Outside of historical ties to the confederacy and political leanings, The South is also defined by more favorable traits such as specific regional dialect and the presence of "Southern" cuisine in the area. Because of this, these twelve aforementioned states best exemplify the cultural analysis I am performing here. I liken citizenship in The South as similar to that of citizenship in the United States as a whole; to be considered a citizen, you must either be born in the U.S., or you must become a citizen through the process of naturalization. Like entering the U.S. upon emigrating, entering The South as a non-naturalized visitor often begets a sort of domestic xenophobia. The South becomes then a site of affective power³⁴ in which you must pledge your allegiance to the pre-existing ways of the area in order to be accepted by the locals. This is because your naturalization, in your attempts to transgress from non-Southerner to Southerner, implies a sort of surrendering to the ideology of the surroundings, a succumbing of sorts to the culture that defines Southern american essence. The voluntary nature of this undoing of the many geographical identities you may arrive to The South with in exchange for the performance of all things quintessentially Southern is deeply romantic, solidifying one's regional identity to them like a marriage contract³⁵ between the newly born Southerner and the region, invoking deeply patriotic affect that the U.S. finds infinitely malleable. This persisting sentiment explains why you may hear Southerners refer to non-Southern americans as "Yankees," or you may hear variations of the phrase, "if you hate it here so much, just leave!" This overtly erotic

³⁴ ...it is important to consider how the state functions as a site of affective power that has shaped the conditions of possibility for the production of U.S. citizens" (Somerville 2005, 671). I argue that this process is replicated infinitely so amongst every region of the U.S., but especially in The South.

³⁵ "Thus, birthright citizenship as an ascriptive model confers status upon a child based on factors that are not under her/his control, such as place of birth or biological parentage. Naturalization, on the other hand, enacts a contractual relationship, a voluntary allegiance between the immigrant and the state...Perhaps not coincidentally, in form, language, and effect, the oath of allegiance [to the U.S.] has similarities to traditional vows of marriage..." (Ibid, 662)

infatuation for The South is exemplified in an instance pertaining to twice-defeated gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams. During her second run for Georgia's governorship, Abrams quipped that Georgia was currently the "worst state" in the nation³⁶, a tongue-in-cheek comment referring to the fact that Georgia is the number one state for maternal mortality and simultaneously very high up the list on factors such as incarceration rates and poor mental health facilitation. Despite her both acknowledging that her comments would be taken out of context and her contextualizing the criticisms with the desire for her homestate³⁷ to be better than it currently is, Republican pundits, including her triumphant opponent Governor Brian Kemp pounced on the chance to rip her argument apart. Kemp twisted her words around to make it seem like Abrams was voicing some kind of clandestine hatred for the state, tweeting in part that "...Abrams may think differently, but I believe Georgia is the best state to live, work, and raise a family" (Jackson 2022). This is what differentiates Southern states from non-Southern ones: a fetishization of the sense of "belonging" that comes with being within the ingroup of Southern identity, and a prevailing (and often totally misplaced) sense of patriotism. The status of being Southern, however, is much more diffuse, as within the exchange between Abrams and Kemp, I recognize and acknowledge two Southerners. The *Southerners* of this work are self-identifying as such; some of the interviewees of this project are native Southerners like myself, and others were naturalized into the identity. A few, even, describe their identity as if they were voluntarily naturalized, but then go on to rebuke the voluntary nature of it. Like gender and femininity and

³⁶ "Abrams made her controversial comments while attacking Kemp and other Georgia Republicans... She said that while Republicans praise Georgia's business, the state lags behind in issues such as workers' wages and mental health care. 'I am tired of hearing about how we're the best state in the country to do business when we are the worst state in the country to live,' she said. 'Let me contextualize. When you're number 48 for mental health, when we're number one for maternal mortality, when you have an incarceration rate that is on the rise and wages are on the decline, then you are not the number one place to live,'" (Jackson 2022).

³⁷ Despite being born in Wisconsin, Abrams considers Georgia to be her homestate, as she lives there currently and was raised there for a majority of her life. In a way here, this also shows how some are "naturalized" into Southern identity.

all other things this project focalizes upon, the state of being a Southerner is far too vast to be quickly operationalized.

In Western contexts, the term *transgender* (synonymous here in this work with *trans* or *trans/gende*³⁸) operates as an umbrella term that encompasses not only those who identify with the “opposite gender” than the one they were assigned at birth, but also those who identify with any gender that does not “match” the one they were assigned at birth. That being said, there are people who identify as non-binary that, while not identifying with a gender that is “opposite” to their binary gender, they too may identify as transgender³⁹. This differs from the term *transsexual*, which refers to someone who identifies with the “opposite sex” than the one that they were assigned at birth and intends to engage in medical processes to appear as the archetype of their determined gender. The state of being transsexual is commonly referred to as *transsexuality*. Transsexuality, despite its spelling, does not refer to sexual orientation nor does it indicate any type of attraction. This term remains contentious, however, as it is often seen as an antiquated and pejorative slur. Even so, there are still trans/gender people that identify with the term *transsexual* regardless of the troubled history of the word, and some even identify with the term without medically transitioning or without ever intending to do so. *Transgender women*, also referred to as *trans women*, are women who were assigned male at birth. The “trans” in *trans woman* operates as a finite term, regardless of the woman’s desire to engage in medical intervention towards her transition or lack of such. *Transfeminine* describes here a person who

³⁸ As some trans people understand trans (also stylized as trans*) to be an umbrella term, I use transgender interchangeably with trans/gender to emphasize the over-encompassing nature and flexibility of this term.

³⁹ Not all non-binary people identify as transgender. For some who do not intend on medically transitioning, they do not identify with it because the term, with the prefix *trans-* meaning across, often operates dialectically as a plan of sorts to “cross” into a different gender. Some also reject the notion of being transgender because they do not want to speak for and/or redirect transition-related resources from binary transgender people who intend on medical intervention in their gender transition.

was assigned male at birth (henceforth AMaB)⁴⁰ but primarily aligns with femininity. Trans women fall into this category, but there are several AMaB non-binary individuals who identify with this term as well. Transfeminine people are also the primary⁴¹ targets of *transmisogyny*, or the systematic hatred and complete disregard for trans women and transfeminine identity. This term was proposed by Julia Serano in the early 2000s, as she did not feel that the term *transphobia* fully encompassed the specific ostracization and danger that transfeminine people and trans women face. Serano defines this plainly by stating “when a trans person is ridiculed or dismissed not merely for failing to live up to gender norms, but for their expressions of femaleness or femininity, they become the victims of a specific form of discrimination: transmisogyny [sic]” (Serano 2009, 14-15), not solely transphobia. *Transphobia* is formally defined as “the irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against transgender people,” but this institution does not only affect those who identify with the transgender umbrella. Serano emphasizes the focalized discrimination and violence that transfeminine face over their transmasculine counterparts, as “...femininity is marked relative to masculinity, with the former garnering far more attention and scrutiny” (Serano 2021, 2).

While few disagree with Serano’s summation here, there are scholars that push back on Serano’s ideas of transmisogyny. One assessment that I have repeatedly seen while perusing the literature is that Serano’s “transmisogyny” does not properly address racialized manifestations of trans/gender. Elías Cosenza Krell criticizes transmisogyny, expressing that Serano’s

⁴⁰ AGaB, assigned gender at birth, as well as AMaB/AFaB is commonly used, but people also use DGaB/DMaB/DFaB, meaning “designated gender/male/female at birth” respectively. Some especially passionate scholars also use the term “ascribed gender at birth” to emphasize the futile nature of birth gender.

⁴¹ Serano does not believe that only transfeminine people are able to experience transmisogyny as she states that “...any person who is perceived as, or presumed to be, a feminine or feminized “male” may be subjected to these same derogatory, pathologizing, and sexualizing attitudes” (Serano 2021, 3).

“universalization of whiteness...forges a theory of [itself] through whiteness and middle-classness while purporting to speak to all” (Krell 2017, 235). For trans people of color who are more visible and considered more disposable than their white counterparts, their gender already cannot be equalized with those whose genders are not forcibly racialized – how, then, should they be expected to equalize their experiences with discrimination based on these genders? Thus, intracommunity discourse around the specific hatred trans women of color experience ensued. The closest term that is now widely accepted amongst trans community is *transmisogynoir*, though this mainly refers to the issues and difficulties that Black trans women face specifically, not trans women of color as a whole. *Transmisogynoir* is a portmanteau of Serano’s “transmisogyny” and Moya Bailey’s “misogynoir⁴².” This term refers to the hatred and discrimination against Black trans women and Black transfeminine people.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Data Collection – Qualitative Interviews

I have derived the data required to explore the questions posed here from one-on-one semi-structured interviews with nine Black trans women and/or Black transfeminine people. These interviews were intentionally semi-structured for two significant purposes. Firstly, I wanted my interviewees to be aware that they were in control of the interview because the agency of Black transfeminine people remains the core value of this project. Secondly, I encouraged the interviewees that chose to engage with this research to add as much or as little detail as they cared to. Rigidly limited questions would not have resulted in the richest and most

⁴² Moya Bailey calls misogynoir “...a term [she] created in 2008 to describe the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in US visual and digital culture” (Bailey 2021, 1). She stresses in her book that “misogynoir” is not simply misogyny that Black women face, but rather it “...describes the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (Ibid, 1). I especially appreciate this latter expansion of the definition, as it expands upon the intersectional nature of misogynoir.

beneficial qualitative data. I focus solely on Black transfeminine people in this work for two key reasons, 1) I do not see them represented often within trans research, and 2) I believe, and recorded and unrecorded data on homicide rates prove that their population is one that is historically under-protected. According to the Transgender Law Center, “hate crimes legislation, while intended to increase safety of protected classes, only further perpetuates the criminalization of low-income communities of color and does very little to end the deadly violence against Black transgender women” (Foster et al 2022). This means that while legislative powers recognize that there is a disproportionate amount of violence suffered by Black trans women, there is very little done about it. If communities of transgender people also do not center their voices, who will? I am hoping that my work will be part of a larger group of contemporary thinkers in the near future that centers on Black transfeminine identity and their voices, particularly as the field of trans studies grows exponentially in popularity with little to no regard for those trans subjects that continue to suffer the most.

I sought my interviewees out via social media primarily, with a few deviations. Some of the interviewees that I conducted for this project came to be through conversations with friends, community members, and like-minded colleagues. I created a flier⁴³ via Canva software that I distributed via Facebook, Instagram, Discord, and through physical means in the Gender Studies suite at Georgia State. I depended on purposive sampling to discern the amount of Black transfeminine people I spoke to, ultimately deciding upon interviewing nine people and utilizing the data from five. I decided to interview more than three people to avoid tokenizing the participants and so that I could study patterns and parallels that emerged as I completed the study, but I also kept the sample size relatively small (less than ten) to remain specific in my

⁴³ Please see Appendix B.2 for a full reproduction of the interest flier that was circulated both in person and over social media in order to attract interview participants.

scope. This is partially because I am not comparing the lives of separate groups of people here. Instead, I am seeking "...to describe a shared perception, belief, or behavior among a relatively homogeneous group" (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson 2006, 76). Additionally, the methodological strategy that I am using here, narrative analysis, is traditionally performed using smaller sample populations as opposed to larger groups. Though this is sometimes criticized by scholars as a breeding ground for gross generalizations, there have been several studies from which theorization has blossomed that based their knowledge on studies of similar sizes⁴⁴. The smaller sample size will allow me deep engagement with a few stories, curating the listening practice I am invested in engaging here. I had 35 participants complete a Google forms survey to confirm their eligibility for the interviews and whittled the population down to the chosen nine. I read the vast amount of responses I received to my initial flier as demonstrative of Black trans women and trans feminine people's desire to tell their own stories. Each interview was at least 60 minutes with a limit of 90 minutes each.

All but one of the interviews were conducted remotely, whether this was over the phone, over Discord, or over WebEx. The one interview that was conducted in person was my interview with Devin, and because of this, they were the only participant who physically signed a consent form. Everyone else submitted a waiver of documentation to me prior to our interview acknowledging the informed consent procedure, as this was requested by the Institutional Review Board rather than having the participants e-sign the consent form⁴⁵. Each interviewee was also asked prior to the interview if they consented to being recorded, and all interviewees did consent to such. I recorded each interview's audio using Audacity software, and upon

⁴⁴ "...sample sizes in narrative studies are small, and cases are often drawn from unrepresentative pools. Although a limitation, eloquent and enduring theories have been developed on the basis of close observation of a few individuals" (Reissman 1993, 70).

⁴⁵ Please see Appendix B.3 for a full reproduction of the procedure that was recited to each interview participant.

commencement of the interviews, I used the transcription function provided by Microsoft Word Online (via GSU's Outlook system) to transcribe the participant's words. I then listened to the audio recorded while reading the generated transcriptions to correct any misheard words or phrases, then manually edited the output myself. I decided upon which interviews to include in this thesis based on three key factors: level of perceived engagement, ability to parse out a narrative, and legibility.

There were quite a few limitations to this research that I did not foresee upon proposing the study. One of these was that offering a cash incentive to interviewees did not entice the most nuanced of participants to sign up. I stressed early on to my advisors that I wanted to offer a monetary incentive to my participants not only because it's a nice gesture, but also paying Black trans women and Black transfeminine people for their labor, even if it is not "labor" in the way some may understand it to be, is core to my praxis as a researcher and as a feminist. Though I do not subscribe to capitalism or capitalist systems personally, my personal beliefs do not prevent such systems from affecting me and these participants. In fact, most Black trans women that I have encountered in my personal life stress that the most helpful thing that those who are not Black trans women can contribute to them is financial support⁴⁶, so I was quite stubborn about keeping this in my project. Including this payment was something I had to lobby for with my advisors for several weeks, and I do feel that including it is part of the reason many of my interviews did not provide as useful data as I desired. For some of my participants, particularly

⁴⁶ "Many institutional factors are at play in this trend [of Black trans women being murdered], and while there is no clear solution to ending the violence, some activists argue for direct financial support of trans women of color—paying them. 'Even small bits of economic security can help keep us away from unsafe situations,' Renee Jarreau says. Jarreau is a Seattle-based musician, DJ, and producer who runs a Twitter account called "Pay Black Trans Women" (@PayBlkTrnsWomen) and uses this platform to amplify disparate calls for financial support" (Garg 2019).

those that were underemployed or younger than 21 years old, that money made quite a difference in their life. Because of this, I observed that the interviews that I conducted with individuals who saw the study as more of a financial obligation rather than an opportunity to share their stories often fell flat. By this, I mean that there was little enthusiasm in the responses I received, and there was little to no elaboration on the participant's part. I would say phrases like "could you say more about that" or "could you go further with that thought, if you're comfortable," and I would still be met with a lack of enthusiasm that, sometimes, seemed to border on disdain. The interviews I've selected to narrate for this work do the exact opposite of this, and were thoroughly insightful, and this did factor into my specific highlighting of them.

The second limitation that I did not consider when proposing this research was accessibility. When I put my research materials through a reader meant to replicate the Flesch-Kincaid reading test, the reader indicated that my interview questions and procedures should be easily understood by anyone with a 10th grade education. What I did not anticipate, perhaps due to the academic echo-chamber that I've bound myself up in over the years, is that there were multiple interviewees that I spoke to who did not complete high school. Ignorantly, I conducted my research under the presumption that anyone who wished to engage in this study had at least a high school education, but that was not the case. Even if the interviewee had a high school education, often I found that the language I used was often inaccessible for the nature of this research. There were several instances in which I had to reword questions or specifically define concepts in order to ask certain questions. This was especially true for the questions regarding "desirability," as I had to repeatedly provide operational definitions of desirability in order to be understood in this work. In addition to this, it did not cross my mind that my criteria would attract people with accents that were unfamiliar to my recording software. In a minority of my

interviews, I spoke with individuals that had very strong accents that often caused the transcription software to mix up or misconstrue what was being said by the participant. What was worse was that during some of these interviews, I was dealing with an illness that made it very difficult for me to decipher some of what was being said as well. Going forward in my studies, if I do engage with qualitative interview again, I will be sure to keep these shortcomings in mind.

Several works that serve as inspiration for the data collection on this project, such as those authored by Lex Konnelly⁴⁷ and Tee Chuanromanee⁴⁸, suffer from the limitation I seek to address in my thesis. Both works (and many others within trans research) unintentionally center on transmasculinity and whiteness. I say “unintentionally” here because neither of these works actively sought out primarily white and transmasculine interviewees – often, it just panned out in this manner⁴⁹ – but this is still a glaring limitation in my view. Secondly, Black women are already perceived as players who operate from a space of “double jeopardy,” where their being has been “...socially manipulated, physically raped, used to undermine [their] own household, and to be powerless to reverse this syndrome” (Beal 2008, 168). Black women do not have the privilege that white women have to be only concerned with sexism, nor the privilege that Black men have to only be concerned with racism. They must be cognizant of both axes of oppression for their survival, while also understanding that they are not able to reverse this transgression. Many Black trans women, however, are not even granted the privileges that Black cis women or

⁴⁷ I reference here Lex Konnelly’s 2021 paper “Both, and: Transmedicalism and resistance in non-binary narratives of gender-affirming care.” Please see references for a full citation.

⁴⁸ I reference here Tee Chuanromanee’s 2021 paper “Transgender People’s Technology Needs to Support Health and Transition” that they co-authored with Dr. Ron Metoyer. Please see references for a full citation.

⁴⁹ “...we made steps to capture the diversity of trans experiences when it came to age and class, because the majority of our participants were white and all were american, we did not fully address the experience of the trans community of color, nor the international trans community” (Chuanromanee & Metoyer 12, 2021).

Black transmasculine people are granted because they must also navigate the ubiquity of transmisogyny and transmisogynoir.

Black trans women embody, also, conceptualizations of gender that are fundamentally rejected by those who align with the dominant view. Their genders and gender expressions exist outside of the conceptualizations of neocolonial understanding. The neocolonial subscribes to the concepts of dimorphism and rejects the idea of mutable genders. Black gender especially falls out of favor with the neocolonial, as Blackness is equated with nonbeingness and with the abject. To be Black and be assigned male but opt consciously to identify with femininity is scandalous to the colonial imagination, and often it is likened to a sign of disaster. Because of this perception, Black trans women and Black transfeminine people are often disproportionately subjected to bodily harm and excessive amounts of scrutiny. However, I must stress that Black trans women are not solely victimized by those that colonial powers privileges. Often perpetrators of violence against Black transfeminine people are cisgender Black men, and Marquis Bey states that the focus on them in liberatory movements such as BlackLivesMatter "...both reveals and perpetuates what qualifies as a 'life' insofar as its implicit codification of black cisgender male lives being those which matter shows how cisgender male supremacy dictates the movement's activist reach, causing it to reify discourses of domination" (Bey 2016, 42). Black trans women should be welcomed within spaces that deviate from the colonial expectations of being. However, even in these spaces, Black transfeminine people are discarded and not prioritized. Their issues are not considered Black issues to all Black populations as they are not deemed "acceptable" to all Black folks.

Within communities of transgender people, there exists a sort of "silent hierarchy," informed by the understood status quo, in which its members quietly slot themselves, without

much objection from those at the top of it. This hierarchy is further complicated when we intersect race with gender, as many people on the top of the hierarchy (read: white trans people) do not see themselves as having a tangible racial identity. Often without question, we are tasked with understanding gender as inherently predicated on the assumption of whiteness. Black trans people and other trans people with racialized gender identities are not afforded such a luxury. It is understood, generally, that Black transgender women often fall to the bottom of this pre-established hierarchy, as there are few advocates that wish to center these women's rights save for themselves. Existing at this juncture of three concepts that are considered the complete antithesis of what Western embodiment is "supposed" to be – Blackness, transness, and female identity, -- Black trans women are often unnecessarily tasked with being perceived as predatory while being treated as prey.

Understanding the risk here with interviewing a population as vulnerable as discussed, I have taken extensive precautions to ensure no harm is perpetuated through this research. To prevent involuntary outing or disclosure of private information, all interviewees' accounts of their experiences have been anonymized in the resulting work unless the respective interviewee expresses the desire to be explicitly credited in the work. Additionally, all data collected (not just data that is deemed identifiable) was stored on my computer which is protected via VPN and advanced encryption. We did not use cloud-based software to back-up this information to prevent leakage of any private data to the internet. This project was determined exempt from full review by the Institutional Review Board under category 2⁵⁰.

⁵⁰ Please refer to Appendix A for a full description of this exemption.

3.2.2 *Data Analysis – Narrative Analysis*

To parse out the data collected from these qualitative interviews, I am employing narrative analysis. Narrative analysis, while a contentious form of data analysis, is a feminist method commonly used to explore interviews such as these. It is broadly defined as “talk organized around consequential events” (Reissman 1993, 3). The main point at which narrative analysis begins to complicate, however, is when the execution of it is not clear to all involved parties. That being said, the narrative analysis I have performed for the purposes of this thesis is riddled with my own biases and perceptions of what is being said, as it is nearly impossible for me to completely erase my own assertions from the discussions. As these interviews were semi-structured, there were several instances during the selected interviews that I interjected (sometimes, unintentionally) the participant’s response to bring up something tangentially related or to emphatically agree with things said by the participant. This is one of the reasons that narrative analysis remains contentious; obviously, the narrative centers on the interviewees’ experiences and perceptions, but my own translations of the material cannot be erased (Reissman 1993, 15)⁵¹. I did, however, make every conscious effort to avoid my interceptions of the data collection whenever possible.

I do not assert here through this methodology that because there are things said by my participants that they are suddenly “true” or “correct” assertions. My goal with this work is to show the varied opinions that exist around Black transfeminine life and ontology surrounding the U.S. South from the mouths of those very women, not to project the false notion that these points of view are the only ones that exist. In fact, as mentioned previously, I do hope that my work will

⁵¹ “...Obviously, the agency of the teller is central to composing narratives from personal experience, but so are the actions of others—listener, transcriber, analyst, and reader” (Reissman 1993, 15). As I am all of these—a listener, transcriber, analyst, and reader--this is applicable to me in every step in using this method.

act as inspiration to future theorists and to trans studies contemporaries to conduct similar research, especially if they generate different results. A secondary goal of this work is also to assert the inherent value of the words and narratives of Black transfeminine people regardless of the ideologies that they present, even if they oppose my own. The narrative analysis that I utilize here falls under thematic analysis, where I will highlight key themes that arise within the text while tracing the participant's personal narrative throughout the interview.

4 RESULTING DATA

The following interviews from my research proved to be particularly memorable. Each of the interviewees is referred to by a pseudonym; this is what was required of their agreement to the informed consent procedure unless they granted me permission to use their actual name. As stated earlier, a large majority of this study's participants signed up for these interviews simply because they found the chance to put their narratives regarding their trans identity to be enticing in itself, beyond any additional benefits of the study. Because of this excitement, many of my interviewees were fairly comfortable attaching their names to their interviews. In some instances, this element of the interview process brought about a sense of intimacy that undergirded the resulting conversations, which is useful in the context of the methodology that I am utilizing here⁵². Similar to the work of E. Patrick Johnson, I practiced active listening during my interviews, making purposeful effort to not interrupt or respond to the participants of the study as frequently as I do in a casual conversation.

⁵² Reissman states that "...narrative analysis is not useful for studies of large numbers of nameless, faceless subjects. The methods are slow and painstaking. They require attention to subtlety: nuances of speech, organization of a response, local contexts of production, social discourses that shape what is said, and what cannot be spoken. Not suitable for investigators who seek an easy and unobstructed view of subjects' lives, the analytic detail may seem excessive to those who view language as a transparent medium" (Reissman 1993, 69). Here I am asserting that knowing that I could openly refer to some of my interviewing by name in this thesis eliminated a lot of the pressure that is often present with interview-based research.

Johnson advises in *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.* that during his interview process he exhibited “...self-effacing attributes that helped set a tone of openness and vulnerability” (Johnson 2018, 12) that allowed him to truly immerse himself in the narratives of the women he spoke to, sometimes finding himself crying right along with them. I found this level of immersion to be aspirational for this thesis, even if Johnson’s methodologies are not the exact same as my own. There are times that I excitedly chimed in with my opinion, such as during my interviews with Edith and Demi, but once I realized my missteps here, I managed to reign myself in. It was quite difficult at times, I will admit, simply because I was so enamored with a lot of the narratives discussed here. Similar to Johnson’s 2018 work, I found that the narratives of my participants oozed from them like a mellifluous honey pour. Thus, I compiled the narratives in a manner that spoke to the conversational nature of the discussions rather than following a thematic organization⁵³. The data are organized by participant with each person getting their own section of the “resulting data” chapter separated by subtitle. I did this rather than coding the interviews by theme, as some themes that I initially noticed proved to be more relevant to certain interviewees than others. Each participant was asked similar questions as described in Appendix B.1, but given the semi-structured nature of these interviews, some interviewees were less forthcoming with certain topics than others. For these reasons, I did not find it most applicable for the purposes of this thesis to organize such a small sample population into a group of themes. Instead, I trace excerpts of their individual personal narratives to unpack what I gathered from each of them.

⁵³ “...The chapters that I have chosen are not neat categories of themes that emerged across the narratives as much as they are signposts for the direction of the honey pour. In other words, while themes of “coming out,” “religion” and “sex” are prevalent in the narratives, those subjects are often covered with a broader context of subjects and themes” (Johnson 2020, 15).

These interviews gave me a perspective that I have been craving from both trans studies works and non-academic works: Black-centric perspectives from transfeminine people. My biggest criticism of how we, as western scholars, engage with transness discursively is that our discussions often reify transhegemonic and transmisogynistic lines of thought. Not only do we often understand transness to be an ailment of sorts that needs curing, but so much of trans narratives are based on the destination or the desired physical embodiment of the trans person rather than the conceptualizations of the now and the short-term. Often we, both as scholars and as trans people alike, forget that trans is the crossing⁵⁴, and it is the journey, and it doesn't end for some, if for any at all. The journey almost never ends for those who transition into an abject identity despite already being considered abjective due to their other intersections, like those whose gender journey centers Black femininity, a construction that is often considered paradoxical in nature.

Before engaging in these interviews, I had the honor of presenting an amended proposal for this project at the 2022 Trans Thinking // Thinking Trans Conference. I presented this proposal under the project's previous name: Tight Coils: Restrictive Black Transfeminine Identity Formation in the American South. Since then, I've made the decision to omit the word restrictive and change "american" to "U.S." I chose the title of this research upon proposing it, and my research has since proven to me that despite my own presumptions, not all Black transfeminine people of the South consider the region to be restrictive of their identities. Additionally, my initial conflation of "america" with "The United States" was quite reductive of me, as we know that the territories that we understand to be america,

⁵⁴ "The trans is an aspiration toward the unrecognizable rather than from already disclosed, recognizable places, The trans *is* the crossing, and it is not always an identifiable mobility across established geographies that require economic and sociocultural dexterity and privilege" (Bey 2020, 133)

meaning North, Central, and South America, as well as The Caribbean, extend far beyond the 50 states that I am referring to in this work. During my presentation, I glossed over the operational definitions for key terms that are now found in my methodology section. At the start of a short Q-and-A session, I received a question about my sample population that surprised me.

A nonBlack crowd member asked me why my definition of transfeminine purposely excluded those assigned female at birth (AFaB). I simply stated that very few individuals that are AFaB who are trans identify as transfeminine, as colloquially the term is used to encompass the genders of non-men who were assigned male at birth (AMaB). This individual then went on to state that they were aware of many trans individuals, primarily in their circles, who were AFaB, medically transitioned, and then in their transness found peace with femininity. I stated then that one core part of transfemininity to me—something that I as an AFaB person did not have access to that I found through these interviews—is the unique experience of boyhood. I opened this thesis alluding somewhat to my own experiences of girlhood, a time of coerced daintiness, forced fragility, and learned helplessness. What I sought out in these interviews was not solely to subvert the expected sample populations of a trans studies work, but also to gain access to a perspective that is often elided from these discussions, one of socialized boyhood: a time of essentialized hegemonic masculinity, hypervolatility, and a space where all effeminate (or, rather, all non-masculinist) instincts were ridiculed and repressed. The crowd member seemed very displeased with this answer, but it's the only answer I had for them.

I will admit, I felt rather slighted by the comment at the time, but I feel that experiencing it was important for orienting and organizing these interviews. This commenter feels that

one can choose to be transfeminine or transmasculine, which is a very romanticized idea of material reality for those whose genders are deeply racialized. For Black people, cis or trans, gender performance is less of a playground and more of a minefield. I do not mean here to imply that nonBlack trans people are exempt from discrimination, gender-based violence, or any of the other horrid things that often result from noncis and/or trans identity. What I am asserting, however, is that Black gender, as it is a comparably new space in opposition to colonial gender, occupies less theoretical space in both trans studies canon and in the schema of all people, whether cis or trans, Black or nonBlack. How simple is it to assert that trans embodiment is something that is achieved through medical transition? If you are aligned with the assertions of this commenter, trans embodiment and ontology are defined through surgery, hormone replacement therapy, and the development of secondary sex characteristics associated with the “oppositional” sex. An AFaB person, in this person’s mind, is able to be considered transfeminine in the event that this AFaB person has transitioned from a female body to a male body, but they now find comfort in “femininity...,” in whatever way this intra-trans group is defining femininity.

What is lost in this definition is what the word transfeminine is intended to umbrella; the term transfeminine is not a cosmetic one, it is one that has a deep history, seasoned with necropolitical implications. The word transfeminine is used commonly not solely to assert one’s personal feelings about their gender identity, but also to imply how their gender expression is perceived systemically. Perhaps I am reading far too deeply into the implications here, but I feel that this line of thinking requires essentialist and neocolonial understandings of gender, whether recognized or not. For most Black people the performance of our genders is incredibly intentional, especially for Black transfeminine

people, lest we be likened to ungendered objects. The definition of transfeminine that this individual is conveying would not elicit the data that I am trying to collect. In addition to this, Black transfeminine people are being disproportionately targeted by bouts of individual and state-sanctioned violence. Thus, I find it unproductive to deliberate on semantics in this way, especially given the historical and necropolitical implications. In my research preparing for this project, I have found instances of people who are AFaB that knowingly identify as transfeminine⁵⁵, but they are few and far between. The general consensus of Western LGBTQ+ communities is that transfeminine refers to the experiences of those who are AMaB and align themselves to femininity, if not for their personal identities' sake, for communicating their relationship to transmisogyny above all else.

I reflect upon all of this to explain what binds each of these interviews to each other. Each interview starts with an initial indication that the participant pointed to as “evidence” of their transfemininity, from early on in their childhood. Each participant is over the age of 18, so all of my participants are post pubescent and far removed from childhood. I start tracing the narrative in the manner that Reissman enumerates in *Narrative Analysis* from this point—slowly, making note not only of what the participants are saying, but also making notes of their delivery and what they may be omitting—and then I begin unfolding the main narrative that I am able to surmise onward. From the narratives that the participants reflect upon in childhood/boyhood, I then move to their understandings of their political geographies and physical positionality. Not only did these aspects of the narratives

⁵⁵ I found instances of people disagreeing on whether or not AFaB individuals are able to claim the label “transfeminine” at this link: <https://gender.fandom.com/wiki/Transfeminine>. Though I do agree with the general consensus that anyone can identify with whatever gender or label they see fit, I think it is disingenuous and entirely privileged to co-opt language that you are fully aware implies experiences that you/your community does not face. That being said, I stick to my original definition of transfeminine throughout this work.

encompass where the individual considers home, but also it allows them the conceptual space to describe what relationship they perceived themselves having with the U.S. South. With these two core elements of their narratives established, I move then to their own perceptions of their current self, asking questions such as how they perceive their own desirability versus who they usually find themselves romantically/sexually involved with, or how they currently feel about their body and if they perceive it as a transfeminine one or not⁵⁶. From there, I enumerated the narratives from the interviewee by tracking how they narrate their own stories, rather than strictly adhering to my agenda with the questions. This is to say that in the event that someone talked about their embodiment in a more passionate way than another participant, I then read this talking point as a defining element of the participant's "adulthood" section of the interview and therefore also their portion of the chapter. To give a specific example, in the case of Demi's chapter, there is an entire part of their discussion of their body that veers into transhumanist theory that is unique to their chapter and is reflected in no one else's.

Reissman speaks to this tendency in the preface of *Narrative Analysis*, highlighting that often traditional qualitative methods fail to predict the variety of thematic elements one may confront when utilizing this methodology in the context of semi-structured interview⁵⁷. Following the individual analyses of these interviews, I return to reflect upon what data I have collected and what can be learned about elements of Black transfeminine identity in the U.S. South. I start by readdressing the questions that frame this thesis, and see what

⁵⁶ Please see Appendix B.1 for a guide that enumerates specific questions asked to each interview participant.

⁵⁷ During her initial use of this method, Reissman described how she found herself in a predicament similar to my own, stating that she "...searched the texts for common thematic elements. But some individuals knitted together several themes into long accounts that had coherence and sequence, defying easy categorization. I found myself not wanting to fragment the long accounts into distinct thematic categories..." (Reissman 1993, vi)

elaborations I am able to come to using this data. To finish out this section, I position these narratives within the theoretical framework established in the beginning of this thesis, marrying theory to material reality.

4.1 Selected Interviews & Data Analysis

4.1.1 *Brittany, “Why Am I Not Like Other Boys?”*

Brittany (she/her) was twenty years old at the time of our interview, making her one of the younger people that I spoke with for the purposes of this project. Like myself, Brittany is a constant traveler. She answered my WebEx call to her from her home in California, though she more so identifies with her time in the Southeastern United States. She told me that despite living in California and having familial roots in Africa, she most strongly identifies with her time in Georgia, and she specifically highlighted the weather as one of her favorite things about The South. I asked her then about what she found different about The U.S. South versus other areas of the U.S.:

BRITTANY: I think in those areas we have.... And the people in those areas...they are...they are like, different from these other parts because, well, in those areas, their...what do you call it? Their culture. I get that their culture is different. Their practices. How they do things, like how they.... yeah. Like they are the people in that area are like, I don't know what to describe it but...they are good, they are good.

VIC: Like they're kind or like they're morally good?

BRITTANY: Yes, they are kind. They are really kind.

VIC: Okay.

Brittany went on to elaborate that she witnessed firsthand a sense of “Southern hospitality” upon living in Georgia for two to three years, despite her describing her family home to be in Texas. She said that in previous places that she lived, she noticed that when she needed help, there was no sense of community, but this was completely different in Georgia. In Georgia,

she said, she was cared for by strangers in a way that she never experienced before, and given food at a time when she was not in a place to locate food for herself.

Brittany described her homelife as a tumultuous one, and the solace that she found was the many girls and women in her life. She refers to all the girls that she grew up around with words like *loving*, *caring*, and *tender*, giggling every time that she thinks back on these times. She let me know that her experiences with girls growing up led her to associating femininity with positive feelings as early as six years old, and this is when she started to understand herself as transfeminine. It wasn't until she was thirteen, however, that she began to truly understand what this strong affinity for femininity would mean for her. At thirteen, she was in a relationship with a boy that she knew.

BRITTANY: “I didn't feel love for him. I just wanted love from a lady or a woman. The love I get from those of the male gender...they are not happy. Men are not happy or loving.”

It was only then that Brittany began to recognize herself as transfeminine and identify also as a lesbian. Being a lesbian is a key part, she expressed to me, of her identity as a trans woman. That sentiment warmed my heart, as often there are misconceptions amongst cisgender LGB people that transgender people are devoid of queer sexualities. There is a common misconception that circulates within queer contexts that transgender people are solely transgender⁵⁸, and there have been persistent efforts within said communities to separate transgender people from otherwise queer communities⁵⁹. To hear a transgender woman, especially a Black transgender woman, be so openly proud of her lesbian identity when many cissexist cisgender lesbians would surely look down upon her for this made me smile. She told me that she feels good being transfeminine, and

⁵⁸ Matt Richardson states that “the fixed imagined borders between sexual identity and gender identity are enlivened by the inability to recognize that transpeople (sic) can also be lesbians and gay” (Richardson 2013, 372).

⁵⁹ Here I'm thinking specifically of the LGB Alliance, which is a group of cisgender queer people based in the UK that was established in 2019 in an attempt to rally lesbian, gay, and bisexual cisgender people against transgender inclusion in the region. Many critics consider them a hate group, and I am one of those critics, but the sentiment is growing strong (especially in the UK).

that though some express disdain for her identity, she enjoys it because she feels that others are caring for her and holding her in a high regard just as she does to other women.

Brittany shared also that she sees everything that people do and say when she walks in a room: the whispers, the loud gossiping, and the parents shielding the eyes of her kids. She particularly harped on her experiences with the parents hiding their kids away from her, and expressed that while she understands their ignorance, it's especially irritating to witness. Brittany teaches school-age children, and she informed me that she thoroughly enjoys the job, though she wishes that people wouldn't be so quick to judge her upon realizing that she is transfeminine.

BRITTANY: There was a time when I went for a job, and when they learned that I was transfeminine, some of the parents, because I teach kids, some of the parents were like, no, it's not...She's not fit for our kids. Stuff like that.

This aspect of the discrimination she faces seemed to be a continued theme for Brittany's interview, and it's understandable, given our present political climate, why this is. Brittany's occupation centers on children, but even beyond this, there has been a concerted effort as of late on the part of American legislators to portray transgender people as predatory or risky to have around children. This concern has extended far past legislators, as many individual Americans share the same thoughts as these lawmakers, or at the very least internalize the lawmakers' messaging. One concerned survey respondent spoke with Pew Research Center⁶⁰ in mid-2022. When asked why they oppose the advancement of transgender rights' in the U.S., they stated that "it's being pushed on society and especially on younger children, confusing them all the more. This is not something that should be taught in schools." The "it" here seems to refer to

⁶⁰ I gathered this information from a report entitled "Americans' Complex Views on Gender Identity and Transgender Issues," published by the *Pew Research Center*. The results were analyzed and published in June of 2022. Please see references for a full citation of this data.

transgender existence. It is a very disturbing trend for trans educators like Brittany who is just trying to live her life.

Something unique about my conversation with Brittany is that she specifically pointed to Asian trans women, broadly, as far more privileged than Black trans women when asked about groups of people that have easier times navigating through the world as transfeminine. She described being Black in America as good, but said that Asian trans women have a much simpler gender journey than Black trans women do. She told me another anecdote about searching for a job, and she told me that her Asian friend was selected for the job almost immediately, whereas she was told she “wouldn’t be a good fit for the position,” despite having higher qualifications.

BRITTANY: The Asians? It's like they are more privileged than the black. You know, the black. I don't know what people think about the black, but I feel like the Asians, because I have an Asian friend, [who is] also transfeminine. We went for a job interview [together] and she was considered and she said she's done permanent [she's being considered for a permanent position]. But when I said that I felt like they saw me like I'm not fit for the job, but she was fit for it. And [as] for the qualifications, I had higher qualifications than her, but she was just given the job.

VIC: OK, understood. So you feel that Asian trans people have a different experience than you as a Black trans person.

BRITTANY: Yeah, I feel like that.

This was a shocking admission to me, but upon reflection, I do wonder if Brittany's perspective on Asian privilege is at all influenced by her current location, since Asian people represent part of the majority minority populations in the Southwest U.S. I prompted her to expand upon this idea, but she was not interested in elaborating further. She did state later, however, that she felt that Asian trans women as well as white trans women have an easier time navigating aspects of transfeminine life than she and other Black transfeminine people do.

VIC: Have you ever felt that not being black would improve your experiences dating as a black transgender woman?

BRITTANY: Yeah, it would improve because I told you we have the perceptions from the black people. But I feel like being a white or Asian, it could change...it would change a lot because there would be no one judging me.

VIC: Have you ever felt that not being black would improve your experiences? Not just dating, just living as a black or a transgender woman? Why not? Why or why not?

BRITTANY: OK, I think being black, it's a good thing. But in america, in america...I think, like, when you are not black, being white or Asian. It would improve your experiences.

VIC: OK. And why is that?

BRITTANY: Because like. I feel like the white, the white people are not judgmental. Are black. The white people are just. They are not judgmental. Yeah.

I made a mental note here of two things evident in what Brittany said here. For one, Brittany emphatically states that she is happy to be Black, and that being Black is a good thing. At no point during the interview did I suspect that Brittany would like to be anybody else other than herself, regardless of the perceptions that she perceives both america generally and other Black people to have of her. The second thing that I thought was important to note is that even though Brittany advises that being either white or “Asian” would improve her way of life in america, she states that solely white people are a population she understands to *not* be judgmental towards her. I found it interesting that this was the one instance during our interview that she did not pair Asian identity with whiteness. I wondered, after our interview, if her perceptions around white people had to do at all with the time that she lived within the Deep South. I recalled how she let me know that Southerners were quintessentially good people who provided for her when she was not able to get help elsewhere. She did not divulge as much detail when we discussed this period of her life, but what she did let me know is that being Black was a double-edged sword of sorts. She very much loves being Black, but she credits a lot of the ostracization she experiences to not only her being Black, but Black communities also being narrow-minded when it comes to transgender identity.

BRITTANY: I think being black is a good thing because we are being a black person. I feel like we are...OK, how do I say it? I feel like black people are just the best people in here [in america] because black people they have...they are kind. They just don't. They treat others well. They have that faith. I feel like they are, in general, when you compare black and white, I feel like black people are more caring. They're more happy. They're more understanding, yeah.

VIC: OK. And how does being black impact your identity as a black trans woman?

BRITTANY: OK, being black and my identity as a black transfeminine woman, I feel like...many people feel...I don't know, but they don't feel black being a trans, black transgender woman. Many people think that it's bad, especially fellow black people, black American, because they don't know why. Black Americans think being a transgender, it's like a bad thing. They don't understand that it's just a feeling. It's not what you wanted, but it's what you've found.

This was confusing at first for me to understand how Brittany could both consider Black people to be a population synonymous with judgment, but also consider us “the best people in here.” However, the sentiment is clear when you read between the lines—Brittany wants badly for Black community in america to be better. She believes that we have the capabilities to be accepting towards transgender people within our communities just as white americans (generally) seem to be, but for religious reasons (consider the use of “that faith” in this context) or out of pure ignorance, Black americans continue to get into their own way. Her ultimate plea is for Black people to recognize that transgender people do exist within our communities, and that it's disingenuous to behave as if this is not so.

4.1.2 Edith, “Too Many Things Crashed Into One Another.”

Speaking with Edith (she/her) felt like speaking with an old friend, even though this was our first time meeting. Edith is the wife of a friend that I made while in undergraduate, and she was ecstatic about getting the opportunity to speak about her experience as a Black trans woman in Georgia.

EDITH: I was born in 1995 in Jacksonville, FL and there's a fun little terrible anecdote there where while I was being born, that's when the Oklahoma City bombing was happening. So.

VIC: Oh my goodness.

EDITH: Right, right. Now I remember being in middle school and just [upon finding out her birthday is the anniversary of the bombing] being like, hey, it's April 19th and on this Day in History, blah blah blah. It's like, oh, well, that's fucked up. (laughs) So yeah, Jacksonville, FL. 1995. Terrible year. We only lived in Florida for just about until I was a year old and then we moved to Georgia, [and] I've been knocking around there for my whole life.

Edith and her husband currently live in an area north of Atlanta, GA, but her upbringing bounced her all around the state, from Fort Valley to Albany. At the time of this interview, she was pursuing a bachelor's degree in performance from a university in the Atlanta area. She says that despite being born in Jacksonville, the wide rural spaces of Fort Valley more resonate with her upon hearing the word "home." I asked her if these things made her a Southerner, and her answer was quite revealing.

EDITH: I mean, one thing is of course, you know, [husband's name] and well, we're married, and I guess I know I'm...I'm definitely not Northern. I think I've been to [husband's homestate, a northern state] a bunch of times. They are different up there.

VIC: Because [husband] is from [state]?

EDITH: Yeah, yeah, he's from [state]. So whenever I visit his family, whenever I'm up there, it's just like people do things *way* differently up there. It's a, it's a vibe, you know, being Southern is a vibe and. I vibe with it, I guess.

VIC: OK, so that goes into my other question... Do you enjoy living in the South? Why or why not?

EDITH: I don't particularly *enjoy* living in the South, I mean, I enjoy living in close proximity to friends and family. That's about it. I really don't like...I remember. I felt like I saw a bumper sticker. We were getting an emissions test the other day, and the bumper sticker of the truck in front of us had, like Infowars, all over it. And like literally, they had this big sign on their back, which on their back window that said "9/11 was an inside job."

VIC: Oh my goodness.

EDITH: And like, I literally gasped out loud and [husband] was like, "What? What's wrong?" And I said "That's that's some...I mean that's some next level shit," And he looks at me and says. "I mean, this is Georgia." I had to take a second. Like...Yeah, this place is rotten to the core. I'm just gonna be honest, I have, like, A student who I used to teach, who...their family ghosted me when they found that I was trans and the kid, his family owns a lot of the shopping centers near where I live, and a lot of like the plazas. And, you know, some touristy areas in [north Atlantan city] and like just, I mean, they are...It's just so...They're old blood, old money. You know what I mean? Like "The South Will Rise Again" types too. "The only problem with America is the people who came on the Mayflower aren't in charge of everything." Yeah. And you know...it's weird. I teach in an area where like that's just an inescapable part of my clientele. And yeah, it's

hard for me to like even show up on that part of town without, like, seeing a little bit. Just from the like you know. Wow, this is the least Black part of the whole area and all the cute little antique stores and all the cute little like high end clothing stores where you can dress like a grandma for 10 trillion dollars and it's just a...It's a weird place. The South is a weird and uncomfortable place, and it's the only place that I know how to navigate. So I guess all that to say, I don't know what I do in any other part of the country and this part of the country is uniquely fucked up in a way that keeps me up at night.

VIC: I see. So going off of that idea, because you mentioned that your husband is from [northern state], and you said because of that, and because of the way that they operate up there, you wouldn't ever be in The North. What do you think is the real difference between the South and other regions of the U.S.?

EDITH: That's a good question. I think that one of the big differences is just like the myths that people tell themselves so, like so, like whenever I leave The South, there's this prevailing idea that, like, you know, the Northerners were the good guys in the Civil War so they have...They were born with their hands washed as it were, and that...I'm not saying that's the vibe that I get from like, you know, individuals who I've met, but that is the vibe that I get just from like the...from the...traveling to [city in husband's homestate] and seeing all the support for Black Lives Matter at the same time as seeing like the fact that the police precinct that was burned down in the George Floyd riots has been built like better than ever and is way more protected and nobody really talks about it. Or at least nobody looks at that to say, "Hmm, maybe these things are at cross purposes?" Like, there's a lot of lip service. To good causes, which is a step in the right direction, and it's still like business as usual because at least we're not Southerners. You know what I mean?

VIC: I see.

EDITH: Yeah, that's. Yeah, it's one of those weird things.

VIC: And you say you say that The South is the only place that you know in which, like, how to navigate. Can you elaborate on what that means?

EDITH: Yeah. So like...Like one thing is people from The South are more...I'm trying to say this without being too generalist but, typically when I'm talking to Southerners, I can just read their faces better. I can get a feel for them way faster. You know you can tell if someone you can tell if a Southerner comes from old money within a few minutes of talking to them. You can tell if a Southerner comes from new money. Pretty fast, you can tell. Just those kinds of things 'cause it's like it's like you don't want to get beat up by anybody, so.

VIC: Right.

EDITH: I know how to keep Southerners from beating me up.

VIC: I see. I see.

EDITH: But yeah, when you leave ...Georgia, it's just like...It's hard to get a feel for a neighborhood. It's hard to get a feel for, like, you know, a part of town. Which I guess that's not something I've had to do in a while, and I went to school in the suburbs. So, I guess the suburbs are the same no matter where you go, but, it's...you know what I think it is? I'm used to...like

white Protestants, you know, ...the Southern Baptists and the like. I'm really used to being around them because my dad, my parents are from the Bahamas and when my dad came over to the United States in the 80s, he was really sold on the Ronald Reagan type conservatism like, well, if I work hard, I can, you know, provide for my family and stuff. So he always made sure that when we went to church and stuff that we were surrounded by Republicans, for lack of a better answer. What I'm trying to say is, old people who care a lot about God and young people who decided to stop going to church as soon as they [could]. Like, I get those people in particular because I was raised by old people who care a lot about God, and I've met a whole bunch of old people who care a lot about God, right? So if I'm caught in a nursing home, I can chat anybody up because I know the language. With that, I was really, really taught how to navigate white spaces and how to navigate specifically white Christian spaces.

VIC: Right.

EDITH: And I grew up navigating a lot of like “new” atheist spaces and a lot of things like that and yeah, the game is just really, really different. If you go places outside of Georgia because like, my grandpa in law is Catholic and they are...they just...they don't. They don't really share the same jargon as us, you know, so it's different having conversations and it's different...to navigate.

Growing up in The South, Edith learned quickly what she needed to do and what she shouldn't do if she wanted to avoid violence from Southerners around her. Despite now identifying with atheism, she is fully aware of how deeply interwoven the Christian church is with The South's outward facing persona of upholding white Christofascist morality. Just as significantly, Edith realized that she felt alienated from her parents growing up, immigrants from the Bahamas while she was born in the United States. She seemed to have a personal epiphany during this question and expressed her displeasure with how “trained” she had become to speaking “properly” with certain groups of people, especially white Southerners, regardless of religion. She didn't necessarily express disdain with being from The South or identifying as a Southerner, but she wistfully expressed just how purposefully distanced she was from Black American spaces, and how expectations of Southern Black femininity really pushed her from an obedient and passive son of immigrants to the woman she's become today.

EDITH: Really, I think that those expectations kept me in the closet. Basically, I mean not to say that...Yeah, not to say that I'm not able to embrace my femininity but honestly, I never...my

parents—Well, my dad in particular—worked pretty hard to keep me out of black spaces growing up and so I never really figured out how to fit in in black spaces in the first place and then in realizing my gender identity and the like....(laughs) Too many things crashed into each other, if that makes sense, like the sheer volume of code switching plus the...well, I reached a point where I was, you know, in my mid-20s, realizing that I feel like the person that I am on the inside. Absolutely no bearing on any of the decisions I was making ... The way that I led my life was incompatible with who I was and who I wanted to be and...yeah.

I could tell from her tone while answering these questions that our discussion was starting to delve into previously uncharted territory. Edith laughs often during this interview not only because she makes frequent quips during it, but also as a punctuation for some of her more revelatory answers. I also sensed a sort of regretful tone to her voice at times, as she lamented about how calculated some of her vocal tendencies were. She expressed that due to her stature and her understanding of how many white people in The South automatically see women like her as a threat, she often finds herself involuntarily stunting her movements to shrink herself or keeping her voice low so as to not rouse onlookers. She repeatedly stressed also that so much of her tendencies were developed from her having no sense of Black community, let alone Black trans community. This did make me a bit more comfortable speaking with her despite not yet knowing her, as I, a child of an immigrant's child, also related to constantly having to code switch as well as to sticking out amongst communities within which I hoped I would've blended in.

I then was curious of Edith's navigation of trans spaces, and more specifically, her introspective process that led her to realizing that she is transgender.

VIC: OK. Moving more into specific experiences of trans community, can you share an experience from your childhood that acted as an initial indication that you were transfeminine or transgender? Only if that [label] applies.

EDITH: Well, I mean. Like all of my toys, when I was a kid were the Barbies and I wouldn't get out of the car to go grocery shopping unless my parents let me carry my Barbie around. And I remember being in AP Psych [class], junior year of high school and the teacher [was] saying to us, *Well, if you give a little boy a Barbie doll, he'll play with it like it's a sword because boys and girls are different.* And it's just like, well, I didn't do that, but I'm going to keep my mouth shut.

(laughs) I was just always obsessed with like, prettiness as a concept. I remember thinking like, well, wouldn't it make more sense for boys to wear perfume because girls like pretty smells? I mean, it would just make more sense, right? And then, but I remember, one of my first memories is painting my mom's nails because I just always saw her painting her nails, and I was like, can I help? What are you doing? How does that work? And you know, I wanted to paint my nails too. And you know, but that was out of the question, of course, but I would paint my mom's nails. We had a lot of fun.

Edith did not formally start identifying as transfeminine until her mid-to-late twenties, which is fairly recent, but reflecting upon her identity in this interview allowed her the space to pin down exactly where things began to fall into place for her.

VIC: So personally, when did you begin to recognize yourself as a trans feminine person or a trans woman?

EDITH: The first time that I learned [about] the gender binary was when I was in middle school and a good friend of my brother's came to visit and she was a trans woman, well, she was trans girl at the time, I guess because she was in high school, but she was always very open about her identity and she always answered my questions. And I remember slowly realizing that I had way more in common with her than I had with, like, anybody else in my life. And so, the idea was in there, there was a lot of repression going on because of course. I knew that even if it was a reality, it wasn't like a viable option for me living in my parents' house and all that, but I've known that I wasn't a boy since middle school. But I didn't...I still didn't end up coming out in any significant way until I was about 27, maybe 26.

VIC: OK, so relatively recently. So what does transfemininity mean to you and how has identifying as transfeminine impacted your everyday life?

EDITH: To me, the most concrete thing that it means is that I am hormonally incompatible with my body in a really deep way. I could always feel that testosterone was knocking around in there and it filled me with disgust and rage and, right now, being on testosterone blockers, I knew from the first few days of it I was just calm and I wasn't so angry all the time. And just, you know? So to me, transfemininity is kind of...I used to tell people, well, I'm just a very soft boy, I really wanna celebrate my, you know, my softness. My lack of warlike attributes, I suppose. To me it really means I.... Ah, goodness. Now it sounds more like a generalization but still.

VIC: No, no, feel free.

EDITH: I want to be soft and nurturing and the like and...It's weird to say those things out loud, even still. Yeah, I guess transfemininity to me is about that kindness, and that sympathy and that empathy that boys are often told that they're just not allowed to possess, just really leaning all the way into it. And letting it be your guide, I guess.

From here, we see how the ways of Southern identity have coiled themselves around Edith's perceptions of herself. So much of what Edith defines as crucial to her transfemininity – her

grace, her sympathetic nature, and her kindness – are all things that directly juxtapose the manner in which she was raised to be. It’s true for trans people in most contexts that they grow up to become someone that is completely distinct from the person others intended for them to be. As Edith has expressed, this is only compounded upon within the U.S. South. The manner in which Edith stated “truths” about race relations and gender ideas in this interview proved to be vacant of nuance. This is not to suggest that she is not capable of being nuanced, but rather that this is the design of the bind that The South puts Black transfeminine people in. Things in The South are historically designed to emphasize a black and white binary: there are women and men, Black people and white people, people doing correct things, and people who are doing things incorrectly. When you’re forced to build your identity in this environment, or to “lean all the way into it,” to quote Edith, only then do you notice the mental tension you’ve accumulated from trying so hard not to attract others’ ire.

Since we were already somewhat on the topic of perception, I asked Edith to let me know if there were specific people within trans community that she felt received more support than other trans people. Her answer was unique in that she did not default to race as other interviewees had.

VIC: Do you feel that there are specific trans people, regardless of modality or gender, that get access to more resources or opportunities than you do as a black trans feminine person?

EDITH: Yes, mostly it's a class thing. I'd say so. Like so like, right now I'm transitioning through Plume⁶¹ and that's \$99.00 a month. Every month! Before even factoring in the price of hormone therapy and well that's, I mean that's that would have been a nonstarter even like three years ago for me that would have just been a complete nonstarter.

VIC: Right.

EDITH: And you know, I'm not saying I'm poor because I'm black, but guess what? (laughs) I'm black and used to be poor. I'm not so poor anymore. But still like, my older sibling is really

⁶¹ Plume Health is a telehealth-based program intended to help people access care for their medical gender-related transitions, whether they are just starting to medically transition, or if they are looking to continue transitioning. Their website is <https://getplume.co/>.

questioning their gender and really thinking hard about hormones and stuff. And like, they don't, they're not as financially secure as I am and so, like I want to give them the resources that I have, but I know that they can't. They can't be paying that monthly. And so, yeah, I definitely think that accessing gender affirming care is way more difficult for Black trans women.

VIC: As you are currently, do you see your body as a transfeminine one? Why or why not?

EDITH: I do see my body as a transfeminine one. Not that I look that much like a cis woman, but I feel like I carry myself like one as opposed to... In the way I walk, in the way I talk, and the way I move and, you know, assert myself in the room. I feel like, you know it's just...yeah, I have deep esoteric thoughts about movement, I guess, yeah.

VIC: I mean, it makes sense you're majoring in performance.

EDITH: Oh yeah, that's fair. (laughs) That is fair. No, I've always prided myself on my sense of balance. For instance, I feel graceful. I am almost never stationary. When I am stationary, possibly I could be mistaken for a cis man, but as soon as you see me move, or as soon as people hear me talk, or the things I do with my wrists. People at least know that I'm queer. I can't avoid that. If I had to, it would be a full time job. (laughs)

VIC: (laughs) OK. Have you ever been told by another trans person, again, regardless of race, modality or gender identity, have you ever been told by another trans person that you need to undergo transition? If so, who was this person?

EDITH: Nope, I've never been told by a trans person that I need to.

VIC: So do you feel that you need to undergo body modification in order to be considered trans feminine?

EDITH: No, I don't. And to that point, I know that a lot of trans women will, like, train their voice to sound more feminine and the like, and I just don't really want to go through all that effort, honestly. Even in explaining to my students that I'm transitioning, like that's a box that I'm checking, you know, the hormones. That's the important part for me, just like having a hormonal cycle that links up with how I feel it should, but beyond that I'm a very, *very* lazy person. If it's too much effort for me, maybe if I was a millionaire, I would consider you know, but that would go along with like, Botox. It's probably rude of me. But I put them in the same camp.

VIC: No, I mean I feel like a lot of—

EDITH: Cosmetic surgery *is* cosmetic surgery.

VIC: I feel like a lot of cis people—not to interrupt the interview, but I feel like a lot of cis people go through gender confirmation without saying it, you know, so.

EDITH: Yes, exactly.

VIC: Or just like, you know, after 50, Cis men start taking testosterone treatments, it's like, OK, we get it. But that actually serves as a great segue into my next question, which is, let's hypothetically say that there are no physical or financial limitations to the modifications you could make to your body. What are the modifications that you would undergo?

EDITH: Oh, it would all be tattoos and piercings and then after that. Probably Brazilian butt lift. Honestly no, that's a terrible joke, but I wanna be juicy (both laugh). I wanna be looking like you know, Gigi Hadid or whatever the black Gigi Hadid is. Like, 6 feet tall.

VIC: Oh, you...that's shorter. You're already 6 feet. Not that you would add.

EDITH: No, you know. Yeah, I'm already 6 feet tall. Oh, man, if I could be, like, 10 inches shorter, that would be everything.

VIC: Again, there's no limitations to this hypothetical like, whatever it—

EDITH: Oh, no limitations at all?

VIC: Yeah, if you want horns, you can have horns.

EDITH: Oh, *oh man*. (laughs) OK, hold up, hold up because I am specifically thinking there is...Ah, goodness with that much to consider. No, but I could look any way I want. In my dreams, I always have a very particular look. Honestly, I'm...maybe right now I'm 6 feet tall in my dreams. I'm always like probably 5 foot eight or somewhere. Of course, thinner, because everyone wants to be thinner, but I can see it really clearly, but it's hard to describe. I would have so much less jaw. So much less jaw and a wider forehead, lighter eyes. Narrow shoulders.

VIC: Does the person that you're envisioning look like any kind of person that's prevalent in the media?

EDITH: Not really, I mean...it really just resembles like, I guess, what my sister would look like if she had my exercise regimen. Yeah, that's about it.

This portion of the interview felt so natural to facilitate, as Edith loosened up more once we discussed the hypothetical situation in which she could express herself through body modification with no limits. I find two parts of this section important to highlight. The first one is that Edith acknowledges transhegemonic expectations of transfeminine transition when she discusses vocal training. Unlike testosterone, estrogen and other medications that constitute HRT for transfeminine people can tend to have a limited or non-existent effect on voice pitch for the person taking them, assuming that this person is taking these medications post-pubescently. To align to transhegemonic and cisnormative expectations of trans womanhood or out of personal desire, many trans women opt to “train” their voices to sound “properly” feminine. This is most

commonly done through vocal therapy or self-training, but recently, more and more trans women are opting to have their vocal cords operated upon through laryngoplasty in order to make their voices higher. This is, of course, not out of sheer preference. The question of personal choice is one always under the duress of needing to not deviate from “normative” cisgender feminine voices. Trans women’s voices often out these women nonconsensually, leaving them exposed to those who may wish to enact violence upon them⁶². Edith expresses her exhaustion with the amount of upkeep expected of transhegemonic transfemininity, and instead opts to ignore such “requirements” that are assumed of her identity. In this way, she is rejecting the ideal model for Black femininity in the eyes of misogynoir (Bailey 2021) perpetrators, one that is “surrounded by hypocritical homage and estranged from all real work, spending idle hours primping and preening, obsessed with conspicuous consumption, and limiting life's functions to simply a sex role” (Beal 2008, 167). Edith makes clear here that her femininity is intended only for her comfort, and not for the consumption of others.

The second thing I find significant about this exchange is the definition of gender-affirming care and/or transitional care. As both Edith and I pointed out here, there are plenty of procedures that cisgender people receive – sometimes with insurance covering it –that is not deemed gender-affirming care, despite the fact that these are also gender-affirming procedures. Botox injections, testosterone treatments, and Brazilian Butt Lifts (BBLs) are all procedures that cisgender people either get on a daily basis or yearn for openly. Rarely are these discursively understood to be gender affirmations.

⁶² “...a different voice is not just a luxury, it’s also a means of protection. For trans women, voice is often times (sic) the most significant indicator of their transness to the outside world. In 2018, LGBTQ advocates documented at least 26 homicides of trans people in the United States. Two murders of trans women have already been reported in 2019. For trans women, achieving a feminine voice can serve as a cloak of protection from bias and bigotry” (Daniari 2019).

Understanding gender affirmation under this scope seemed to delight Edith, and thus she explained further on what she would allow herself to partake in, if given the chance to exist in a space free of judgment or limitation. I concluded this section by asking Edith about how her racial identity directly impacts her transfemininity.

EDITH: It's weird. As a defense mechanism, or maybe just as a disarming tactic, I've always played up my femininity when having to deal with white people, especially older white people, just to really set them at ease and make sure they know I'm not going to attack them or anything and recently that's put more of a sour taste in my mouth, even though it's a, it's a *modus operandi* that's hard to shut off. I think that's...could you repeat the question?

VIC: No, you're fine. I was just asking how does being black impact your transfemininity?

EDITH: Yeah. So I guess, I pretty much consciously become a lot more confrontational around it recently, like if I'm leaving home in a dress, I am clocked by every single person. There is not a snowball's chance in hell of me passing⁶³, you know? So I really give off waves of *do not fuck with me*, just I, I practically stomp when I walk. I want people to understand that I will stab them.

Again, we see here that Edith is expressing a sort of dull anger, one developed through years of masking and years of tiptoeing between the stereotype of the dangerous Black man and the wrathful Black woman⁶⁴. She communicates here something that seems contradictory on its face; how can one wish to look harmless while also giving off an air of “do not fuck with me?” This seemingly paradoxical mindset shows how tightly coiled Black Southern transfemininity can be for women like Edith, as there is a constant understanding that someone else's perception of your rightful indignation can lead to harassment. It is important to point out that the language here of “passing” operates duplicitously, as there is little promise of protection in the event that she does find a way to pass; for the paranoia around trans people existing in america is at such an all-time

⁶³ In transgender communities, the word “passing” refers to one's ability to walk through the world without being “clocked” as transgender. Those who are rarely clocked and avoid harassment by living in stealth are often referred to as “cis-passing.”

⁶⁴ The “angry Black woman” trope is a stereotype that exists in societal norms and in fiction, banishing Black women to the “Sapphire” figure. When Black women are labeled unjustly “angry,” this often leads to them developing lower than normal levels of self esteem, or even being seen as unintelligent (Mowatt et al 2013, 652). I would personally argue that since many cisgender people perceive Black trans women as Black cis men, this stereotype is even more harmful when lobbied at these populations.

high that many cisgender bigots attempt to find “anomalies” in strangers’ gender presentation, regardless of if said stranger is trans or cis.

At the end of this interview, I thanked Edith for her candor, and she thanked me for offering her a question that really made her introspect. I will admit that I found myself emotionally connected to this interview, as I found Edith’s sardonic yet revealing responses refreshing and eye-opening.

4.1.3 Moca, “I Can Work With It Instead of Fighting It.”

The “it” in this case refers to Moca’s (he/him or they/them, interchangeably) feelings about their own body. They told me during this interview that their body was a big point of contention for them regarding their gender identity, but they were slowly learning to work with it rather than fighting against it. I asked them to elaborate on this.

VIC: All right, so in general, how do you feel about your body?

MOCA: A little...a little...I’m happy with it. It’s still like a work in progress, and it’s kind of something that I’ve been struggling with over the years, but recently I’ve been talking to, like, multiple friends and just seeing how they view their own bodies and what they do to, like, mitigate that feeling of “*Ohh, I don’t like what I see when I look in the mirror.*” Or they’ll look down like, um, just not be happy or really upset with what they look like and it’s gotten to, for me personally, it’s gotten to a point where I’m like, you know what? This is what I was given. And this is what I got. I can...I can work around it. I can work with it instead of trying to fight it.

VIC: Have you gotten any body modifications, gender confirmation surgeries, or engaged in hormone replacement therapy at all?

MOCA: No, I haven’t...

VIC: Is this something you would want to do or do you not see it to be necessary?

MOCA: I don’t see it to be necessary for me for the way I display my femininity. Um... Yeah, that’s. That’s my answer.

Moca and I spoke over the phone for this interview, and though I could not visibly see them during the interview, I could very easily hear the hesitation in their voice throughout. This was

not at all due to the interview itself, as they were quite excited to verbalize their thoughts around their gender to someone in a way they haven't been able to previously. I sensed the hesitation in their wavering voice whenever I asked questions directly relating to the U.S. South. There were long pauses between their statements, and they would trail off in the middle of their responses. Moca no longer lives in The South; they let me know early into the interview that they were calling me from a state out west. Often when I asked questions about living in The South or their feelings about the area, the hesitations seemed to stem from 1) their current distance from the region and 2) not wanting to come off as offensive about the area to those that live in it, e.g., me.

VIC: How is living in the South different from any other region of the US?

MOCA: So, with The South...there's a lot of. I guess.... I don't want to say it.

VIC: Go ahead. Say it. Say it however you wanna say it, and you can clean it up.

MOCA: Because I look masc, I guess, there's expectations as...when you first see me, a Black man, that are different...that's different than when I was in The North. There's a lot of...perceptions that are already made. Already being a presenting "Black man," I guess. That was different than when I was up The North, where it was more of a "Ohhh" you got. Like, "You're just a guy. Just a person." And then, another thing is...It's kind of weird sometimes. Because you'll have to like navigate myself a little differently, being Black. Because sundown towns⁶⁵ still exist, you have to avoid certain areas. You have to present yourself a certain way so you can make it home sometimes, and it's kind of draining. And *annoying*.

Moca travels often, as is required by their career, so they understand their identity as a Southerner as more coerced than freeing. They discuss here how they characterize The South as an area riddled with sundown towns, though this is a half-truth. In actuality, though The South definitely still has many areas in which it is quite dangerous to be Black, the majority of current sundown towns in the U.S. are concentrated in the Midwestern U.S.⁶⁶ Their experience with The South and being naturalized into Southern identity comes from their years living in both North

⁶⁵ Sundown towns are all-white towns in which, either *de jure* or *de facto*, Black people were lynched or prosecuted for being in after a certain time of night (usually around sunset).

⁶⁶ Here is a modern-day sundown town map: <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/map/>

and South Carolina, two Southern states where they first experienced culture shock. They were born in the British Virgin Islands and moved to the U.S. when they were eight years old, and once in the U.S., they spent a majority of their childhood in a state in New England. In this northern state, they spent their time surrounded mainly by other Caribbeans and African-Americans, so the majority-white Carolinas proved to be a bit of a challenge for them to adjust to. They also, as indicated above, first began to look at their gender as something more taxing once they moved to The South, as they report that more and more people began to delineate them to the category of “Black man” when they lived in the area. This, I surmised, was why there seemed to be such a fixation on their embodiment in many of their responses: it was in The South that they first started to understand that their gender expression was something that constantly put them on display to others. Their identification as Southern was somewhat nonconsensual, as they told me how their mom made this determination for them.

MOCA: I know my mom says I'm a Southerner because she was like, you went to high school here and that's where you finished high school, so you're Southern, but for me, I kind of don't. Just cause like whenever I talk, or whenever I say certain words, I don't have a southern accent. I have a northern accent.

Though they harbor very obvious hesitations about identifying as Southern, they frequently identified themselves as such, and they stressed that they thought the research I was doing on Black transfeminine Southerners was a novel and intriguing project. From here, I asked them to discuss their initial understanding of themselves as a transfeminine person.

VIC: When did you start to recognize yourself as a transfeminine person?

MOCA: I guess it happened a lot more over... I guess after I graduated [from high school] and then once I finally got out of the house. I realize I don't really fit into what's considered masculine. I don't wanna say stereotypes, but like expectations or to say more...it's like I don't wanna be called handsome. I'd rather be called pretty. I don't wanna be... I wanna wear my dresses and skirts and wear makeup and stuff. And also, it is, well, kind of like, well, I don't exactly have to be like. But also, it's like I don't have to be...I don't know what I'm going to say.

VIC: OK. You want me to give you a moment?

MOCA: Just a little bit.

There was a long pause here. Moca let me know early on in the vetting process that they had never been able to discuss the intricacies of their gender identity with anyone as openly as I had given them the opportunity to. I could hear the continued hesitation in their voice as they mulled over in their head when exactly they started to align with the label transfeminine.

MOCA: OK. I didn't. I didn't wanna do all these things that I considered masculine. But also I identify more with being feminine. That's what I felt more at home with, that's what you know, I clicked more with, that's what I grew up around. It's what I felt like.

VIC: OK. And so how has identifying as transfeminine impacted your everyday life?

MOCA: Ohhh, for me it's been a lot of like connecting with certain music because I'm a big music person. The one genre I'll always go back to is R&B. And Rap. And the main artists I listen to are black women. So when I listen to R&B, it's like, I feel these women telling a story for me and about me. Like recently, *Heaux Tales*, *Mo' Tales* [by Jasmine Sullivan] was an album, man. It had, like, a really big impact on [me] and it was just a black woman telling her stories. And I really connected to it. There's like one part of it. There was this woman [on the album], and she was like, *I'm not like these other girls or I don't look like these other girls*. And I kind of was like, *yeah, I don't! I don't like these other girls either*. And I thought about it like, oh wait. Maybe, maybe I could look like these other girls. And then every day it's kind of like debating on whether or not I wanna present the way I wanna present the way I wanna be perceived. *Who is this person?* Talking to other people, interacting all that kind of stuff. *Who's who?* I don't want to say in control, but who's running the show in some type of sense? Like when I step out the door, am I going to present this way because I have to conform to societal standards or am I gonna step out and just be who I wanna be?

Moca makes an ontological argument for Black womanhood here that I found exciting.

He offers here an essential sense of his own Black transfemininity can be accessed through the music of cisgender Black women. He characterizes Black femininity, cis or trans, as indicative of an attitude that fiercely focuses on one's right to be their complete selves. He is clearly of two minds, though, as he expresses when he wrestles with what's intended by "I don't look like these

other girls.⁶⁷” On one hand, the phrase is declarative, as to say, I don’t look like these other girls and that’s okay, my transfemininity does not require that I aspire to cisnormative or transhegemonic ways of being. On the other hand, Moca panics with the second meaning, which is that his gender expression doesn’t *currently* match that of “these other girls,” but there is a sliver of hope that one day it will. He emphasizes how this idea has him split down the middle by asking himself what his motivations are. He asks himself if “not looking like the other girls” is something that he reveres, knowing that he does not have to change anything about his body or his gender expression to be transfeminine, or if it is something that he resents, and if soon he will find it within himself to be braver in order to look more “stereotypically feminine.” Even if he comes to such a conclusion, he inquires further on if this conclusion would be stirred by his own desires or rather external pressures.

MOCA: My first, I guess, real interaction...not interaction, but exposure [to Black transfemininity] was [The TV Show, RuPaul’s] Drag Race. Seeing these Queens just...Like, my favorite, my favorite drag queen is Bob⁶⁸.

VIC: Oh, I love Bob.

MOCA: The way she carries herself. I’m like, wow, that’s a woman. It was kind of like...wow. That’s crazy. People can do that? I didn’t know. From then on, it just got to a point where it was like can I do that? And if I can do that, how do I do that? Then just different questions of how do I get there or what do I need to do to look like that or to achieve that confidence.

A lot of what Moca determines to be “womanly” traits are those that are associated with the freedom to be who one wishes to be without apology or remorse, which I found intriguing. This was a unique aspect of Moca’s interview, as other interviewees associated femininity with

⁶⁷ It’s unclear what song that Moca is specifically referencing from Heaux Tales, Mo’ Tales with this lyric, but I am assuming here that they are referencing one of the spoken word tracks of the album.

⁶⁸ Bob The Drag Queen (she or he pronouns) is the stage name of Caldwell Tidicue, a nonbinary drag queen and comedian from Columbus, Georgia. Her claim to fame is winning the eighth season of the American rendition of RuPaul’s Drag Race, a competition reality television series that pits drag queen performers against each other in an attempt to win a large cash prize and the title of “America’s top drag superstar.” Along with her eccentricity, Bob stood out from her competition due to her overt and unapologetic Black identity during her season.

more commonly stereotyped traits, such as an ability to nurture or an inherent sensitivity. Moca let me know that despite Black transfeminine people's hypervisibility, it is essential to their understanding of this femininity that Black transfeminine people are loud and proud and as flamboyantly themselves as possible. This remains so in their psyche, regardless of what legislative bouts are dealt to these communities. This is one way Black transfeminine people in and from The South continue to create and manage their gender manifestations, despite detractors. Moca stressed that without people like Bob the Drag Queen being as out as they are, Black transfeminine people like themselves will continue to stay in their closets; something Moca advised will lead only to the poor mental wellbeing of people in their community.

4.1.4 Devin, "What Kind of Woman Do I Want to Be?"

My interview with Devin (they/them) was one of the few that was conducted in-person. They were ecstatic to give their account of their transfeminine experiences, as they very recently became acquainted with their femininity. Both Devin and I were graduate students in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department at Georgia State at the time of this interview in mid-January of 2023, so I echoed their excitement as well. I was thrilled to speak with someone about their gender experiences that also was classically trained in academic matters but also expresses a passion for application of these matters to non-academic experiences.

VIC: And you said that you were in gender studies, does that at all impact your own gender or your own experience? Like, does your gender inform your work? And does your work inform your gender?

DEVIN: ...A big part of my interest in WGSS as a discipline came from just the fact that I really generally enjoy having multiple perspectives and sometimes even specifically an academic perspective on matters of identity. And I found my WGSS degree to be really meaningful. Of a step of self-exploration and kind of in the ways that are attached to my goals towards helping other people find ways and language to navigate their own identity. So, it's as much of a personal project for me as it is my wish to share that with others.

Devin came into their transfeminine identity during the 2020 lockdown period in the U.S., a time during which a majority of cities and towns in the U.S. urged residents to shelter in place and stay away from others lest they contract the coronavirus. During these months of lockdown, the usually buzzing city of Atlanta, Georgia screeched to a halt⁶⁹, with businesses and schools alike opting for remote options for workers and students respectively. They let me know how they discovered they had an intense passion for table-top roleplaying games (also referred to as TTRPGs) such as Dungeons and Dragons (often shorthanded to D&D). This newfound love of fantasy-based play compounded with both social media exploration and being separated from many of the social factors that required them to cling heavily to hegemonic masculinity led them to identifying as nonbinary. Their identification with being transfeminine, as well, developed more so from their tenure in their Master's program. For one of the first times in their life, they were in a social space welcoming to gender deviation, and they had access now to transfeminine-centric theory that helped them parse out their gender further than they had before.

DEVIN: Well, the most, I think, really impactful interaction for me, because my trans identity didn't really come until a little bit later in my life, that was actually after I had graduated [from undergraduate]. Even then, it didn't really materialize into something that I could name and place, and that frankly happened mostly as a result of TikTok (laughs). It was in the midst of the pandemic, and so I think a big part of me had stopped feeling a lot of the demands of masculinity, as I had been previously at the time, I was working for a fraternity, my fraternity that I had joined while I was in undergrad, which quite literally hinged on my masculine identity and identification... That would have been right around that time. So, probably sometime late 2020 and yeah, I would say I started with kind of like a blanket nonbinary identity around that time ... a little bit after starting my Master's program [was when] I really recognized myself as transfeminine and [recognized] that like my transition would be a process of finding ways to yeah become more visibly feminine.

⁶⁹ Or, rather, as close to a halt as possible. Governor Brian Kemp enacted the stay-at-home orders in Georgia on April 2nd, 2020, and the restrictions were officially lifted in Georgia on April 30th, 2021. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution advises that the official restriction lift was mostly symbolic "...as the rules were scarcely enforced, particularly in recent months as the economy began opening up with the broader availability of coronavirus vaccines" (Bluestein 2021).

Devin came into this interview with a big smile, excitement evident, and ready to delve deep into the core origins of their identity. They let me know that they were 25 years old and they identified heavily with The South, despite them understanding that The South continues to posit itself as a breeding ground for bigotry that is entirely incompatible with their identity, such as homophobia, racism, and transphobia.

DEVIN: So growing up in [city that is near Atlanta], my parents were really intentional about the schools that I went to all throughout my life, so even though I grew up in a part of South [county in Atlanta] that wasn't necessarily known for having the best school system and had some real struggles with those institutions, I grew up essentially first in magnet schools, then actually going out of district for school and then returning to another form of magnet school for high school. That gave me this really interesting experience of elementary school. I was very much marked by isolation from my peers, I really struggled socially....Especially, I mean, even that early, across lines of race in a predominantly Black area, I was having issues connecting with my peers, speaking in a similar kind of like language and dialect and connecting in that way, which led to some feelings of isolation that I think really compounded. Compounded by the fact that it's a very emotional child and a very sensitive child who's always been large for their size, which was a great bargain for bullies because they got to take down the big person who also was not going to do anything about it. So that made my early childhood pretty difficult in that regard. ...Middle School is where my queerness really started to consciously come to the forefront of my mind [and] started to display itself, and I really started to reckon with those feelings and those experiences, which again kind of compounded with the fact that I was still very large and very sensitive and still a pretty prime target for bullies and that kind of maintained up until the end of my middle school career and joined 4H, which ended up being quite formative and developmental for me. [4H] helped me find my voice, helped me overcome a lot of fears with my speech impediment that plagued a lot of my early years. And going into high school, I was again [in] a predominantly black school. I think there are like 5 white students and my entire school. My queerness had started to take a back burner as I got into a hetero-presenting relationship. And before I really tried [to] reckon with my gender identity, I was with somebody who was homophobic, so that was very difficult.

VIC: [gasps] Oh man.

DEVIN: It's much more difficult and I think set me back in processes like that and I think to really bring it back to what it's like, what that had to do with being the South, I think the climate of the areas [here] are...I mean, even in the times where they were not downright preventing me from engaging with my queer identity like, even if I wasn't experiencing blatant homophobia or transphobia, I definitely started to pick up the passive sense of that in the ways that...It often exists as like a backbone towards societal structures and our social structures. And by the time I was in high school, I was in some ways dealing with it a lot more directly and internally, as I had really started to discover these things about myself. But even before expressing any of it, I had really recognized an unfriendly climate towards it, which made my process of coming out and exploring my queer identity... much more difficult.

There was a sort of anxiety that interwove itself with Devin’s identity at the time. They reported a sense of being restricted not only by the bigotry associated with being in and from The South, but also with attending such a rigorous school. Simultaneously, dealing with bullies that picked on their sensitivity and their physical appearance did not help with their understanding of their self-worth.

VIC: OK. So just because I went to public school, I don't know what a magnet school is. Is that like a charter school?

DEVIN: ...it was essentially for, in the case of my elementary school, it was like a lottery program school that had high academic rigor – even for elementary school—and was kind of known for that in the area. And then my high school was a very similar experience. It also had a number of certifications and professional development programs that were unique for high schools in my area, so they were both places that you couldn't just go [to] like a public school. You weren't just zoned there based off of (sic) where you lived. You either had to apply for a lottery or some other form of application in order to be there, and [that was] the case of my high school. If your academic performance fell below a certain standard, you would actually be kicked out of the school and you would have to go to your “normal” school.

VIC: And do you feel like that pressure added...because you talked about how there were a lot of issues around your race and your queerness and your weight and everything, do you think that the academic rigor and that pressure of being kicked out of school also fed into that anxiety?

DEVIN: Yes, I think that that led into the anxiety, and I think [being at a magnet school] was also a pretty specific culture, especially by the time that I got to high school because. It was not just a high-achieving school, but that also came with the association with a higher socioeconomic class. So, it was like, my school was kind of like the Joneses that were being put up, and I think that culture, and specifically its engagement and intersection with like, respectability politics and like. Developing good future Black leaders was really relevant and I think that really came with the dimension of heteronormativity as well, because of those expectations.

Our interview, although it went wonderfully, had a bit of tension in the background of it relating to gender identity. As someone who grew up with coercive femininity staining every aspect of their childhood, I had previously butt heads with Devin in the classroom on just how necessary it is to center femme aesthetics in our understandings of Black femininity and nonbinary identity. Particularly, we had this disagreement after attending a lecture series headed by Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, who was introducing the basis of her 2022 book *The Color Pynk: Black Femme Art for Survival*. Tinsley establishes a pro-femme argument, exclaiming that the

existence of Black femme identity is an acknowledgement of Black femme-ness extending past those who were coerced into femininity at birth, as it extends to those with “nonbinary vaginas and biologically femme penises,” though, interestingly, there’s no mention of nonbinary penises? I got her book shortly after this address, and I learned that she defines “Black Femme-inist” as an adjective that means that this person “...loves other Black femmes, erotically and politically. Practices collaborative solidarity. Recognizes the reality of nonbinary vaginas and biologically femme penises. Knows love is a bustling highway and not a one-way street” (Tinsley 2022, 5). I expressed in private to Devin, vehemently, that I disagreed with the femme-ifying and essentializing of Black “female” identity that I understood Tinsley to be doing in this piece. I, at the time, said that this felt patronizing to me as a trans person who is often lumped into categories with Black femmes as I am a Black person who is AFaB but does not identify as a man. For me, “femme” has always been equated to “girl,” and not in the way it is often utilized by Black femmes speaking to each other. In this way, “girl” can be a prayer, a war cry, or a gender-neutral request for help with something. The word “girl” is almost always spoken with camaraderie in mind when it comes from a Black femme, a Black queer woman, or other Black non-man. But “girl” as a descriptor has always been diminutive when it comes from others – whether it's an admonishment of my accomplishments (e.g., “you’re such a lovely girl, why all that school?”) or as a disciplinary tactic (e.g., “girls don’t say things like that, cut it out”). Its derivatives as well do the same: young lady, female, woman – all reductionist drivel that is often weaponized against people like myself who exhibit behaviors or opinions that go outside of the box that women are “allowed” within. Neoliberal attempts at expanding the binary have left trans people (or more broadly, non-cis people) like myself hanging aimlessly in the margins, as we have not done enough in the eyes of binarists and transhegemonists alike to “atone” for our birth

sex assignment. Thus, as I and other people like me “appear female” but are not, often we are incorrectly relegated to the term “femme” within colloquial contexts. I told Devin that I find the categorization reductive and, above all, incredibly lazy. Tinsley’s iteration of femme seems not to necessarily enforce the gender binary, but rather emphasize a shared sense of “vogue femme,” a sort of channeling of hyperbolic femininity⁷⁰. Intentions do not excuse material realities, however, and the material realities that come with expressing a “femme” essence that is essentially a sort of feminine expression but not female, in my opinion, still elides the experiences of those who do not wish to be enveloped with a binary ideal femininity, one that stresses accessorizing, softness, or the color pink/Pynk⁷¹. Tinsley asserts that her work does not do this, and perhaps I am overthinking her assertions, but it did not resonate at all for someone like me⁷².

Devin expressed disdain with this point of view, as someone who was not raised with the connotation of negativity towards “feminine” traits. The conversation I had with them presented me with a different perspective that I had not previously considered. Devin wholly embraces the term “femme” and gushes at Tinsley’s assertions around the label. Tinsley says how switching from the female to the femme allows femmes of all modalities, whether cisfeminine,

⁷⁰ Tinsley’s work operationalizes “femme” in the context of Indya Moore’s perception of their own nonbinary identity, both as nonbinary but also femme, not to invoke the female/male binary, but to invoke the tradition of vogue and ballroom understandings of femme-like movement (Tinsley 2022, 63-69). She quotes Christina Tente by describing the dance form of femme choreography to be “...characterised (sic) by hyperbolic femininity, soft moves, dramatic poses, and cunty energy” (Ibid 65-66).

⁷¹ Tinsley understands pynk to be “...an analogous color to Alice Walker’s purple...a neutralizing shade for misogynoir” and “...the color of the Black femme imagination: a metaphor for how Black femme-inism (sic) distinguishes itself from Black feminism by its queerness, and from white femme-inism by its Blackness” (Ibid 10)

⁷² I am not of the opinion that theory needs to apply to everyone – some theories just exist for the sake of being theories, and there is inherent merit and value in such – but I do believe that we are at a golden age of gender theory and praxis in which we must consider both theory for theory’s sake and the material applications of such theory. As someone who previously did identify as a Black femme, this book would have saved me (and people like me) years ago. However, as my gender identity now aligns more so with Marquis Bey’s assertions on nonbinary identity (see conclusion for the expansion on this), I cannot help but point out the inherent essentialism implied by words like femme, even if such essentialism is not intended.

transfeminine, or nonbinary, a refuge from Black queer battle fatigue. She states that for Black femmes “...surrender isn’t a dress we choose to put on. Instead, when we take off the straight, bougie, respectability-conscious constrictions of womanness, we imagine slipping into garments of Black femme freedom” (Tinsley 2022, 15). Devin resonates with such assertions; a freedom from not only the constraints of cisnormative aspirations towards womanhood, but a freedom also from the respectable “manhood” they had thrust upon them early on in life, as early as in magnet school. Femininity, they told me, was always like a piece of forbidden fruit for them. Not only was this world of gender exploration guarded off from them as they were coerced into their expected expressions of hegemonic Southern masculinity, but also, they would often find themselves walling off feminine traits and actions from themselves, falling into a paradoxical self-fulfilling prophecy passed down to them for being born AMaB.

DEVIN: I think it was kind of like one of those doors that like, once you open, kind of like Pandora's box, it was like once they clicked for me that there was actual transition to be had it really allowed me, honestly, a lot of clarity in my life, because it helped me first recognize a lot of the feelings that I've been struggling with for a really long time, especially like body issues and insecurities in that regard, and help me identify those as forms of dysphoria...I think it has definitely brought more to my attention the difficulties that come with transition. I think it made me very much realize this sort of safety and security that comes with masculine presentation. As someone who was assigned male at birth, and I think in my day-to-day life I am much more...I find myself very frequently considering like the fact that not my desired appearance and gender identity and expression also requires a bit of risk taking for me in a lot of regards and that has made me more aware of the really unsafe climate and space that can exist for a lot of trans people, specifically transfeminine people. So, I think I find myself a lot more cognizant of concerns of safety. I find myself a lot more cognizant in terms of community, and I find myself looking for more and more opportunities in order to, you know, make my way step by step, day by day, closer to my desired gender expression and identity.

Just as in the Pandora myth, Devin expressed that finding language such as “femme” or “transfemme” gave them a look into a previously unopened container flush with the allure of the unexplored and the inescapable danger of hypervisibility. They let me know that they hesitated for a while with the language as they knew for sure what they were feeling was gender dysphoria towards being understood as male, but they also knew that they were not a woman in the same

way binary trans women or binary cis women were. This is why they find comfort in the term femme, as it is a term they could identify with while still having hesitations about completely aligning themselves with womanhood. There exists a safety and a danger in this in-between space, they explained to me, as they were forced now to tackle the endless possibilities of Black transfemininity but also navigate the dangers inherent to the space. Devin tends to be an optimist, though, and raved on about how discovering this about themselves, while somewhat anxiety-inducing, also brings about a sense of joy. They beamed when they asked aloud, both in response to a question I asked but also, I believe, to themselves, “What kind of woman do I want to be?” They explained their use of Pandora’s myth as a metaphor: not solely negative like the initial myth, but definitely a box that once opened could not be closed.

This new access to creative imagination around their gender partnered with their daily incorporation of play and whimsy in their everyday life was not in any way restrictive or coiling. On the contrary: for the first time in their Black and Southern life, they were granted the space to establish exactly what they wanted for their identity and embodiment, without the pressures of coercive boyhood. I let them know how much I appreciated their point of view, and how my view of “femme” was unfairly universalizing. I gathered from this a new perspective on what exactly “femme” identity can mean to those who are usually omitted by it.

4.1.5 Demi, “It’s Just a Matter of Knowing.”

Demi (they/them and he/him, interchangeably) grew up in the same part of South Carolina that I had, moving to the capital city shortly after their mother was relocated to Fort Jackson for military-related obligations.

DEMI: I grew up going, when I was in [city], Oklahoma, I actually went to a Christian School, a private Christian School, up until I was maybe, eight? Um, and that was just a mess. (laughs)

Honestly, any stereotype of like a coming-of-age-kid in a Christian School? That was me constantly, just like trying to figure things out and I eventually did get kicked out because I was queer, so...um...

VIC: Can you explain? What do you mean you got kicked out because you were queer?

DEMI: Yeah so...I would...Whenever you're a kid, okay, people would experiment, you know, kissing is a thing that everybody sees and something that everybody needs to experience. It's a very *normal* thing to do, but I was only doing that with other "boys" in the school and that was just too much and so, eventually they caught wind, and they were like, "Yeah. This is getting weird." I just remember them, literally, contacting my parents after like maybe the third time [I kissed a boy] and essentially outing me."

My interview with Demi was very interesting because, like my interviewee Devin, Demi only recently came into their transfeminine identity. However, they came into their own identity as gay and/or queer very early on in life. Here, they discussed the first instance in which they identified something "different" about themselves than other "boys" around them. This especially came to a head once they relocated to Columbia, South Carolina, as the area has a much higher Black population than a central town in Oklahoma. Demi indicated that though they grew up in South Carolina and Southern culture is the only one that they've ever known, they do not enjoy identifying as a Southerner.

VIC: So, do you identify more so with being an Oklahoman or with being a South Carolinian?

DEMI: I think...I *like* to identify more with Oklahoma just considering the political climate of Columbia, but also Oklahoma's political climate (laughs)...Who knows what goes on in Oklahoma? But, uh, I guess I've been in Columbia most of my life, so I guess I'd have to say with Columbia (South Carolina).

VIC: What was growing up in Columbia like?

DEMI: (laughs) OK. So, this is a story that my mother told me. Shortly after we moved here—and I'm not proud of it at all when it comes to just like me as a person—But apparently, whenever we moved here, I had a culture shock because I literally was.... I had never been used to seeing so many other black people. When I grew up in Oklahoma, I was literally the only one. We were the only black family for miles. And it is very different from me. Whenever we moved here and it was, it was that and also trying to understand where I like, fit in terms of my blackness and trying to tackle that as well as being like a young gay person, and also that's like that has a broken home because my parents are divorced and so there was just a lot going on in my adolescence. So yeah.

VIC: OK. Do you consider yourself a Southerner? Why or why not?

DEMI: No, and I would say no because I just don't sound like one, I don't think. And I just, I think, like Southerners have a certain attitude, a certain gung-ho, about being something, and that's just something I hope I will never have. It's not an interesting thing.

VIC: You're saying that Southerners have a gung-ho? What do you mean?

DEMI: Like people love to talk about Southern hospitality or just being very proud of, you know, being born and raised in the South and I kind of wasn't so, it's just. I don't know. I don't want to like put myself in a place where I'm kind of already not, you know?

VIC: OK, remember you don't have to be quick about the answers like feel free to go on tangents, if you wish. Do you enjoy living in the South? Why or why not?

DEMI: I do not. 2020 was especially hard. Was that 2020 whenever we had in Columbia, like the downtown riots and everything like that? 2020 or—

VIC: Yes, that was 2020. After George Floyd, you mean?

DEMI: Yes, 2020. At the time, I was working at a veterinary hospital in Lexington, which if you don't know, it's like a lot of new money. So it's very rich white people and me being the only black person that works in the hospital, they were constantly like *how do you feel about, you know the situation that's happening in downtown?* like, *where do you stand?* and it's like I'm not the spokesperson [of Black people] like don't come to me asking me for that, and it's also just like, that's just a lot happening.

VIC: Why is it that you feel that this region is different than other parts of the US?

DEMI: I think there's a lot of cognitive dissonance that has to happen. If you're on social media at all, you kind of see the political climate of where you are. But whenever you go out in public, it's a lot more hush, hush, so it's not as believable or honest. Sometimes it really can be just depending on the situation. And so, you kind of have to put on your blinders every day and doing that all the time can really wear you down because every time I get in my car and I drive somewhere, there are constantly stickers. That are, like *Blue lives matter*. It's very much hate speech. They don't like gay people, things like that. So, it's not... The South is just very that and that's like the energy.

VIC: I see. So do you feel like you and your family? Whatever you consider your family to belong where you live?

DEMI: Yeah. Being black and queer kind of means you are alienated regardless of where you go. Chosen family is kind of like a super important thing, because, like, it really doesn't matter where you go. If someone sees your skin or gets to know that you are not straight or that you're a genderqueer person. Like something is wrong, you know so.

Demi went on to discuss how, as he knew he was queer from a very young age, it did get complicated for him to live in Columbia, South Carolina, as rumors and gossip traveled very easily in the small city. However, it was much more affirming to live in a city with other Black families as opposed to living in Oklahoma.

VIC: Did your family ever, ever move or feel pressured to move by others because of your race, ethnicity, gender or any other aspect of your identity?

DEMI: I definitely thought about the fact that like because we were the only [Black] people in the [neighborhood back in Oklahoma], My mom might have made that decision [to move to Columbia] because, again, we were the only people for a very long time in our neighborhood. That might have been more of like a subconscious thing and not like the main reason, but I hope it wasn't.

For a while, Demi attributed a lot of his “difference” from his peers entirely to homosexuality, meaning, his attraction as a cisgender man to other cisgender men. However, upon volunteering for the study, he began to recognize some of his more feminine childhood pursuits as indicative of his current gender identity.

DEMI: Yeah so, when I was like three years old, one of my aunts lived with us, and she was really young so she was kind of like my sister at the time. To all of us. And I remember we were watching *American Idol* and we were talking about, like, oh, how pretty the girls were every time they went up and sang and [my aunt] got me like a pair of her heels. And I remember wearing them and walking around in her bathroom and like her bathroom was like a tile floor and we were on the second floor and. So, it was really loud, like hearing me walk up there and I was so confident and so happy and I remember my dad came in because he heard the loud noises happening and he just like slams open the door and looks me up and down and just slowly like leaps [at me]. So, I think that was, like, a very small indicator, very early on that I was like this is normal to me and it's kind of weirding out the older people around me.

VIC: So, when did you start to recognize yourself as a transfeminine person?

DEMI: Well, I knew I was gay, very, very early on. Transfeminine, that didn't really happen until maybe after college, honestly. Like I had constantly done smaller things throughout my entire life and I never really saw it. I just thought I was kind of like a guy that just liked doing things differently. But it slowly was just like *Oh no like listen, listen*. (laughs) I think I think after college was when I really had that conversation with myself.

VIC: And how has identifying as transfeminine impacted your everyday life?

DEMI: I'd say, and sometimes it's just a lot just hearing my friends say my name or like my partner [say it]. It really is self-assuring that I can choose the life that I want and every time I like, hear someone say my [chosen] name, it's like a reminder like... These are all like. I essentially have a lot of positive traits, and I really work at trying to keep my name a good thing in everyone's mouth. You know, like I don't want it to be like my father's name.

Demi hasn't pursued any gender-affirming surgery or hormone replacement therapy, and he let me know in this interview that he has no intention of doing so. They let me know that the only move they've made to be more affirmed in their gender presentation other than using

they/them pronouns along with the ones they were assigned at birth (he/him) is in changing their name. They said changing their name to Demi rather than their birth name, which they share with their belligerent and bigoted biological father, proved to be the most affirming move they could have made.

DEMI: As far as my body, I remember the term for this word, the thing I'm thinking of. PhilosophyTube's thing when they were talking about like you know, taking body parts and replacing them. God, what's that word? Transhumanism.

VIC: OK, Yes.

Demi spoke then about how their identities as transfeminine, nonbinary, Black, and as an aspiring science fiction novelist alienates them from a lot of embodiment-based spaces for trans people. The theory of transhumanism, specifically as it is discussed by internet personality and YouTube star Abigail Thorne on her channel entitled PhilosophyTube, really spoke to them in terms of their vision for their ideal embodiment. Thorne defines transhumanism roughly as “...the philosophical study of technology that might enable us to go beyond current human limitations” (PhilosophyTube 2022).

DEMI: A lot of my identity as a non-binary person like I find myself identifying a lot with like in sci-fi like, androids are like robots because they're seen as genderless, unless they're like wearing something [such as gendered clothing] and then people associate genders with them, which I think is an interesting thing to think about, and that's kind of how I see my own body. If I like, as far as genitals go, like if I could just, you know, remove them. Put them back on, replace them [as needed] you know, like that wouldn't be an issue for me. I like it, I'm very like net zero when it comes to my sex if that makes sense.

In a way, this perspective does reflect some wistful sense of a Western society beyond dimorphism and gender expectations⁷³, but Demi's understandings of their own gender allow for such speculative aspirations. Demi also joked with me, knowing that I am also nonbinary though

⁷³ “The cyborg is a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (Haraway & Wolfe 2016, 8)

not transfeminine, that researching transhumanism has helped him with dysphoric thinking around their body.

VIC: OK. So, do you consider your body a transfeminine one since you identify somewhat with being transfeminine?

DEMI: No, I don't.

VIC: No?

DEMI: Yeah, because I have things that are usually associated with the male body. But they're just the kind of things that I see as just things that I have and not really like me trying to portray masculinity like I can't really help that there's just my genetics. So to me, I just have a beard and broad shoulders, but like, you know.

They describe their genitals, sex, and gender expression as “net zero,” meaning that they wear/display what will most easily allow them and their partner to get home without attracting the ire of transphobic and/or homophobic Southerners, but none of these things that they wear or do have gendered value. This approach is fairly utilitarian – the idea that clothes are just meant to be worn, sexual organs are meant strictly for pleasure, but have no impact on their feelings about their presentation nor their identity as transfeminine.

VIC: OK, so you don't consider it transfeminine though. OK.

DEMI: Yeah, I wouldn't want to take that from someone that like trans women and be like my body is like...yeah no. (laughs) I don't think so.

VIC: Well, could you elaborate on that? I don't know what you mean.

DEMI: Um, I just think that the way I preserve [myself] spatially. And because I live in the South, a lot of the time I will dress a lot more masculine, especially when I'm out with my [same sex] partner, it's more of like a...like, I don't wanna say a defense mechanism, but that's kind of what it is. just like a *don't mess with me*, kind of look. Or like *don't talk to us because I don't want a problem* and that's a luxury that I can have because of the way that my body looks. And somebody that does not look like me [who is transfeminine] can't do the same thing if that makes sense.

VIC: Got it. Do you feel that you need to undergo body modification in order to be considered transfeminine? Why or why not?

DEMI: I don't and the reason I think you don't is because, again, a lot of my belief in being non binary is the idea... it's not a want to do...For me, it's definitely how I feel thing, and just trying

to have people that I care about understand that feeling and so I don't think it needs to be like, you have to physically change anything. I think that can be harmful to push in some cases because not everybody has access to that and trying to get access to that can be very taxing in certain cases.

VIC: But you...OK, so you don't feel like you need to undergo body modification in order to be considered transfeminine, but you do not consider your own body a transfeminine body. Is that because you feel that the word transfeminine comes with implications like ...?

DEMI: No, no.

VIC: Oh, OK.

DEMI: I think it's more of a.... I guess I'm. Trying to not step into circles that like, I can't...how do I say this? Transfeminine people that are a lot more transparent [about being transfeminine] than I am, and I think their voices should be heard and I think you mean in some cases where there are people fighting [to be recognized], they need to be heard over the people that are just there, you know?

VIC: So, like you're saying that those that identify as transfeminine as you do, you don't want to encroach upon that label, for those that are more visibly transfeminine. OK. The only question I have about that is basically that maintains the implication that those people [who do transition] are more transfeminine than you. Do you believe that?

DEMI: Yes and no. Yeah, it's like...we obviously share the same feelings [about our gender identities]. But at the end of the day, I do realize that I don't care about my physical appearance and how I outwardly present, and I know that some people do. And unfortunately, the way society works, that's like the most important part of what gender presentation is—it's the physical. And like, there's also like the most dangerous part in all cases is how you physically present and again, I get to avoid a lot of those things. Because of how I look. So, yes and no.

This interview stuck with me far after Demi and I went our separate ways. I had never before considered that any of my interviewees would actively express a “net zero” approach to their gender expression, and I found this to be a convincing argument, for the most part. Demi here tries to articulate what it's like to embody a theoretical Black transfeminine space, meaning by definition, an AMaB person who identifies somewhat with femininity, but also embodying a self-awareness of their material reality, meaning that as an AMaB person who doesn't outwardly present in the most detectably feminine manner, he is awarded some privileges that other transfeminine people are not awarded. At the time that we spoke in late January, Demi was applying for a different job than the one he was currently working. There were several motivations that led them to this decision, but they confided in me that one of the biggest reasons

was that they wanted a job that they could use their preferred name at because they were growing tired of hearing and seeing their legal name on everything. Even in the application process when they were putting their preferred name on everything, they were not questioned why their preferred name did not match their legal name because of their “net zero” approach to transfemininity. This felt strange to discuss openly, as if we were discussing something taboo, though simultaneously freeing to hear. Demi disclosed to me that they and their partner have been subjected to homophobic hate speech while they’ve lived in Columbia, and for them, they feel as if they must weigh two options. Should they use their newfound transfeminine identity as a mode through which they can explore more “effeminate” ways of being, and wear feminine clothing/go about altering their gender presentation, or should they maintain the status quo and ensure that they and their partner can get home as safe as possibly? The implication here is that this is a constant power struggle in their psyche, even as they expressed that they do not feel a need to present their transfemininity in order to be transfeminine. This is what is intended by their “yes and no” answer that they gave; they acknowledge that they are transfeminine, but they do understand that when it comes to those who are physically targeted by certain statutes and violence perpetuated in The South, they are not the main target unless they declare their gender identity aloud. I found this analysis to be poignant and powerful, but it also left me feeling a little somber. The coils Demi and people like them are constantly navigating sound so specific and overly contrived.

DEMI: I either correct everybody on what my gender is every time I meet them, or I just deal with everybody misgendering me. I just sound crazy every time I have to tell someone I'm not a man, even though I look just like a man. And then, like, I guess I'm just gonna have to deal with being misgendered. I just feel like if there was a checklist of what men are supposed to look like I'd have like three out of five, you know. So yeah, I get it.

At the end of our discussion, I told Demi that I appreciated their honesty, and I understood their overall pessimism around gender identity and embodiment. He chuckled in response to this, saying something akin to “that’s life, I guess” and thanked me for the opportunity to parse out these ideas aloud.

4.2 Reflections and Praxis Making

Let us reflect upon the questions that drive this thesis. My biases are evident in my initial questions asked, as I incorrectly assumed that all my interviewees would perceive their Southern Black transfemininity as something restrictive or limiting. Though there were small pockets of truth in this assumption, the reality is much more complex. Reflecting upon the data collected here, I am able to decidedly state that while the U.S. South contains proven “coils” that seemingly complicate Black transfeminine identity, Black transfeminine people do not wholly deem the U.S. South as uninhabitable, and many of these interviewees, even if it was begrudgingly, do credit the lives they had/have in the South as key to their personal identity. Even in the case of Demi, who I believe by far had the most negative thoughts towards The South, they still expressed that The South is key to many of their sayings, gender expression, and political leanings. The reasons why these populations remain in The South vary from person to person, but the main three that I encountered were being more accustomed to the South than other parts of the U.S., financial barriers that prevent them from moving, and pure spite. The latter is most true for interviewees like Devin who are fully aware of the legislative pushes to rid The South of Black and trans constituents like them. They told me that it’s a partially political stance to stay in such an area that is seemingly defining itself through exclusion, but primarily they just know that their presence in the area bothers bigots. Anywhere that they can both experience the “pure love” characterized by Southern hospitality, to directly quote their

interview, and ruffle the feathers of conservatives simultaneously is a home worth fighting for to them.

I look again to the many Afropessimistic views of the scholars I've used to theoretically frame this thesis, and again, while I do agree with their theories, I must disagree with the idea that the Black and trans is impossible to imagine and create. I feel that the interviewees that I spoke with here contradict such assertions. I can resign to the fact, easily, that it is complicated to create Black gender manifestations when colonial gender was formed without Blackness and Black peoples in mind. I agree, too, that antiBlackness flavors the efforts of all Black ontological projects⁷⁴, especially once imbricated with the abjection inherent in the weaponized terms "transgenderism" or "transsexuality." I can even resign to the idea that such an ontological project is unassimilable, even if it were in the most utopian sense, successful. However, I offer here that it is not purely based on the metaphysical impossibility of the intersection of Black and trans that some constituents of the Afropessimist project find contradictory with the nonbeingness of Blackness, but rather it is because we, meaning Black people generally, have not yet come to understand what Black gender means to us outside of colonial limitations. How can we conceptualize the Black transgender person without understanding the Black cisgender person? Is Black truly trans to gender, or is Black gender something that exists outside of our current understandings of colonial gender entirely?

I argue that despite years of research, we still exist in the beginning of such an ontological project, as we are not even 200 years separated from the days of enslavement. Such tranifestations continue to befuddle us because we have not yet, both as an individual population of people and by extension, greater society, atoned for what enslavement has brought about

⁷⁴ "Tranifestation...explains why the black transgender will never constitute a being or subject within the world: because antiblackness precludes the onto-phonological procedure" (Warren 2017, 271).

within the collective Black consciousness. I understand that we may “lack a proper grammar to describe black existence outside of the precincts of onto-metaphysics,” (Warren 2017, 272) but does this necessarily annihilate instances of Black trans modes of being, especially those not yet considered by cultural fields of study such as Gender Studies, Queer Studies, and Africana Studies? I am not of the opinion that such assertions are incorrect, per se, but I do feel that they commonly omit the complex and often-elided potential inherent to Black transfeminine identity.

The establishment of praxis requires the marriage of theory to the material, a troubled marriage that often weds the over-explained to the unacquainted. Perhaps gender as it currently stands was never intended for us, but this does not change the fact that there are many Black transgender people who are attempting to get in where they fit in. Though I am sympathetic to the teachings of Afropessimism, I cannot wholeheartedly deem Black trans identity, whether it's through ontological means or through embodiment, as inherently incongruent with the world that we live in. The interviewees that I spoke to for the purposes of this project, if a group of exceptions can break a rule, prove such. The air that enters their lungs on a daily basis creates theory in itself, and as long as Black trans people continue to populate and dwell among others, we must find a way to make room for them, both in our day-to-day interactions and in our mind's eye. I cannot say for certain that I have an all-encompassing answer for such a conundrum. Theorists have offered gender abolition as a method to liberation, but such methodology requires a complete upending of gender as we know it. I have learned over the course of this research that this is not an endeavor that everyone finds attractive, nor feasible. For many Black transgender people, particularly Black transfeminine people in The South, a worldview dependent on parting with gender and gender identity is not realistic. It is my hope that more people, both within the academy and outside of the academy, will opt for measures that

cling less so to an assumed futility of Black gender, as such assertions do (albeit, helpfully in a theorizing sense) establish Black trans as a speculative space, but often cast Black transfeminine aside and lead to further ignorance of their specific gender manifestations and experiences. I want to see more than non-transfeminine writers engaging with possibilities such as these; I also think that this field would benefit with more direct discussions with Black trans women and other Black transfeminine people.

5 CONCLUSION

I ended each interview with a question I found necessary for the ethics of this research. I let my interviewees know that though I am nonbinary, I am not transfeminine. If I had to pin down my gender identity in words, I would most likely summarize it in a way similar to Marquis Bey; I am not necessarily aligned with a nonbinary identity, but rather that I strive (even if it is for naught) for a nonbinaristic relationship with (my) gender⁷⁵. Despite my personal feelings about my gender, transhegemony and dimorphic/bigenderist⁷⁶ ideals dominate most perceptions of gender, so often trans people who do not identify with either gender of the gender binary are still forced along a sort of binarist “spectrum” of transfeminine being on one extreme end and transmasculine being on the other. As a nonbinary person who is deemed transmasculine, I stated this to my interviewees, and I expressed that as I am non-transfeminine. I wanted to know what

⁷⁵ Bey states this on their website in reference to their gender preference: “the “preference” for they/them pronouns to describe myself is an attempt to mark my irreverence toward the gender binary, and to mark my tentative and always-in-process relationship to gender nonbinariness. Put differently, this is not to say I “am” nonbinary but, more pointedly, seek a nonbinaristic relationship to my own understanding of my gender—an attempted unrelation to gender, as it were. Thus, it matters less what pronoun one uses for me; I am, ultimately, pronoun indifferent. That capaciousness is simply another attempt to express an irreverence and disdain for the gender binary and the ways it might inhere in pronouns.” I do not share Bey’s indifference towards gender pronouns, but I do share their view of personal gender identity and sympathize with their aspirations to abolish gender. The website that this blurb was taken from is <https://www.marquisbey.com/>.

⁷⁶ Here I am invoking the definition of bigenderism as defined by Miqqi Gilbert, not the colloquial nonbinary identity of “bigender”.

they thought of this research. My question was twofold; I wanted to know what the participants thought would be the best use of the research I was doing, and I also wanted to know how non-transfeminine people could better support Black transfeminine people in day-to-day life.

The general consensus I received from my interviewees, including those that are not reflected in the interviews selected, is that the research that I am doing is necessary, regardless of my own identity, embodiment, or modality. I received a lot of thanks and praise for the work I was doing, as a majority of my interviewees expressed that they do not often see formal institutions like academic ones directly speaking with and uplifting the voices of Black transfeminine people and Black trans women. However, many of my interviewees expressed that this is only the beginning, and that other groups of people should follow suit in order to ensure Black trans women get to a point in society, especially in Southern society, that they are prioritized and protected. Devin emphasized this sentiment in their response to my question:

DEVIN: Outside of the [Black and transfeminine] trans community, Black transfeminine folks, more than anything need...protection right now, right? So I really imagined this research and I was like, and unfortunately, I think there are still issues. That's the dehumanization of Black people, and specifically Black trans people, and that when compounded with misogyny and transmisogyny, we know makes a really deadly concoction. For black trans women, right. And you know, I still move through the world with a lot of safety. You know, I primarily present as a 6'2, 315-pound, like, big Black man who lifts weights and, like, could rock your shit, you know. Though I recognize myself to not yet be in the most vulnerable position and not need that protection the most, it makes it very important for me personally and to share the message of really forefronting that protection aspect, you know, I think like there are so many intricacies to our social lives and our social experiences, but so many of those intricacies are hard to explore. Basically, the fact that like there is no, not just no promise of safety, but like *an explicit promise of danger*. So I really hope and would love to see the way that this research could contribute to, like really helping humanize black transfeminine people like showing the complexities of our lives and like showing the spaces in which we still need an encouraging community...I think a lot of like...the Combahee River collective, they're like, until Black women are free, none of us are free⁷⁷, and although it wasn't explicit like in the writing of that, that certainly means probably most foundationally Black trans women. If Black trans women are still in danger, all of us will continue to be in danger and really turning people's attention to that and turning that into like this foundational actionable item for essentially any area of social growth or defense or revolution, I

⁷⁷ Devin is referencing the Combahee River Collective's quote where they state that "We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (The Combahee River Collective 1977, 4).

think is paramount and something that I can see this research really helping and contribute to a deeper understanding of [our identities].

Though Devin understands that their physical stature doesn't fit the usual schema for someone who needs protection, what they emphasize here is not only that they share space with other Black transfeminine people who do not have the comfort of fitness prowess, but also it is the very identification as Black and transfeminine that still leaves them vulnerable to both physical and ideological attacks. They stress also that they see most of the issue being that Black transfeminine people are constantly dehumanized to the point that if they are not met with violence, they are at the very least seen as inhuman or subhuman. Though Devin is correct in saying that the Combahee River Collective did not explicitly name Black trans women as the women that they were fighting for, I am sure that the members of the collective would relate to Devin's desire for "...reject[ing] pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind...be[ing] recognized as human, levelly human, is enough" (Eisenstein 1978, 3).

Moca's response to this question was similar to Devin's in their emphasis on protection, but they also went a step further. They use this moment to consider the possibilities of people like them reading work like this and feeling seen.

MOCA: I guess protect...the trans femmes. Protect us. There was a while ago, where black trans women were just going out and not coming back around, [while with] people they thought they were safe around? So my thing would be to just get more word out to protect us. Protect these people. Defend them. Do whatever. Make sure they're not alone. Stuff like that. And get to know them first as well. Just talk to [us]. Get more, I guess awareness out about us. All [that] you're compiling, all these different stories and different takes about Black transfeminine people. To really educate others on how we perceive ourselves or what we need or what we didn't have for the future, for other people that are growing up now, somebody could read this research and. Be like *ohh. I was like me when I was growing up, maybe I'm not alone.* Or if somebody's giving this to their parents would be like, *well, hey, this is, this is me.* That awareness of *Oh, okay, well...as a parent, I could take this information kind of move forward and treat my child a different way and be there for them,* or in the system. Or maybe even going to doctors or hospitals would be like, *well, these people said that they've come here. They've gotten different treatment unlike their other [cis] counterparts, and this is why.*

Moca jumps from discussing how Black trans femmes often experience disproportionate rates of violence to hypothetical instances of medical transphobia, but their main focus is on Black transfeminine futurity. They told me that my positionality isn't what really matters in the pursuit of publishing work on Black trans feminine populations, but rather it's most important that the work is out to the public at all. He went on to discuss how if he was able to see people like him early on in his life, he probably would have come to the conclusion that he was transfeminine sooner than he had, and he would probably have more solid footing in regards to what exactly his transfemininity looks like.

Demi relayed a message very similar to Devin's in his response to this question, but he took on a more pessimistic tone.

DEMI: I think...I think it's just a matter of knowing. And you know, an understanding that like people [like us] do exist and we can coexist. And because like we've been here for a very long time. I don't know how to like...answer that question, because that's just like that's the solution. I don't know. Because like right now, especially as it is a really bad time for anything progressive. Because you've got the Andrew Tates of the world, you've got the Sneakos. And it's just like we are very much pushing in the opposite direction in society right now. And I guess the opposite of that would just be like progressive personalities that are like entertaining [in a way similar to] Sneako, but it's like what would that look like? And so, because I already have like, we have video, essays, video essays are essentially like the, you know, I'm not reading all that on YouTube and they come to like people that don't already know or like, are not interested in that topic, you know. Because like they're...if you don't agree, or if you don't like something you're not going to sit down and watch a 50-minute video telling you why you're wrong, you know? So I...I don't know. (laughs) I don't know.

Demi's answer and his interview as a whole is an interesting departure from the expected. Their discussion of their gender identity, as they are a person who was "raised by the internet," to say, is based mainly in discussions of internet personalities and discourse that occurs online. When asked what the best course of action for the resulting data from this research would be, they immediately used that discussion to turn it to the growing amounts of anti-trans and anti-progressive sentiment being circulated online by internet personalities such as former ISKA

fighter Andrew Tate or by internet personality Nico Kenn De Balinthazy (Sneako). I find this fascinating though not necessarily incorrect, as the Anti Defamation League reports that anti-trans rhetoric has been increasing online in recent years⁷⁸, and with the polarizing views that surround this topic, these transantagonistic views then are reiterated in the hallowed chambers of congress and the senate.

My last two interviewees, Brittany and Edith, both emphasized the need for reeducation using information such as the data that I've collected here. Brittany's answer reads more like a love letter of sorts to Black community, with an underlying bittersweetness.

BRITTANY: I feel like this like these Black people, my fellow black people, they are...they're just supposed to be, like, given some sort of education, they need to be educated. Like being a transgender woman does not necessarily mean that you're [unintelligible]. It's just a feeling that you just develop out of nowhere, and you must deal with it. You must be able to stay with it because that's your feeling, that's YOU. That's who you are. That's what defines you, but I...I just feel like the black people just have to be educated like, they just have to accept these people in the society, this thing, these transgender people in the society and they are just they are, they have to accept them and to love them and to understand them.

Despite having a deep love and passion for Black community, what's evident in Brittany's response to my question is that she is aware that Black communities are widely perceived as inherently transphobic and transmisogynistic, as if the very racial categorization of Blackness is wholly incompatible with transgenderism and trans-related ideologies.

Edith also pushed for a sort of reeducation of our communities, but far more broadly. She, like Demi, ultimately did not have a cohesive answer to the question, but she let me know that she would continue to ponder upon the matter even after our discussion.

EDITH: That's a good question. I wasn't expecting that [question]. What is my ideal direction for the research that you are conducting? I am personally most interested in how gender differences

⁷⁸ "People who embrace hateful anti-transgender rhetoric often operate within echo chambers, where ideas, themes and even language go from extreme to mainstream. At a certain point it becomes impossible to tell who inspires whom in this ecosystem of hate but it's impossible to ignore the parallels between language on social media and language that influences policy." (ADL 2021)

are experienced by trans people, like, as in, how does a transmasculine person describe masculinity, and how does that differ from how a cismasculine person would? Or you know, what are the differences in femininity between trans and cis femmes because like, you know, I know that they're social constructs [meaning their gender identities]. But how and *why* do we construct it? And once we have the power to construct it in our own images? Yeah, where do we go from there? Like, are we building this consciously? Are we building this still in reaction to biological force? Where does the identity end and the person begin? Where does expression tie into it? These are the things I want to know?

VIC: OK.

EDITH: Did that make any sense?

VIC: No, it did make sense, but then the second part of the question, what insights would best...do you think those are the same insights that would serve the communities that you are in the best?

EDITH: Here is the thing. Possibly. That's a hard one for me to answer because I think that, you know, my main ethos has always been people ought to do what they want to do?

VIC: Mhm, mhm [affirmative].

EDITH: And leave well enough alone, so I don't know if that would serve just about anybody. And in thinking about research to serve communities. Nothing yet comes to mind, but I will continue thinking.

—

I, too, intend to continue thinking on this topic. I want to conceptualize what it would look like for Black communities, our family units and our academic spaces alike, to prioritize the wellbeing and flourishing of Black transfeminine people. What would research look like if continued onward in this manner, in a manner that assumes Black transness as not only acceptable, but as close to empyrean as we humans are able to access? How would our communities react to such research when so much of academia's conceptualizations of Black transness seems to be predicated on such an identity being understood as ontologically impossible? What would it look like to allow Black transfeminine people the ontological space to develop their own gender identities outside of the predetermination that their lives are inherently restricted in comparison to the lives of people that align more so with hegemonic norms? I have never been of the mind that my work in this thesis would be some sort of "lifesaving" project, as

I feel that positing such is evident of arrogance, and such an assertion implies my methodology is extractive. I do hope, however, that my work here can catalyze a domino effect in trans scholars that will follow me, one that will leave future Gender Studies students and researchers desirous of further conclusions that directly consider the words and lived experiences of Black transfeminine people. Black transfeminine people in the U.S. are being targeted from all angles of “civilized” life, and this target only grows more conspicuous in The South. They are asking for protection and humanization, and I don’t think that either of these requests are hard asks.

My mind wanders again back to Mia and the woman who came to her door. Her words echo amongst the synapses in my brain. I cannot help but reflect on The South, an area that I hold fondly to my heart, and how it both houses misguided mothers like Mia and vulnerable Black trans people such as the woman at her door, my friends, my family members, and myself. I don’t believe that the only way that Southern bystanders to transmisogynoir can be allies to Southern Black trans women is to research their communities, nor is it to simply pay them whenever you can. What I believe will force Southerners to face the reality of Black trans existence in their contexts starts with education; not necessarily instruction within the classroom, but simply speaking up on their behalf when able, and not freezing up in the way I did during this interaction. I said earlier in this work that The U.S. South is often considered inherently transmisogynistic due to its characterization of the area being determined by its loudest bigots. What I am calling for is for us Southerners that reject such a narrow definition to learn to be even louder than them.

6 APPENDICES

6.1 Appendix A: Clarification of Institutional Review Board Decision

The Institutional Review Board (henceforth IRB) must approve of any research that directly involves the observation or surveying of human subjects. The Georgia State University IRB determined that the study described in this proposal is exempt from regulations requiring review under Exempt Category Two, reproduced here:

“Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

1. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;
2. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or
3. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by .111(a)(7).”

My graduate advisor, Dr. Daniel Coleman, and I were alerted via email on September 6th, 2022 that the research we were looking to partake in was deemed exempt by analyst Laurel

Benta. We were alerted on the same date that the submitted study required changes. The first of these changes was providing explicit attestation from our Departmental Chair, Dr. Jennie Burnet, approving of the study and expressing the scientific validity of such. The second of these was providing a research protocol with the study that expressed a "...rationale, objectives, methodology, and data management and analysis; ethical consideration, and references." We received the attestation from Dr. Burnet on September 28th, 2022 and resubmitted the amended application on October 4th, 2022. We received another alert on October 4th from Laurel Benta that advised that 1) the study is exempt and 2) further changes were required. The IRB advised that we needed to request a waiver of documentation for any interviews that we conducted over the internet rather than requiring participants to electronically sign the consent form we are using for in-person interviews, we had to clearly define the Principal Investigator on these forms as Dr. Coleman, and we needed to clarify our protection of the identifiable information of the interview participants.

As aforementioned , Black trans women and Black transfeminine people are considered a relatively unprotected group of people societally. The IRB wanted us to ensure the protection of our population's private information by first confirming that the interviews that we will engage in would not be embarrassing or damaging to the participants' reputations or impede their efforts to pursuit employment in the future, then by clarifying the exact intentions we had on storing any data obtained from the participants, not only their identifiable information. We advised in amended documentation to study IRB number H23114 that the interviews would not be at the detriment of the interviewees in any manner, and we explicitly explained the manner in which

information from the participants would be collected. I have reproduced the edits made to H23114 15.3 here:

“The PI intends on deleting and/or destroying any documents with the participants' personal identifying information on it, as this information will not be used outside of the purposes for their graduate thesis. Any data collected for the purposes of this study will be stored on the student's personal computer. This computer is password protected and encrypted via VPN. Only the student and the PI will have access to this data. Both identifying information and non-identifying information about the research subjects will be deleted and destroyed upon completion of the graduate thesis.”

Upon these clarifications, Dr. Coleman and I received full IRB approval on October 7th, 2022 from IRB Co-Vice Chair Susan Vogtner.

6.2 Appendix B: Research Materials

6.2.1 Interview Guide

After the purposes of the research have been explained and the informed consent procedure has been completed, the principal investigator of the study will begin the interview by asking general questions about the interviewee before proceeding to more direct topics related to how they form and understand their identity. Not all topics listed will be covered in all interviews. Not all questions will be asked of all interviewees. Interviewees are allowed to omit questions as they wish. The principal investigator also maintains the right to slightly adjust questions according to their discretion.

List of topics to be covered and sample questions:

Biographical Information

- How old are you? What year were you born?
- Where were you born?
- Did you go to school/Are you currently in school? Where? How many years of school did you complete? What grade level did you stop studying?
- What do you do for a living? Do you enjoy your job?

Political Geographies

- Where did you grow up?
- Do you consider yourself a Southerner? Why or why not?
- Do you enjoy living in the south (if applicable)? Why or why not?
- How is living in the South different from living in any other region of the US?
- Where is your family home? How long has your family lived there?
- Do you feel like you and your family belong where you live? Has this always been the case?
- Did your family ever move or feel pressured to move by others because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or any other aspect of your identity?
- Have you ever been displaced from your family home or houseless? If so, how did your community within or around your area show support for you during this time?

Transfeminine Specific Experiences

- Can you share an experience from your childhood that acted as an initial indication that you were transfeminine/transgender?
- Did you choose your name, or do you continue to use the name you were given at birth? Why or why not?
- What is the significance of your name, if any?
- When did you recognize yourself as a transfeminine person or a trans woman?
- What does transfemininity mean to you?
- How has identifying as transfeminine impacted your everyday life?
- Do you feel that there are specific trans people that get access to more resources/opportunities than you do as a Black transfeminine person? Who are these people, and why do you think this is?

Embodiment

- How do you feel about your body?
- Do you feel that your body is a transfeminine one? Why or why not?
- Have you gotten any body modifications, gender confirmation surgeries, etc? Why or why not?
- Have you ever been told by another trans person (regardless of modality) that you need to transition? Who was this person?
- Do you feel that you need to undergo body modification in order to be considered transfeminine? Why or why not?
- Imagine that there are no physical or financial limitations to the modifications you could make to your body. Describe what changes, if any, you would make.

- Are there any celebrities/influencers/etc that you consider “transition goals?” Who are they? What do they look like? Are they cisgender, transgender, or nonbinary? What specifically about their body do you enjoy?
- If you lived in a world where the gender binary did not exist, do you feel that you would have the same desires for your body? Why or why not?

Media and Representation

- Do you recall the first instance that you saw a Black trans woman or Black transfeminine person depicted in a media source such as a book, tv show, or movie? Who was this person? Was their depiction in the media source positive or negative? How did seeing this person impact your sense of self? How did seeing this person impact your perception of transfeminine identities?
- Has the media’s representations of Black cisgender women impacted your understanding of your identity?
- Are there any Black transgender women or Black transfeminine people prominent in the media that you resonate with and/or idolize? Why or why not?
- Are there any Black cisgender women prominent in the media that you resonate with and/or idolize? Why or why not?
- Is there a group of trans people within the community that you feel have an easier gender journey than Black transfeminine people do? Who are these people? Why do you feel that their journey is easier?

Sexuality and Desirability

- What is your sexual orientation?
- Are you “out?” Why or why not? If you are out, who are you out to? Why do you choose to be out to these people?
- Are there any aspects of your romantic or sexual orientation that are unique (e.g., asexuality, aromanticism, polyamory, etc.)?
- How do you perceive your desirability?
- Have you been in a sexual relationship in which you felt fetishized?
- Have you ever been in a relationship with someone who was DL/downlow? E
- Does it matter to you how your romantic and/or sexual partner identifies? Does their gender matter? Does their sexual orientation matter? Why or why not?
- How do you feel when a partner wants to love you/have sex with you openly? How do you feel when a partner wants to love you/have sex with you in secret?

Blackness, Race, and Black Identity

- What does being Black mean to you?
- How does being Black impact your transfemininity?
- Are there aspects of your gender identity that you feel are at odds with your racial identity? Are there aspects of your gender identity that you feel are in harmony with your racial identity?
- Do you feel supported in Black-centric spaces? Why or why not?
- Do you feel more or less visible as a Black transgender woman/Black transfeminine person?

- Do you feel like there is a specific archetype and/or stereotype to being a Black trans woman?
- Do you primarily date within or outside of your race? Does it matter to you? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt that not being Black would improve your experiences dating as a transfeminine person/a transgender woman? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt that not being Black would improve your experiences living as a transfeminine person/a transgender woman? Why or why not?

6.3 Appendix B.2: Interest Flyer for Interviewees



Volunteers Needed
for a research study on Black
transfeminine experiences

sign up for this
paid* interview
opportunity!

*25.00 USD compensation provided
your participation in the study

if you are ...

- 18 or older
- Black and/or of African descent
- AND you identify as a transgender woman and/or transfeminine person

we would love to talk to you!

COMPLETE THE INTEREST FORM HERE:
<https://bit.ly/BLACKTRANSURVEY>

please direct any questions or concerns to
vkennedy4@student.gsu.edu

6.4 Appendix B.3: Informed Consent Form

Procedures

- You are being asked to take part in a research study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be interviewed by the Student Investigator on this project, Vic Kennedy. This interview will pertain to your experiences as a Black transgender woman and/or transfeminine person living in the American South.
- You qualify for participation in this study because you are an adult (18 years of age or older) trans woman or transfeminine person of Black and/or African descent.
- If you choose to be in the study, you will take part in one interview. This will last about 1-2 hours on one day.
- The interview will take place at a time and place agreed on by you and the student PI. For safety reasons because of COVID-19, interviews may take place on the phone or virtually via WebEx. This can be on a secure app or platform to which you and the student PI have access.
- There will be a maximum of 5 people in this part of the study.
- Your interview will be audio recorded if you agree. If you do not want it to be recorded, you can let the student PI know. In that case, the student PI will take notes. The recording will be discarded after transcription.
- You will be asked questions about your needs and obstacles you have faced as a Black trans woman and/or transfeminine person.

Incentives

You will receive \$25 in cash for participating in this study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

You do not have to be in this study. You may skip questions. You may also stop being in the study at any time.

Confidentiality

You will not be referred by name in this study. Your name will be replaced in this study with a pseudonym with which you approve unless you otherwise indicate that we are allowed to publish your name. After the completion of this study, your consent form and documentation related to the study will be shredded and destroyed to ensure your privacy.

Contact Information

Contact Dr. Daniel Coleman at dcoleman48@gsu.edu or (404-413-6585), or Vic Kennedy at vkennedy4@student.gsu.edu (757-912-720) if you have questions or concerns about this study.

Consent:

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please say yes in an email, online meeting, phone, or in person with the student PI.

If you agree to have your interview audio-recorded, please say yes in an email, online meeting, phone, or in person with the student PI.

If you are engaging in an online/WebEx interview, you are not required to sign this consent form. Please submit a waiver of documentation upon receiving this form to vkennedy4@student.gsu.edu.

Interviewee Signature & Today's Date

Interviewee Printed Name

Interviewer Signature & Today's Date

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