Spring 5-3-2024

# Living in Death: Creating Trans Non-binary Futures

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# LIVING IN DEATH: CREATING TRANS NON-BINARY FUTURES

By

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B.A. University of Minnesota, 2019

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Communication)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2024

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## UNIVERSITY OF MAINE GRADUATE SCHOOL LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The University of Maine recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of Penobscot people, where issues of water and territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations— the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac—through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The University also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.

# LIVING IN DEATH: CREATING TRANS NON-BINARY FUTURES

By Larissa Little

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Nathan Stormer

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
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The central question in my paper is how trans non-binary people produce their identities from a space of social death. This is important because much of the conversation around transgender identities in the field of Communication has been focused in media studies and health communication. These literatures take care in exposing the ways the transgender population has been systematically excluded and stereotyped. Research produced has great utility for understanding how society can be inclusive of the transgender community. However, I question the extent this literature includes non-binary identities in research, and if so, how non-binarism is defined. I question this because the current understanding of gender in these fields is that gender is a discursive knowledge product, an interpretation of the body, founded on the presumption that non-binarism is essentially a variable, meaning it is a known condition.

To explore my research question I cultivated a heuristic to collect appropriate data. The heuristic used is similar to Hesse (2016)'s colonial constitution of race thesis. Hesse (2016) asks why does race function the way it does in society instead of the more common question of how race affects the individual. Following Hesse (2016) I consider how the non-binary identity is

being cultivated by individuals instead of focusing on the effects this identity has for the group. Adopting this heuristic, I am able to identify stories that stem from the desires of individuals about how they want to create their identity. Following how identity is crafted allows me to see what is important to non-binary people and what has been missed in the current understanding of non-binarism. I maintain an aesthetic orientation to my research because of my interest in the ways non-binary individuals are crafting their identities where societies say there are none. Aesthetic theory is crucial for explaining how and why a subject creates itself, so the concepts I discuss in my literature review have provided the language I need to accurately describe my data. Key concepts I use from aesthetic theory include Black abjection, improvisatory freedom, and queer futurity.

My findings suggest that the community is so diverse that it is nearly impossible to continue researching this community from the standpoint that media studies and health communication take. My data suggests that the experiences a trans non-binary person has with abjection can vary depending on how close one is to whitened normative identities, meaning some individuals are able to escape social death through the use of white privilege and others cannot. My data suggests the creation of the trans non-binary identity is a project of futurity. I have seen many discussions on how to look more non-binary which presumes that there is a future for the non-binary community where they are acknowledged as their gender, there is discussions of gender abolition where they imagine a future without the gender binary, and discussions on how the relationship to abjection and futurity plays out in the social norms created around how to respond to oppression as a community member.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to every individual in my data that had the tenacity and strength to share their stories online. Without your bravery and vulnerability, I would not have been able to accomplish this work alongside you. Never stop talking about yourselves, your experiences, and lives. Never stop being brave and creating something from social death.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to everyone who helped me along the way over the past two years. For every party, arts and crafts session, restaurant date, and late nights fixing my car helped me bit by bit to accomplish this research. Without my office mates in Dunn 404 who doubled as roommates, confidants, best friends, and comrades, I would have crumbled my first semester. Without my partner, Earl Gary IV, who helped me navigate the confusing and beautiful experience it is to live in Maine I would not have felt a sense of home here.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd first like to thank my advisor, Dr. Nathan Stormer, for supporting this research. We spent hours finding the best way to research a complicated issue such as this, and I would not have been able to do it alone. Nate pushed me to be a better writer, reader, and researcher. Alongside Dr. Nathan Stormer, I would like to thank Dr. Bridie McGreavy for both supporting me at my first conference panel presentation. I would not have had as much confidence that day had I not had familiar faces in the audience.

Next, I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Liliana Herakova and Dr. Haley Schneider for supporting me throughout the thesis process with helpful edits and meaningful conversations. Their graduate classes pushed me to engage in reflexivity on a deeper level that I can only hope shows itself in my work. Without their support this project would be missing important pieces of analysis and methodology.

I would also like to acknowledge my undergraduate professors who recommended me for graduate school. Without your support I could not have made it this far. Dr. Karla Padrón especially encouraged me to continue my education and prove to the world that this research is important, despite having multiple encounters with people who discouraged me and attempted to deny my lived experiences as true. I would not have gained the courage to put myself out here had someone not believed in my ability to continue learning and growing.

Finally, I acknowledge the support my friends and family had for me during this process. Having my mother, Yvette Schneider, and brother, Johnathon Little, cheering me on during this process is invaluable. Having my friends, Mayah Blakely, E Oropeza, Brianna Christie, Izze Dickey, and Lexi Docken by my side held me down.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Creating an identity from the ground up is not something that many people think about on a day-to-day basis. If someone is a cisgender man, they have the resources ready to maintain and perform that identity. There are men's clothing sections in stores, hygiene products marketed towards men, masculine media advised home decor, and social norms surrounding how to look and act like a man. Because of this, men have an identity environment in common with each other, which makes them a group that academics have used as research populations. Woman as a category is similarly defined. If a cisgender woman wanted to perform her gender, it would be easy for her to buy clothing and products that affirmed her gender. Even as the social norms for each gender category expands, one can still imagine what a woman is fairly easily. But how do you imagine a non-binary person?

When imagining a non-binary person do you think of long hair or short hair? Tall or short stature? Pants or skirts? Do you think of neither or both at the same time? You might think of someone that is completely androgynous, a mixture of man and woman. You could imagine someone with long hair but sharp features. Broad shoulders yet small stature. Maybe a non-binary person is someone that you can't tell at first glance whether they were assigned male or female at birth. What about a non-binary person that is so over the top feminine that their expression becomes a caricature of femininity; aren't they non-binary too?

The issue is that all those ideas of non-binarism are correct. You can be masculine, feminine, androgynous, and be non-binary. You can be masculine one day, and androgynous the next, and still be non-binary. Non-binary can be fluid, euphoric, dysphoric, and so it is complicated. Some trans non-binary people contend that "not-binary" is almost a third gender

outside the categories of man and woman. This third gender is generally presumed androgynous and matches transnormative narratives of what a transgender person should be (Johnson, 2016). Others understand "non-binary" to embody the negation of the gender binary. Embodying this negation creates an entirely new subjectivity from a space of being non-human, or as I will argue, of social death and abjection (da Silva, 2011). That left me with the question: how can trans non-binary people produce an identity from a space of no identity that is "non" – abjected and socially dead?

My interests are to dig deeper into the ways transgender non-binary people produce their identity from a space of social death. This is because a majority of my data outlines either an action an individual has taken to become closer to their idea of what non-binary is, or interactions between two or more people discussing how to be non-binary, but always in a heteronormative, binary social context where non-binary people are perceived as not existing or where their identities are erased. Throughout this thesis I use the word "non-binarism" to describe people producing this identity. I became interested in this research because as a non-binary person myself, I do not see my experiences or knowledge of my identity reflected in the field of communication. When I began researching communication studies, I saw the trans non-binary community referenced in scholarship related to rates of reductive stereotypes in media, or rates of discrimination the community faced in healthcare. These studies and their recommendations are important for non-binary inclusivity, but I question how trans non-binary people fit into this work, and where knowledge of non-binary identity comes from in the first place. I desire to understand myself and my diverse community better.

To justify my research question, I conduct a literature review on key concepts necessary for my analysis. I explore the literature in media studies and health communication, arguing that

these fields presume that "non-binary" is a discursive knowledge product about a known condition that can be manipulated as a variable in research design. I introduce a different framework that allows me to collect data relevant to the aesthetic self-creation that non-binary people participate in, which does not align with the way media studies and the health communication field treat non-binarism. By taking an aesthetic orientation, I can study individuals as they create their identities instead of presuming that their identities already exist. This allows me to investigate the way non-binary identity arises from a space of social death.

After my justification, I explain how coloniality and race are integral to my research. To invoke gender is to invoke its colonial legacy which is intertwined with race. In recognition of its colonial legacy, I adopted Hesse's (2016) colonial constitution of race thesis to guide my data collection and analysis, which argues that in order to get away from defining race as color, we must instead understand race instead as a modern form of power so as to see clearly how race is institutionalized in the present (p. viii). As I analyzed how gender is being created by non-binary individuals, this allowed me to take a decolonial stance toward the ways non-binarism interacts with whiteness and blackness as political categories (Johnson & LeMaster, 2020; Snorton, 2017; Towns, 2018).

I found the colonial constitution of race to be valuable as a heuristic because it allowed me to see gender as a context of social death for trans non-binary people, rather than as a set of adverse consequences for these individuals. This led me to conceptualize gender euphoria and dysphoria as aesthetic concepts relative to coloniality and race. Using Hesse (2016), I collected and analyzed data for how identity was being formed in a context of negation instead of taking identity as already formed but suffering adverse effects. I used euphoria and dysphoria, which are prominent identity concepts for non-binary people, to guide the selection of stories of

aesthetic self-creation. Drawing from theories about coloniality and race, I found it valuable to think of euphoria and dysphoria in terms of abjection because abjection speaks to the aesthetic experience of social death, which gave me a critical perspective to read stories shared by non-binary people. Further, building on ideas of abjection, I found the concepts of improvisatory freedom and wake work afford me additional language to elaborate on the creative labor found in my data. Finally, queer futurity proved valuable for understanding the importance of transgender non-binary identity aesthetics.

The basis for aesthetics used here is Black aesthetic theory. As a result, I offer a brief history of Western aesthetics in the literature review and I delineate how Black abjection, improvisatory freedom, and wake work contrast with whitened concepts of abjection and freedom (Fanon, 1990; Sharpe, 2014; Towns, 2018). Finally, I explore futurity and its relation to aesthetics and identity, specifically queer futurity (Muñoz, 2019).

Following the literature review I discuss my methodology, detailing my data collection techniques, analytical approaches, and the limitations of my data. As a result of using Hesse's (2016) framework, I collected data from social media by looking for stories of becoming trans non-binary versus the stories about the consequences of being so. My commitment as a qualitative scholar is to stand with the trans non-binary community; I am producing my non-binary identity alongside them in this project. Because my data comprises screenshots of social media posts that are publicly available, I adopted the social media research ethics outlined by Willams et al. (2017). I was not obligated by the University of Maine Internal Review Board to gain consent from users to collect and analyze their public posts; however, Williams et al. (2017) claim that most social media users presume their data will not be shared outside of the platform. I

chose to anonymize the discourse in my analysis and not share the exact posts but to re-write the discourse in a manner that upholds its original intent for the reader's understanding.

Having justified the project and described my methodology, I proceed to the analysis which is broken into two stages: descriptive analysis and critical analysis. My data consists of screenshots of social media posts, which include descriptions of ways that people deal with gender euphoria and gender dysphoria. The descriptive analysis groups the data in two ways. First, much of the data grouped itself into places that mattered aesthetically: public, private, and digital spheres. Second, across those groupings I identified threads that addressed themes of gender abolition, passing, Blackness and gender, and freedom. The descriptive analysis provides the reader necessary context for my archive in preparation for my analytical claims. For the critical analysis, I apply key concepts from the literature review to the spaces and themes identified in the data in the previous chapter in order to make claims about the aesthetic work of creating trans non-binary identity.

To conclude, I reflect on the ways that trans non-binary identity functions as a project of futurity and the limitations of my approach and questions. The overall limitations of my research are that my claims are not generalizable. From this work, I envision my future research including a deeper study of gender abolition and trans non-binary identities. My hope is that readers will come to understand that it is hard to comprehend the diversity of non-binary identities when non-binarism is considered an aesthetic project, and in doing so, that we may have to rethink what diversity means.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

To address the question of how trans non-binary people produce their identities from spaces of social death, I first had to research the present understanding of non-binary identities in scholarship. This led me to compiling current understandings of transgender and non-binary identities in media studies and health communication. The following review discusses literature used to orient my research, including not only how non-binarism shows up in current communication research but also my rationale for using aesthetic theory to analyze gender euphoria.

## Existing Health Communication and Media Studies Research on Non-Binarism

To address how trans non-binary people produce and conceptualize their identities from a space of social death, we must first explore the ways that existing research does not account for the abjection of trans non-binary people. I begin by addressing how subjects are conceptualized in research that considers them as part of an excluded and marginalized group. Are their numbers scarce or abundant?

### Abundance

Existing research in communication tends to treat trans non-binary people as few in number, which reflects their marginal status. Rather than adopt a population scarcity viewpoint, I see the non-binary community in terms of abundance, tracing instances of what Flores and Rae Gomez (2020) call "witnessing" within the online non-binary transgender community. An abundance framework opposes the scarcity frame that media studies and health communication usually take when researching the trans non-binary community. Much of the research in these fields laments how more work needs to be done with this population, but that it is difficult due to

low population numbers, which affects the availability of data. The practice of "tracing witnessing" resists a presumption of scarcity because it does not adopt a logic of populations or the view that groups are already defined (Flores & Rae Gomez, 2020). To enact witnessing in terms of the aesthetic "how of gender" means one needs to find the places where the transgender non-binary community is but without treating those spaces as marginal. For non-binary people, those spaces have been on various social media platforms. Individuals have posted many stories about how they enact their gender, particularly about their experiences with gender euphoria and dysphoria. There they have been intensely, abundantly theorizing their genders, not just living a redefined identity and my work aims to bear witness to this.

Much of the conversation around transgender identities in the field of Communication has been in media studies and health communication, with connections to medical fields. Media and health communication literature take great care in exposing the ways in which the transgender population has been systematically excluded and stereotyped. The work produced has great utility for understanding how society can be more inclusive of the transgender community. However, given the logic of population scarcity that underlies these analyses of exclusion, existing research tends to assume non-binary identity is a settled, recognizable category. I question the way this literature includes non-binary identities in research and, also, how non-binarism is defined. I question this because the current understanding of gender in this research is that gender is an established discursive product that is an interpretation of the body, which takes non-binarism to be a variable of gender, thus making it a known condition.

**Health Research**

To understand health-based research on trans non-binary people, one must know a little about the history of transsexuality. The following will briefly discuss the medical history of

transgenderism and current health research. Notably, binary transgender patients have gained more access to medical interventions over time that allow them to live in the bodies they feel most comfortable in, while non-binary transgender patients have not yet had the opportunity to share the ways healthcare does not serve them. Not all the sources cited come from health communication journals as some articles are from more general health research and surgery journals. However, the logic of transness as a medical issue persists across communication and medical literature.

Transgender history did not begin in the 1800s with German sexologist clinics. The Greek myth *Metamorphoses* describes a woman who was raised as a male falling in love with another woman, who then magically transforms into a male before the ceremony. This has led scholars to argue gender diverse people have existed since ancient times and through every culture (Koh, 2012). Centuries later, in 1886, psychiatrist Krafft-Ebing studied people that "wanted to live as a member of the other sex" (p. 6). Beek et al. (2016) note that in the nineteenth century some psychiatrists found what they described as "transsexualism" to be a severe neurotic condition that deluded their patients into believing they wanted gender reassignment surgery. Beginning in the twentieth century other medical professionals took the risk to treat their patients with those surgeries (Beek et al., p. 6). Thus began contemporary Western research on how best to treat patients that exhibit symptoms of what we now call gender dysphoria (p. 6). Health communication scholars have worked diligently to uncover the issues and barriers that modern transgender patients encounter in healthcare. Presently, research has exposed the ways that this community is underserved in healthcare and offered suggestions for healthcare professionals to increase their competence when working with transgender people (Ehrensaft, 2012; Friedman et al., 2023; Kosenko, 2011).

In terms of research about health in rhetoric and communication, a search of *Rhetoric of Health and Medicine*, the *Journal of Health Communication*, and *Health Communication* is instructive. As these are the lead journals for health and medicine for communication researchers, they are indicative of work on trans non-binary people in the field. A review of these journals turns up articles ranging from research on COVID-19 information dissemination, to safe sex practices, to reviews of transgender healthcare webpages, to improvements in interactions between providers and transgender patients (Horvath, 2011; Kosenko, 2010; L'Engle et al. 2023). All articles reviewed generally acknowledged that transgender individuals are underserved and are at increased risk for certain health conditions, mental health issues, and negative bias (Banerjee et al. 2018; Ramierz-Valles, 2014; Redfern & Sinclair, 2014; Thaker et al. 2018).

What I notice the most from these articles is that they treat "non-binary" as a definable variable, such as thinking of non-binarism as a condition of trust in order to then determine the likelihood of trusting health online information when compared to cisgender people (L'Engle et al. 2023). They also lump together transgender people with lesbian, bisexual, and gay people when testing the knowledge of healthcare providers (Banerjee et al. 2018). I question the accuracy of testing providers over a wide array of sexualities and genders when gender variety is reduced to a single established variable. What happens if a provider answered positively to a question with only one of the sexualities named above in mind? What if a provider is more accepting of differing sexualities than genders? What if they take a category as an idea that it is not recognized by patients? The focus of these articles is how non-binary people, taken as a given, are affected by healthcare practices and not how people who are actively crafting non-binarism are affected. They presume that the identity is stable to assess impacts and make

generalizations. This information is useful in advocating for trans non-binary people to have better healthcare resources; however, I worry that non-binary identity is misconstrued to make such findings possible.

In medical journals such as the *Journal of Plastic, Reconstructive & Aesthetic Surgery*, scholars like Friedman et al. (2023) called for research on non-binary gender confirmation surgeries because emerging literature suggests some common chest surgeries that transgender men seek are similar but different to the type of chest surgeries that non-binary patients seek (p. 12). Differences between binary and non-binary transgender patients are being explored to help offer patients surgeries that are individualized and consistent with their perceived gender identity. Friedman et al. (2023) name a few instances of non-binary patients conceptualizing their gender in unique ways that do not align with traditional binary gender confirmation surgeries. These instances, such as requesting an *incomplete* total mastectomy or more aggressive breast reductions, highlight how non-binary transgender people want to take an active role in producing and conceptualizing their identity (p. 12).

Friedman et al. (2023)'s call for more research on how non-binary transgender patients envision their gender confirmation surgeries echoes Hesse (2016)'s colonial constitution of race thesis, which I discuss in more detail below. The field of health research presumes to know what makes up the needs and desires of the trans non-binary community, or they operate under the assumption that the needs and desires of the binary transgender community are the same as the non-binary trans community. They focus on diagnosing this community, finding a medical treatment for that diagnosis, and then overcoming barriers to this community accessing that treatment. I believe we need to take a step back from this conversation and question *how* we know what we already seem to know about non-binary transgender patients. Friedman et al.

(2023) may agree with me; more research needs to be conducted on what trans non-binary patients want. This is precisely the intervention I hope my research can make.

**Media Studies**

Research on transgender people in media studies has been conducted largely on the representation of transgender people to improve cultural inclusivity and reduce harmful stereotypes. Scholars have also researched ways in which queer youth look up to queer media figures as part of their identity formation. Representational analysis generally assumes that non-binary identity is an interpretation of an underlying difference. While the work that this field has been conducting is useful and important, it still falls into the trap of assuming we know what non-binarism is because we can evaluate its misrepresentation. In that regard, similar to health communication studies, media studies similarly prefers an interpretivist knowledge production framework to conceptualize the transgender community, where gender diversity is an interpretation of a condition already identified by researchers. Media studies has made advancements for transgender representations in media, but its literature still leaves out the stories of identity *production* that I am trying to capture.

Many media studies scholars point out that representations of queer and transgender characters have come a long way, from historical transgender exclusion to outright transphobic and homophobic depictions. Unfortunately, when it comes to transgender characters and celebrities, contemporary American media consistently misgenders and deadnames transgender people. In news media regarding hate crimes against transgender people, misgendering and deadnaming effectively invalidate their genders and prevent victims from receiving true justice (Billard, 2016; McLaren et al., 2021). Transgender activists have worked hard to identify common stereotypes and transphobia in the media, which has led to a refreshing number of new

narratives of transgender experiences in news media and television shows. The narrative around transgender people is no longer just the "evil deceivers and make believers" stereotype, but also now includes stories of medical transition, queer love, transgender people being desired, transgender people having children, and struggles to access healthcare (Bettcher, 2007; McLaren et al., 2021).

However, the constant cycle of capitalist commodification of identities works harder. Other scholars, such as Johnson (2016), have coined the term "transnormativity" to describe the emergence of prevailing stereotypes for trans people. This term came to be through the study of representations of transgender men in documentary film. Johnson (2016) describes how social identities, which include gender, are constructed through social interaction. To "succeed" at gender is to present yourself in the way someone might expect you to be based on secondary sex characteristics and then successfully perform that gender in the social interaction (p. 465). With transnormativity, "trans people, both those who undergo and do not undergo medical transition, are held accountable to medicalized narratives of gender non-conformity across social contexts and institutions" (p. 466). This means that with the new and improved representation of transgender people, we have new and improved reductive narratives for them to contest.

This is especially complicated for the non-binary transgender population due to the fact they are not transitioning from one binary gender to the other. They are striving for something outside the bounds of the gender binary, which will never be included in a transnormative model of medically transitioning from gender A to gender B. The research done on transnormativity also resonates with Hesse's (2016) work on the colonial constitution of race thesis. The idea of transnormativity hinges on the presumption that the transgender identity has a singular definition that everyone knows and strives to attain.

Studies of media do touch on my research questions when they discuss how queer youth are often left without mentors that can guide them through identity formation. This leaves queer youth solely to look up to troubled and reductive representations as a survival technique. Research has shown that queer characters are not what defines queerness, and in turn non-binarism, but rather they are used to make identities for queer and trans youth (Kizer & Hunter, 2022). Stereotypes are not simply absorbed by queer youth as their whole identities in other words. They are taken into queer bodies and live there in complicated ways. Queer youth try on personalities, engage in different interests, and mimic various characters to see what feels right and discard the rest. Queer people use queer characters to find their limits and feel their boundaries, deciding how to "engage different genders and sexualities in a binary world" (Kizer & Hunter, 2022, p. 4).

Nevertheless, Kizer & Hunter (2022) conducted fantastic research on how queer youth engage with mediated representation of queer adults. And yet their work still hinges on the assumption that all these genders and identities have stable definitions that are communicated effectively, and each individual understands that identity the same way. This research privileges an interpretation of a stable reality as the basis of knowledge, and it has limitations for the ways we come to know ourselves aesthetically and perceptually. These literatures have done much for queer and binary transgender people, but a limitation still also exists in the absence of non-binary transgender identity formation. By not including non-binary transgender people and the challenge that non-binarism poses for the "how" of gender, they effectively maintain the idea that gender formation is a function of representation.

Media research understandably focuses on how media representations affect identity formation, while my research analyzes discourses produced by trans non-binary people

themselves. Although non-binary people sometimes are passive interpreters of their identity formation, my work privileges the non-binary transgender person as the source of knowledge about identity that begins in their sensory experiences, and not in mediated representations. Ultimately, the media studies literature provides rich histories of transgender people stereotyping and considers how we should move away from such depictions. It also provides necessary information on how mediated representations of queer identities are used in identity formation. Further it provides concrete guidelines on "ask etiquette" to inform cisgender and heterosexual professionals on how to work with gender diverse colleagues and information on transgender identity management across social media (Buss & Haimson, 2022; Dou; 2021; Hanckel et al., 2019; Richards et al., 2016, p. 96). Some researchers in media studies have recognized that the way they define non-binary does not align with the community's view, yet the conversation on how the community produces this identity is still unheard (Cannon, 2021, p. 2).

Thinking generally about existing literature in communication, I note that there is utility to treating non-binarism as a known quantity. Without more attention in scholarship and more attention in media studies, in healthcare communication, and in medical fields, non-binary people would still be falling under the radar. There would be no attention drawn to the ways that actors problematically portray non-binary people and characters; there would be no discussion on what surgeries trans non-binary people are interested in having; and there would be less awareness among healthcare professionals of how to interact with trans non-binary people. Solidifying this identity into a determined category also allows for research to become generalizable. Nonetheless, I question whether any research done with a focus on trans non-binary people can be, or should be, valued principally for its generalizability when the

community is aiming to disrupt such institutions as the gender binary. If the gender binary is disrupted, research conducted using man and woman as bases of variation would then be subjected to further scrutiny.

## Theoretical Frameworks

The previous section addressed how the transgender community, and sometimes non-binarism, frequently shows up in the field of communication. The following discussion presents an aesthetic framework that draws from concepts of race and social death to form an aesthetic orientation to trans non-binary identity formation. I also discuss why other considerations, such as theories of gender performativity, though certainly relevant, have proven less useful within the scope of my research.

### Coloniality and Race

My approach to studying trans non-binarism is like Chakravartty et al. (2018) and Hesse (2016), who study race against a traditional social constructivist approach that focuses on the effects that race as a construct has on a population. Chakravartty et al. (2018) avoid the assumption that race *causes* discrimination, and instead focus on race as a formative category, which allows them to see the different ways racial power works through populations (p. 255). In Hesse's (2016) preface to *Conceptual Aphasia in Black: Displacing Racial Formation,* he argues that the "social construction thesis" posits that race is a "social inheritance" that disguises itself as a "biological inheritance" (Hesse, 2016, p. vii). This disguise is problematic because social constructivism avoids the question of "what is socially constructed of race?" Social constructivist views of race simultaneously describe the ways in which race is constituted in culture through skin color while reinforcing color as the definition of race (p. vii). This constructivist approach, as defined by da Silva (2011), is "interpretivist" in that it assumes racism is a wrongful

interpretation of existing differences rather than being an institutionalized mode of power. In contrast, Hesse (2016) introduces the "colonial constitution of race thesis" to get away from defining race as color, understanding race instead as a modern form of power, so as to see clearly how race is institutionalized in the present (p. viii).

I take a similar orientation for my research on non-binarism by moving away from discussing the effects of gender, or gender as an interpretation of an underlying difference, and towards gender as an institutionalized form of power. Hesse's (2016) framework allows me to ask how non-binarism came to be, shifting the conversation away from "*what* is gender?", which supports the idea that gender interprets preexisting differences, and to ask instead *how* gender functions for people.

Thinking in terms of coloniality, non-white Eastern and Southern cultures have been forced to adopt a European gender binary and assimilate to Western, white gender norms (Johnson & LeMaster, 2020). To discuss the gender binary is to invoke its colonial legacy, which is why it is important that this work takes a decolonial stance to investigate how gender functions, rather than concentrate on the effects of the binary or adaptations to it. As Lugones (2011) writes in *Decolonizing Epistemologies* "to be gendered is to be human" (p. 73). Using a transformative worldview that is power and justice oriented, I aim to see how trans non-binary individuals are creating their humanity with regard to gender as a form of power (Creswell, 2014).

Further, as people of color have been systematically denied their humanity on racial terms, they have simultaneously been denied on gendered terms. This raises the question of what are the racial implications of coloniality for those who perform their genders outside of the binary? People do not choose to be non-binary and transgender, so there are implications for

what kinds of people have access to non-binarism and what kinds of people are denied the ability to identify or be identified as non-binary. This brings up more questions as well, such as how being denied gender self-definition and self-determination intersects racially with having a gender that is undefinable, and in what ways does gender non-binarism disrupt the gender binary, and in turn, Whiteness? These questions will be discussed further in my analysis through theories of abjection, which I use to understand the non-binary subject's position as abjected. This analysis focuses on how we experience non-binarism as a racialized experience of gender power situated in the wake of coloniality.

## Aesthetic Orientation

Aesthetics offers the possibility of focusing on the creative work of producing what a non-binary transgender life can be. Contemporary aesthetic theory, particularly found in Black radical thought, privileges the knowledge we gain from bodily experience rather than the epistemological work of symbols that is privileged in Western academic spaces (Fanon, 1990). Aesthetics addresses ways in which subjectivities are created, which is particularly important for understanding how trans non-binary people use gender euphoria to form identity. The following will provide a brief overview of aesthetics as I believe it pertains to my research.

**Aesthetics, Sublimity, and Rhetoric.** Aesthetics most commonly is defined in relation to art, but a substantial legacy of thought that addresses poetics and feeling in relation to subjectivity, particularly theories of sublimity, are also part of the aesthetic tradition. Sublimity, especially the negative side, is of special interest because, when understood through coloniality and race, it offers a way to understand discussions of gender euphoria and dysphoria within my data.

Canonical British philosophers such as Edmund Burke (1757/1798) defined the sublime empirically, where sublimity is an experience that someone has when confronted with a terrifying object or situation that creates such a vicious tension in the perceiver that it contorts one's nerves into a painful mess. He operated on the presumption that everyone had the same feelings, or the same sensibilities, as himself and, further, that only people with what today we understand as Whitened normative identities were able to experience the sublime (Burke, 1757/1798). Immanuel Kant (1952) transformed the empirical philosophy of aesthetics into one of subjective perception of otherwise objective reality. While Burke (1757/1798) felt the sublime was an external stimulus that impressed itself upon a subject, Kant (1952) defined it as a judgment that existed inside of you that required a certain mindfulness and education to accurately judge the sublime's pleasures. The qualities that a person had to embody to access the sublime made it inaccessible to anyone not properly civilized and educated (Battersby, 2007, p. 166). In this way, Kant (1952) transformed aesthetic philosophy into a theory of subjectivity, although he still reserved it for Whitened European men. In that regard, this was an interpretivist view of aesthetic experience, making aesthetic judgments socially conditioned responses to given realities that assumed racial and gender difference at the core of the subject who possessed the capacity for aesthetic judgment. Because Kant (1952) theorized the sublime as an experience by which one was able to reinvent themself in the face of something greater, through feeling that came from within yourself, aesthetics became an important way to explain identity and identity formation. "Aesthetic rhetoric," as that term is used in rhetoric studies, thus often focuses on the relation of poetics and subjectivity, particularly to questions of sublimity, and to parsing out different features artistic mediums have (Reeves & Stoneman, 2014, p. 138).

Aesthetics certainly did not end with Kant (1952) and has produced substantial critical responses by Black radical and queer thinkers to Kant's concept of aesthetic subjectivity and the sublime that inform my research (primarily concepts of abjection and improvisatory freedom).

**Abjection**. Abjection has become an especially important concept for understanding sublime experiences of people excluded from normative humanity; that is people who experience forms of social death. Abjection, or what Fanon (1990) calls the state of non-being, is one way of thinking about the sublime. If you take the stance that sublimity explains how someone whose identity is threatened still manages to gain subjectivity, then Black and queer abjection speak to what happens when sublimity becomes a constant state of existence and not the rare occasion of being thrown from one's stable identity. The following section is an in-depth overview of abjection and its application in my research.

Black Abjection. Theories of sublimity dating from Burke's (1757/1798) time have stressed the negative aspect of having one's sense of self undone in the face of external stimuli. "The ill effects of bad weather appear often no otherwise, than in melancholy and dejection of spirits, though without doubt, in this case, the bodily organs suffer first, and the mind through these organs" exemplifies the suffering one undergoes from the sublime (Burke, 1757/1798, sect. IX). Abjection speaks to that feeling of being undone, theorized by many authors as a space of being neither object nor subject (Kristeva & Lechte, 1982). Kristeva and Lechte (1982) in *Approaching Abjection* provide a detailed description of abjection as a kind of aesthetic event. They start their work asserting that "the same discourses allow the sublime and abject to exist" because abjection is "bordered by the sublime" (p. 133). Abjection is "bordered" by the sublime in that it is felt when one's subjectivity is pulverized. If sublimity names the displacement of peoples' subjectivity, then abjection describes the nauseous feeling of dislocation. Being in a

state of abjection is to neither be a subject nor an object, being not human nor other. It is being unsure who or what you are. They describe the state of abjection as a "violent … revolt of being," where "repulsion draws one … literally out of himself" (Kristeva & Lechte, 1982, p. 125). A simple example can be unknowingly biting into a rotten fruit and immediately spitting it out and inducing a gag reflex. Eating the fruit threatens the sense of self, taking putridness into oneself, and must be thrust aside. As they say, "The distaste for certain foods is perhaps the most elementary and the most archaic form of abjection. When the skin on the surface of milk . . . touches the lips, a spasm ensures . . . " (p. 126).

These descriptions leave us with the understanding that being in abjection is a state of disruption adjacent to certain experiences of negative sublimity; one is prompted to try and recenter themself. Understood as a rare event, abjection is about momentary loss of self in confronting what is unassimilable, what is permanently pushed beside you; you are isolated and excluded when abjected. The abject is thus not a specific emotion inside of you, but the affective state of being thrown into non-being. An important distinction, then, of Kristeva and Lechte (1982)'s abjection is that it focuses on a specific *moment* for the individual; they do not view abjection as an ongoing experience.

In contrast, Black abjection has been theorized by scholars such as Fanon (1990), Sharpe (2014), and Spillers (1987), as an ongoing status. Abjection is felt individually, but Black abjection refers to blackness as a permanent state of non-being, not a momentary one, that is unique to colonial structures of race. Frantz Fanon's (1990) work is foundational for thinking of Black abjection. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon (1990) recounts a story of being called a racial slur by a white child. At first, it was uncomfortable when the child called out, but he felt a strange amusement as the child continued yelling and no one hushed them, but as the crying kept

going, the tighter he felt. When the child finally screamed in terror that she was frightened of Fanon, the amusement dissipated as he felt waves of nausea. Fanon (1990) recounts how his "corporeal schema crumbled," replaced with a "racial epidermal schema," meaning that he saw himself now as society viewed him, reduced to his skin color and thrown into a state of abjection (p. 112). In that sense, Fanon (1990) defines abjection much like Kristeva and Lechte (1982) but argues abjection is a social status for Black people. This experience is directly tied to his identity as a Black man. Being in this state he was positioned outside history, always already Black. His story was laden with emotional and sensorial descriptions (feeling tight, having nausea), and it resonates with my data. Much of the discourse I collected begins with feelings like Fanon's (1990).

Authors such as Christina Sharpe have deepened the understanding of Black abjection. Sharpe (2014) argues that African Americans and Black Americans live in the wake of North American slavery and colonization, which is why she characterizes the space of abjection as being "in the wake." To Sharpe (2014), living in the wake of slavery means living in the wake of mass death, of police brutality, of isolation and exclusion (p. 14). The question Sharpe (2014) asks then is what do Black Americans do with and in this space of abjection? Sharpe (2014) does not seek resolution of the aftershocks of North American slavery and instead moves towards finding a consciousness of abjection as a place (p. 14). In that, she uses abjection to form an ethical orientation to the alienating, aesthetic experience of coloniality. Sharpe (2014) characterizes the creativity of being in the wake as *wake work*, where Black Americans imagine new ways of life and being from the space of non-being or social death (p. 14).

Black abjection informs my thesis in that I consider the ways in which the trans non-binary community also live in a sort of ongoing state of social death. This also offers a view of

racially differentiated aesthetic responses to abjection within the trans non-binary community. In my data, a few trans non-binary people of color have documented how they identify as non-binary to recognize the social death and un-gendering they were born into. They recognize that they have been denied the ability to be read as a woman or feminine due to being Black. Trans non-binary people of color also have documented their feelings of wanting to be non-binary to escape this social death that Fanon (1990) and Sharpe (2014) discuss. In that regard, Fanon (1990) and Sharpe (2014) allow me to see nuances in the different ways people *feel* non-binarism which would not be possible if I were primarily using Kristeva and Lechte (1982)'s conception of abjection, which ignores this constitutive racial difference.

Queer Abjection. Having said that, theories of Black abjection have not fully considered how transgender identities matter. Sharpe (2014) addresses transness in her book many times (much of transness to her is in *trans*iting over the Atlantic and to other countries and how the slave ship *trans*forms bodies to flesh and matter). Sharpe (2014) creates space for transness to exist in the wake but does not push the concept of transness as part of Black abjection further. To address the issue of how transness matters for abjection, we must look for authors who work with this concept in tandem with the queer community.

Lee Edelman's groundbreaking work in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) argues abjection applies to homosexual men. Edelman (2004) focuses on the figure of "the Child" in this book and its relationship to "reproductive futurism." Edelman (2004) asserts that the child, or the act/ability of having children, is symbolic of how North American society will secure its future. The queer subject, which for Edelman (2004) means homosexual white men, is always in the position of disrupting that future by allegedly not being able to reproduce. Therefore, Edelman (2004) asserts that homosexual men are thrust into abjection because they

will not produce any "future" (p. 31). The exclusion from normative futurity for queer people in Edelman's (2004) analysis shares similarities with Black abjection in that Black abjection also understands Black people to have been removed from history. Black abjection is in part about how Black peoples have no future, but also no past.

However, a key difference is that Edelman (2004) focuses on the sterility of queer reproduction, while Fanon (1990), as elaborated by Hortense Spillers (1987),[1] focuses on the ways in which Black people are reduced to flesh. While Edelman (2004), much like Fanon (1990), theorizes how and why queer people live in a state of abjection, Edelman (2004) is not sensitive to queer difference. Luciano and Chen (2015) offer a corrective to Edelman (2004) in "Has the Queer Ever been Human?" Their definition of queerness includes more than homosexual men as they question how abjection can allow for queers to create new understandings of what it is to be human (Luciano & Chen, 2015, p. 186). In that sense, their work resonates with Sharpe (2014) because they imagine what queer people can do *in* their abjection, such as creating fluid and dynamic ideas on what a human can be. Through Edelman (2004) and Luciano and Chen (2015), we can see that queer people live in abjection relative to the heterosexual norms, and we can also see by the ways individuals are racialized by Western standards that abjection is further nuanced by the particular social death of queers of color.

This line of thinking is important when taking the trans non-binary subject into consideration because many trans non-binary people are living in abjection not just based on their transgender identity, but also based on their race and sexuality. Similar to C. Riley Snorton (2017), I hope to knit Black and queer abjection together to assist understanding the trans non-binary subject is creating identity from a space of non-being. In *Black on Both Sides,* Snorton

[1] Spillers (1987) and Towns (2019) show us how Black people have been reduced to non-being, flesh, and matter, and how adding layers of identities, such as "woman," cause that abjection to be felt differently.

(2017) begins by stating their work is about "tracing the ways in which 'black' and 'trans' have been constituted as fungible, thingified, and interchangeable, particularly within the logics of the transatlantic exchange" (p. 6). Snorton (2017) sees this transatlantic exchange, where Black people became thingified and transitive, as creating a deep connection between "Black" and "trans" experiences. They assert that blackness and transness work together to maintain Western and White notions of the white man being the purest of human beings (p. 6). Snorton (2017) also discusses how transness as the category 'transgender' is also a racial project, meaning that transness, as a concept, acts much like blackness does as a political category.

Blackness as Matter and Gender Abolition. Synthesizing Black and queer concepts of abjection raises the question, to what extent is social death a shared condition? Abjection describes several experiences in the trans non-binary community, but to make use of it requires a synthesis of the Black radical tradition and queer theory. My data includes discourse within the trans non-binary community about the oppression of those who have whitened normative identities and who relate to the ways they are abjected based on gender. This is highly contentious within the community because it points to abjection as differentially raced and gendered.

Armond Towns, in "Black "Matter" Lives," (2018) presents a possible answer by addressing how Black people have been treated as "dead objects," which speaks to Black abjection as non-being, or beings presumed to have no self-determination and who are disposable (Towns, 2018, p. 2). Towns (2018) asserts that blackness, as an already dead object, is no longer just a description of one's skin tone, but is a political category that "shares a consistency with the Western construct of matter" (p. 2). Blackness as a political category is useful for thinking about non-binarism as a blackening of gender. In that sense, one views members of this community

through their relation to blackness whether they are considered Black themselves. Non-binarism is a collection of gender identities that are dead to the gender binary, which is effectively a "blackening" of gender. Blackness as a political category is important to consider with this research because trans non-binary individuals adopt a blackened notion of gender to craft their identities.

If one understands trans non-binary people to live in abjection, this calls for a differential account of the ways white privilege is enacted by some non-binary people. I have found in my data the desire to be oppressed to feel closer to the trans non-binary community and non-binarism. These are individuals who want to feel that pain of social death. Such desires are met with criticism if whitened normative trans non-binary people engineer the feeling of oppression and then go home and never have to face the life-long consequences of racialized social death. In other words, it is a curated experience of abjection and not a state of social death. While it is true that trans non-binary people live in abjection, it may also be true that there are differences to this abjection based on one's relation to futurity (Keeling, 2019). For example, while Edelman (2004) claims that homosexual men are seen as reproductively sterile, that is not true. Many adopt, use fertility treatments such as surrogacy, or have familial relationships with women (Parvulescu, 2017). That allows homosexual men to attain reproductive futurity, while Black queer people deal with presumed reproductive sterility based on their racialized sexuality as "dead objects." So, we can see the ways in which whitened normative trans non-binary people may have a different relationship to futurity than trans non-binary people of color and why those whitened normative identities are scrutinized within the community.

Abjection in Summary. The similarity among these literatures is that abjection is not understood as the subjective perception of feeling about race, gender, and sexuality; it is a

condition imposed by white cis-normativity that one weathers. In that regard, all the sources considered here argue that abjection is a state of non-being, albeit as a Black American, homosexual man, queer person of color, and/or woman. And yet, trans non-binary experiences of abjection are still missing. I consider the ways in which trans non-binary individuals form identities in spaces of abjection, how they try to regain their agency while in abjection, and the different ways blackness, transness, and whiteness operate for this community in abjection.

**Aesthetic Creativity in the Trans Non-Binary Community**. If social death is taken as the context for thinking about trans non-binary peoples' aesthetic creativity to form their identities, I make sense of their creative work by witnessing discussions of gender euphoria and dysphoria, as well as concepts of improvisatory freedom and trans non-binary futurity.

Gender Euphoria and Dysphoria. Gender euphoria is an important concept to the transgender community. There is no single definition of gender euphoria, but commonly it describes unique experiences of finding immense pleasure, comfort, confidence, and/or joy in the affirmation of your gender and sex (Austin et al., 2022). This occurs in a variety of situations, such as having body hair removed for transfeminine people, or an assigned male-at-birth person being invited to the girls' night out. On the other hand, gender dysphoria is usually described as the discomfort when one's gender identity misaligns with the gender or sex they were assigned at birth. Gender dysphoria originated in psychiatric research, while gender euphoria was coined to work against the medicalization of the transgender experience (Beischel et al., 2022). These terms are important for transgender people to describe the aesthetic dimensions of being trans in terms of affective responses. Because of their significance and common usage, these terms are good search tools for finding discussions non-binary people have about the embodied experiences of their gender and are good heuristics for analyzing those discussions. These

concepts mark citable aesthetic realities that can be traced across digital spaces (Burke, 1969, p. 57)

I argue that these concepts speak to the abjected experience of a trans sublime. Someone experiencing gender euphoria can be looked at as having a particular form of sublime limit experience. A gender euphoric moment is one that creates so much joy and affirmation at one's gender that it impacts your identity. Gender euphoria can be seen as someone losing themselves in feelings of affirmation only to find themselves anew. In terms of abjection, such feelings occur in relation to a state of non-being, of social death, not in relation to one's stable, recognized identity being temporarily disrupted. In that sense, gender euphoria can be understood as describing a kind of aesthetic, self-creating work not unlike what Sharpe (2016) calls wake work and which below I will describe as improvisatory freedom.

This view of sublimity's significance for subjectivity differs from a Kantian (1952) one in that he presumed people who held whitened normative identities were the only ones privileged enough to experience the sublime and to benefit from its productive disruption of subjectivity. However, we see in the transgender community that many people are experiencing a kind of sublime euphoria that cannot be understood through a whitened, cisgendered sense of disrupting one's being. Due to the colonial context of race, gender, and sexuality, it makes much more sense to study non-binarism in terms of aesthetic concepts like abjection that account for the condition of non-being. By focusing on gender euphoria in my data collection process I can capture the moments that people are having an affective response as a part of their processes of self-creativity.

Freedom Enacted. Given the context of living in a zone of non-being, a valid question to ask is how can one envision a non-binary identity when we are wholeheartedly entrenched in the

gender binary from before we are even born? How is this possible when it is virtually impossible to escape the gender binary? Writing about enslaved people's visions of freedom, Fred Moten (2004) addresses this conundrum through what he calls improvisatory freedom, which he describes as how people imagine an existence outside of oppressive structures. Moten (2004) considers freedom as it appears in slave narratives and their contemporary references (p. 279). He begins with an excerpt from *Uncle Toliver*, in which Uncle Toliver is beaten by his slave masters because he prayed the Yankees would triumph over the Confederacy (p. 286). But how does an enslaved person even begin to dream of freedom? How could he possibly understand? Moten (2004) also discusses the story of *Equiano*, which is a narrative of an African man being bought and sold into slavery. He describes Equiano as an abjected, enslaved person but analyzes Equiano's desire for freedom. As Equiano becomes comfortable working with Englishman, learning the English language, studying the bible, and working on a ship with free men, he desires that life for himself. In that sense, Moten (2004) strikes common themes from Sharpe (2014) and Fanon (1990) regarding Black abjection and creating futurity from spaces of non-being.

Moten (2004) asserts that improvisation is a knowledge of the possibility of another type of existence, one of freedom. Uncle Toliver sees how his slave masters live; he sees the freedoms they have; he can imagine those freedoms for himself. The concept of improvisatory freedom is like Sharpe's (2014) idea of wake work, in particular to the way she discusses how people can still create despite being abjected. Moten's (2004) improvisatory freedom, making something out of nothing, is a necessary ingredient for Sharpe's (2014) wake work.

Improvisatory freedom can explain how the trans non-binary community produces and conceptualizes identities that don't exist inside the binary and, thus, seemingly have no futurity.

When trans non-binary people post stories of enacting a non-binary identity, they are improvising their freedom. Constructing a non-binary identity affirms the fact that they have been denied their humanity, and in turn their gender, since before they were born. Yet to craft an identity is to engage in a kind of wake work to the extent people find ways to live and to create different futures in social death. If the gender binary is baked into every layer of North American culture, how can one begin to conceptualize what it is like to live in non-being? Improvisatory freedom begins to answer this question. Non-binary people imagine life without gender, lives with mixed genders, multiple genders, third genders, and other Indigenous ways of performing gender. All this imagination resonates with what Moten (2004) argued Uncle Toliver and Equiano were doing when they imagined themselves as free men.

Significant themes in aesthetic theory address the different ways that people shape themselves through self-perception. From the sublime, to abjection, to blackness as matter, to improvisatory freedom, we have concepts concerned with creating subjectivities and producing new ways of being from a space of non-existence. The trans non-binary community is also particularly important to research considering this literature because they are uniquely trying to craft seemingly impossible subjectivities relative to what White and Western notions of what humanity should be. In that regard, the trans non-binary community is developing a distinct sense of futurity that deserves to be understood.

**Gender Performativity**. One might ask why my work is using aesthetic theory, which is the study of self-creation, to discuss feelings and subjectivity for trans non-binary people, and not theories of gender performativity. The theory of gender performativity is great at explaining ways that people enact their genders in everyday life; however, this work does not unseat the idea that we still do not know what non-binarism is. Non-binary people are also enacting a

gender that is not considered to be human, but it is very different from the gendering that is typically discussed through gender performativity. The following briefly explains gender performativity and why I have not chosen to use it in my research.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler theorizes that people incorporate social norms through speech and their bodily existence. This incorporation serves to create their identities. They posit that there is no gender without the reproduction of social norms in this way. In this theory, gender is not produced from our internal feelings, it comes entirely from what we see other people doing. Gender then becomes an action that we take, which is subject to failure when a person unsuccessfully matches the gender they strive to perform. This creates a gap in everyone's performance of gender because the odds of us performing our genders 100% correctly are not in our favor when what constitutes a gender is forever changing within our culture.

The theory of gender performativity opens up dialogue over the question of how and why some people perform genders they were not assigned to at birth; however, it has not yet addressed what happens when one enacts gender from the space of non-being. Butler is doing work that inspires my research and motivates me to continue researching gender, but it simply is not what I aim to do with my own work. Butler's earlier work such as *Gender Trouble* (1990) was initially perceived as empowering the idea of gender bending. However, Butler's work on gender, especially in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), is focused on mourning and perpetual melancholy one may feel from the constant failure to perform the gender you have been assigned or chosen (Butler, 1993). It may be possible to synthesize Butler's concept of mourning with Sharpe's (2014) concept of wake work, but it is not clear what additional value that would give me. I cannot easily reconcile the concept of gender euphoria that is foundational in my data and transgender discourse that is mourning. I am interested in the other ways that people produce

depth and meaning in their gender alongside the feelings of loss and grief that Butler discusses. I am interested in investigating gender euphoria at the level of sensation and emotion on an individual and subjective level. Much like Hesse (2016), I aim to unseat the idea that we need to discuss the effects of gender or race, and instead investigate the presumptions of gender and race that we already use.

**Trans Non-Binary Futurity**. Queer futurity is an integral concept within queer theory and highly relevant to the questions made evident in my data, particularly considering the improvisatory freedom just discussed. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity,* Muñoz (2019) claims that we are not yet queer, that queerness as a concept is oftentimes future oriented. Queerness moves beyond the present and peers into possible futures with the possibility of reorienting ourselves. In that sense, queer futurity is an aesthetic orientation to crafting new subjectivities. Muñoz (2019) explains that queerness is like our modern notions of the sublime (p. 1), but with a utopian imagination. Muñoz (2019) "uses a backward glance that enacts a future vision" to argue that the queer future is a future of hope.

Edelman (2004), as mentioned, also engaged in thinking about futurity relative to reproduction. He contends that the future is for children and that homosexual men are absent from it. By embracing the death drive and the concept of having no future, he argues the queer subject no longer needs to fight for issues such as marriage equality and the right to adopt and can focus on other social causes such as abolishing oppressive structures in the world. Edelman's (2004) reproductive futurity is inherently resistant in the sense that it works against dominant narratives of heteronormativity. For example, he argues that queer people taking advantage of the marriage equality act are upholding heteronormative notions of family and sexuality and despite being enacted by queer people, these actions are not queer at all. Between Muñoz (2019)

and Edelman (2004), one author focuses on homosexual men while the other discusses the whole queer community, with different concepts of futurity as a result.

And Edelman (2004) and Muñoz (2019) are not alone. Other authors such as Johnson and LeMaster (2020) have proposed ideas of queer futurity. They argue “the term ‘futurity’ signals a shift in research praxis to focus on advancing liberation and creating a future environment free from oppression, trauma, violence, and discrimination.” They call for a “radical imagination" to explain how the struggle to have the world you want to live in begins with a collective, which is evident within my data as well (Johnson and LeMaster, 2020, p. 195). Futurities as described in the literature are responses to dominant cis-heteronormative narratives and differently related to decoloniality.

From these few sources we see ways that futurity is important for research on queerness and gender. Normative futurity excludes the queer community from history, where queer futurities create new ways of life in the state of exclusion, even to the point of non-being becoming the foundation of the queer community. From Muñoz’s (2019) perspective, queerness is always future oriented. There is a deep connection with the futurity described in these sources and Black futurity described by theorists of Black abjection. I see the improvisatory freedom of Moten (2004) as an important link between them.

By synthesizing concepts of social death or life in abjection, and futurity, it is possible to make sense of the aesthetic work evident in my data. As members of the trans non-binary community seek to create identities, they turn to gender euphoria and dysphoria to describe the affective work of creating something from spaces of non-being in a white cisgendered binary world.

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODOLOGY

I am a white transgender non-binary communication scholar who wants to expand how the non-binary community is viewed in communication studies. My desire stems from wanting to understand myself and to gain insight on the ways that identity formation works in this specific context. I have always been able to find a connection to myself in research from other fields like Women and Gender studies, but few courses I have taken in Communication included research by and conducted with the trans non-binary community. As a result, it is important to me to bring my whole self to the table when I conduct research.

This ethic is inspired by the work of Denzin (2008) in *IRBs and the Turn to Indigenous Research Ethics.* Denzin (2008) describes Maori indigenous scholars' ethic which envisions the researcher as someone who listens to and participates with the community, not as someone who tries to give a voice to or empower the community (p. 98). I take a similar stance because I do not speak for the trans non-binary community; instead, I hope that my research conveys how this group theorizes their own genders in new and exciting ways. We as researchers should be paying attention to them, sitting with them, listening, and participating in this process. To do that, I engage with my data as a participant in the process of crafting the non-binary identity. As I interpret my data, I participate at the same time. I consider the ways this group navigates their self-creation in a space of social death, a space I share, so this process has been one of learning about myself, not just others.

As noted in the literature review, the heuristic used is like that of Hesse's (2016) colonial constitution of race thesis. Hesse (2016) asks why race functions the way it does instead of the more common question of how race affects the individual or the community. Following Hesse

(2016), I consider how the non-binary identity is cultivated by individuals and the community instead of focusing on the effects this identity has for the group. Adopting this heuristic, I can identify stories that stem from the desires of individuals and the group about how they want to create their identity. Following how identity is crafted allows for me to see what is important for people about non-binary identities and what has been missed in the current understanding of non-binarism in academia. I was further inspired by authors such as Chakravartty et al (2018) and da Silva (2011) who adopt a similar viewpoint in their work. As explained, I maintain an aesthetic orientation because of my interest in the ways non-binary individuals craft their identities when society says there are no such identities.

The concepts of abundance and witnessing by Flores and Rae Gomez (2020) informed my use of digital platforms. Flores and Rae Gomez (2020) explained that it is true that faculty of color are the minority employees at universities, and that disparity grows even larger when you take gender into account. However, a scarcity narrative effects "disciplinary containment" that further works against those same faculty by amplifying feelings of constriction and alienation (p. 237). Refusing a scarcity narrative for the trans non-binary community, I find a wealth of public information and theory generated by individuals and groups of trans non-binary people. The community is here and crafting their identity; they are only "scarce" if one thinks in terms of population numbers for a defined identity and ignores the abundance of discussion about radical identities that are under formation.

## Data Collection

Regarding data, as I began to think about how to approach my research question, I realized that I could not just go out into the world and observe this community and draw conclusions from that. Identity and identity craftwork are not fully observable, particularly for

non-binary identities. You cannot tell if someone is non-binary just by looking at them, so I decided to turn to digital spaces to collect my data. The queer community has been seen as early adopters of the internet, so there are many public forums geared toward non-binary groups and many social media users on platforms such as Twitter and TikTok post vignettes of their lives (Miles, 2018; Wright, 2014). I collected data from digital spaces because it was convenient and because there is a history for queer people in digital spaces. Digital spaces are valuable, not only for convenience, because it is impossible to identify if someone is queer based on their appearance; however, online one can get a sense of someone's identity from their biographies, the tags they use, and what forum's they post on (Miles, 2018; Wright, 2014).

In accordance with the University of Maine Internal Review Board, I collected screenshots of Twitter posts, Reddit posts, and downloaded TikToks by following a series of hashtags across the three platforms. These posts were collected from January - September 2023 and were all from public accounts. I saved posts so that I could revisit as needed. To ensure I was collecting reliable data, I only collected posts that referred to the user as non-binary in some fashion. To do this, I searched each platform for posts that contained keywords such as "non-binary." I also collected stories that were told in first person, as they seem likely to be about that user. I was interested in anything that fit my criteria, so I did not search for posts that only had high levels of engagement. All the posts collected were written in English. It is impossible to tell where the user was located at the time of sharing their post, whether English was their primary language, or what their socio-cultural background is. This data collection method and rhetorical analysis of social media posts adopts the framework of Lockett et al. (2021) who conducted a Black rhetorical analysis of Black Twitter, which is further discussed in my approaches.

The specific steps I took consisted of searching for hashtags, reading through posts and screenshotting any that fit my heuristic, then uploading the screenshots to my Google Drive folder, and finally organizing them in themes. The hashtags that I used included phrases like "non-binary feels" to find posts discussing feelings of euphoria and dysphoria. The data itself led me to my other hashtags used which included words such as "Black." I organized the data into themes of private, public, and digital spaces due to the nature of how space seemed to affect stories of aesthetic self-creation. Users discussed or told different stories based on their sense of location. Collecting stories about gender euphoria meant that my role was a participant viewer, not an interviewer. This allowed me to avoid making anyone uncomfortable, but conversely limited me to information individuals felt comfortable sharing in posts. Reading these stories in terms of crafting identities in a space of social death allowed me to listen differently and participate in theorizing gender together.

To focus on aesthetics, I searched for posts that contained discussions of users' feelings of gender euphoria and dysphoria. I searched for depictions of these affective states because creating euphoria or dysphoria is often crucial to how trans non-binary individuals feel their identity. To try and find descriptions of these feelings, I searched for hashtags such as "non-binary gender feels," "non-binary feeling," "Black non-binary feels," and "fat non-binary feels." By adding the words feels and feeling, I was able to generate a list of posts that centered user corporeal experiences. Adding in qualifiers such as Black and fat, I located posts that were more specific and diverse. Also, I uncovered stories that reveal how users perceived themselves.

Euphoria and dysphoria concerned me because they revealed moments when the poster felt subjectivity aesthetically through positive and negative affect. The moments users described were ones in which they faced the bounds of their identities, especially nuances of how they

navigated being queer, non-binary, fat, and Black. Individuals talked about how that affected the way they are viewed and view themselves in public, private, and digital spaces.

I organized data in these categories based on common language and similar experiences across space. Gender euphoria and dysphoria were felt in any space, but users had different ways of navigating those experiences publicly and privately. Categorizing my data in this way, I allowed users to guide analysis while also bringing an analytical perspective to their stories. After separating the data by public, private, and digital spheres, I noticed threads of gender abolition, passing, blackness and gender, and futurity cutting across these spheres. Thus, I formed my initial categorical interest, and I identified emergent themes. These spatial and thematic categories organized my descriptive analysis.

**Social Media Affordances**

Because I collected my data on various social media platforms, the different affordances of each platform affected my data. For example, TikTok is a website where users can post and watch short to medium length videos (Schellewald, 2023). I was able to hear the voice of the user, the tone of their voice, and see facial expressions as users shared their stories of gender euphoria and dysphoria. I also draw on Reddit and Twitter and discuss all three in more detail.

**TikTok.** As a platform, TikTok is not great for facilitating conversations. The poster can choose to respond to comments with a video, but creating, editing, and posting a video takes time. TikTok thus facilitates being seen and commented on, but rarely a back and forth with every comment. This affects the way I looked at the data as I only viewed comments that the user posted a video response to. Because I focused on collecting individual stories from members of the communities, not limited conversations, the videos were mostly stories of individuals dealing with non-binarism. When I found a video that fit my heuristic, I immediately saved the

video and uploaded it into a google drive folder for future review. At times I explored comments or other videos by the user, especially if the video was a part of a series, but I primarily treated videos as standalone pieces.

In some videos that had gone viral, the comments were filled with transphobia. This also affected the way that I viewed the video because in context the subjects of the videos posted only to then be made fun of. However, when I viewed it among my data, their stories became more positive accounts of how the subjects felt their gender identities. I chose not to change my analysis after I realized this because even though my reading might be affected, my intention was never to analyze hate speech or transphobia.

**Reddit.** Reddit has thousands of small communities often centered around a singular common interest, such as cooking or facets of identity (Prakasam & Huxtable-Thomas, 2021). This is useful because I was able to navigate through the subreddit r/Nonbinary, which is geared towards anyone who identifies as non-binary. Reddit is structured to allow for long discussion with comments. Once you are in a subreddit, which is not private, you can scroll through long exchanges. Reddit promotes dialogic interaction, so images are less common because oftentimes you must link externally to share them. The platform also encourages users to use randomized usernames and promotes a sense of anonymity. You can click someone's profile and see what other communities they interact with, their posting and commenting history; however, it is common for users to make “throwaway” accounts to be used only once. As a result, I was able to see key interactions between anonymous non-binary people. Many posts had multiple comments and people came specifically to converse and ask for others’ opinions. Many of the posts contained shorter stories that set context for the issue the user posed to the community, or longer ones about how they found success in feeling non-binary. Because of Reddit affordances, I

became interested in the interactions users were having with each other and how identity was produced as a group.

Another interesting aspect of subreddits is that moderators can ban accounts, delete posts, and delete comments. Moderation in r/Nonbinary filtered out any posts that were deemed inappropriate for the group. This adds a layer to my data because I am unfamiliar with the people who moderate the subreddit and their criteria. The moderators did include some general rules and guidelines, such as no hate speech and no "not safe for work" content. This means I may have missed data that would have fit my heuristic.

**Twitter.** Twitter, which has a more open nature and is easy to search (Siegert et al., 2020). Twitter is like Reddit in that many posts are text based; however, there are accounts such as news websites that post audio visual media to the platform. Twitter functions as a hybrid of Reddit and TikTok in some ways, but the posts must be short due to the word limit. Another difference is that I found I could refine the search function more. I could conduct an advanced search where the tweets that populated could only contain certain phrases. Much of the Twitter data I found was individuals posting short tweets about their experiences, and I found a few threads of users replying back and forth. I even found some users posting art created about their experiences being non-binary, which is not something I found on Reddit.

Twitter does not have groups or communities with moderators like Reddit, so like TikTok I found more hate speech and bullying. Users often set themselves up for ridicule from other random users that happened upon their tweets. This affected my willingness to collect entire threads of conversations as my research is not about hate speech and transphobia. The data I collected from Twitter was limited to actions and interactions by non-binary people.

## Euphoria and Dysphoria in Data

Gender euphoria and dysphoria often shows up in discussions of futurity in my data, and not just about posts about finding joy in pain. Muñoz (2019) writes in *Cruising Utopia* that queerness is the tool that allows us to feel the limitations of the world around us, and "the queer aesthetic frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward dawning futurity" (p. 1). Gender euphoria and dysphoria can describe the ways trans non-binary people feel the limitations of the world due to their inherent participation and roots in queer and transgender communities. As trans non-binary people are engaging in queerness, they are having discussions of what the possible future can look like in this community. These conversations also allow insight into how this community defines agency regarding their crafting of their identity. Being that gender euphoria is future oriented, it has a positive value orientation assigned to it. Gender dysphoria is overwhelmingly seen as negative, and therefore the desire is for it to be a relic of the past. As a result, I used a broad reading practice to identify and analyze the presence of gender euphoria and dysphoria in the data.

## Data Analysis Approaches

The main method used to analyze data was a rhetorical analysis of aesthetics. I have adopted Lockett et al. (2021)'s methodology of rhetorically analyzing Black Twitter alongside my heuristic developed from Hesse (2016). Lockett et al. (2021) argue that Black Twitter (a collection of hashtags across various social media platforms) should be read as a series of narratives by and for the Black community that contest dominant reductive stereotypes. They combine critical technocultural discourse analysis and Black rhetorical analysis to discover ways in which Black Twitter pushes against these dominant narratives (p. 169). Their approach considers how Twitter users use various social media affordances to decenter whiteness.

Similarly, I followed a series of hashtags across various social media platforms to analyze the ways in which individuals and groups of non-binary people are creating identity from a space of abjection and social death. However, where Lockett et al. (2021) use Black rhetorical analysis and critical technocultural discourse analysis, I used aesthetic theory and my heuristic adopted from radical Black thought to guide my data collection. The authors also assert that Black Twitter is a "living archive of collective memories of Blackness" that allows scholars to study the intersections of racial identities and social media (p. 165). I also view queer forums and social media posts as a "living archive" that I have collected for my thesis. Sifting through the web of hashtags on how it feels to be non-binary, scrolling through threads of discussions on whether it is possible to pass, and reviewing videos about what it feels like to take care of a body you feel no connection to, I am able to see social media as an archive.

By blending aesthetic theory with my methodology, I take the perspective of "theory/criticism" as outlined by Wilson (2020). Wilson (2020) describes theory/criticism as a functional understanding of rhetorical analysis that produces the vocabulary necessary to describe contradictory rhetorical situations and to legitimize the scholar's interpretation of data (p. 282). Focusing on work that isn't strictly criticism or theory building, Wilson's (2020) framework recognizes the author has flexibility to apply concepts creatively in their research. This flexibility is especially advantageous when working with a concept such as non-binarism, because in fact, this community is working towards embodying a negation, an impossible contradiction from the standpoint of the gender binary. The negation comes from embodying what does not exist. Yet, by identifying as a non-identity, they in turn reinforce the gender binary's existence. Using a theory/criticism orientation to creatively synthesize aesthetic theory, Black, and queer thought allows me to maintain a decolonial stance towards users' attempts at

non-binarism and to find a way to talk about what is impossible. My goal is to intervene in the presumptions about non-binarism. Adopting a theory/criticism framework, I understand my analysis as producing a language of engagement so that scholars can begin talking about this issue (Wilson, 2020).

I divided my analysis into two chapters. The descriptive analysis is first and is meant to place the data into analytical categories already identified by spaces and themes. The descriptive analysis is how I identify in the data different kinds of language, thoughts, and ideas from trans non-binary people that shape how they theorize their genders. The analytical claims chapter serves as my own critical evaluation of what those kinds of language, thoughts, and ideas mean for non-binarism. In both chapters I am not speaking for the community. I am analyzing the data at two different levels, the first level being about what people are saying, and the second level being about what I make of what people are saying about non-binarism.

**Ethical Considerations and Negotiations**

The data that I have collected has constraints. One of the biggest tensions is the lack of information on social media users I collected from. Due to their posts being public and in accordance with the University of Maine Internal Review Board, I was not obligated to contact and gain consent from everyone for use of their work in my analysis. I have taken measures to protect each individual identity, but because I did not and was not able to interview these individuals, I do not know their socio-cultural background. This also means that it was not possible to verify that these individuals are who they claim to be. This means my findings are not empirical descriptions but rather a catalog of public discourses about identity and aesthetics. In keeping with Wilson's (2020) theory/criticism, I have generated qualitative knowledge for a new listening practice.

I am left with the thought that I did not ask participants to do the labor of recounting potentially disturbing stories back to me. What I have done is shifted the labor onto myself and did the work to find where these stories were already being posted and discussed. This listening practice allowed me to hear these stories differently and to learn with their stories, encountering them the same way any other non-binary person would who was looking for help with gender dysphoria. It is still unclear to me what is the most ethical path to move forward in a research project such as this, but I hope to take with me the knowledge of how I can use my privilege as a scholar to try and shift more labor onto me than to my co-creators of knowledge.

A second constraint to my research is the decision to not share my data archive as an appendix. Despite the posts being public and accessible to anyone who wanted to log on to the social media sites and scroll through the hashtags that I listed above, I find it best practice not to share direct screenshots. In Williams et al. (2017)'s ethical framework for publishing Twitter data, they conclude that not every social media user is familiar with the terms of service and privacy settings of each social media platform that they use. Despite Twitter making no commitment to protect their photos, screen names, and posts from being used in journalism or academic research, Williams et al. (2017) found that there was an expectation from Twitter users that their information would not be collected and posted elsewhere. The researchers also state that more users softened their views on data collection if they knew that their information was kept anonymous. As a result, I made this decision to not "out" any social media users without their informed consent. My research explores the ways people produce their gender identity, which can be very personal and private. One can argue that because posts are public, feelings about one's gender identity are not private. However, I find that it is more ethical to protect their identities and just provide my transcriptions of their social media posts. The authors suggest that

if a researcher cannot obtain consent that it would be most appropriate not to share usernames or photos of the Twitter user and re-write the post so that it maintains the original meaning while being different enough to not be traced back to that user (Williams et al., 2017). However, the consequence of this practice is that readers are not able to come to their own conclusions about my interpretation.

A final consideration of the study is that the order in which I viewed videos or re-read posts affected my interpretation. This was complicated by the fact that I took archives of the data and put them in a Google drive for review. I took data out of the social media context and created a new context of an archive. I tended to see stories more positively without hate comments attached to them, for example. Thus, it is possible my data interpretation is affected due to data being removed from other conversations not captured by my heuristic.

There are certain affordances to my methods. While it is true that the posts that I collected differ from the information I might get from an interview, they still represent the thought process of individuals crafting identities. Posts that are actions or statements by individuals or by a group interacting are a rich discourse. I can sense these individual experiences, which educate me on possible interview questions in the future. While my findings may not be generalizable as empirical descriptions of identity, I did not set out to conduct an empirical study. In the context of my aesthetic analysis the looseness of my data could be viewed as one of its strengths. The conversations I found allowed me to build a conversation that was not directly in situ. My hope is that this work begins to invite many more people into the conversation. In sum, one of my strengths is that I look at non-binarism as a praxis, which avoids turning the identity into a variable for pre-defined measures of effects.

# CHAPTER 4

# DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

In this chapter I describe the data in terms of the categories I chose to organize statements about crafting non-binary identity followed by descriptions of emergent themes. Data was sorted based on how space affected the individual's experience with euphoria and dysphoria, thus giving us categories of public, private, and digital spheres. Themes that emerged across these spaces include gender abolition, passing, race and gender, and freedom enacted.

## Place and Non-Binary Identity

### Reading Public Spaces

Many of the stories I collected discussed being a trans non-binary person interacting with the public. The public is either a place of great pain and gender dysphoria, or a place of affirmation and gender euphoria. For stories of euphoria, many posters discussed being invited to events, such as a female bachelorette party when they were assigned male at birth, affirmed their non-binary gender identity. Similar stories were posted many times, with slight variations including feeling euphoric when gendered correctly on a night out, or by causing confusion in strangers to the point that they did not know what gender to use. Others discussed feeling gender euphoria when they knew they were “clock-y,” or visibly transgender in public. By being visibly transgender in public, they felt connected to the transgender community. One poster even described wanting to be microaggressed, or called transphobic slurs in public, so that they could feel “queer enough.” They wanted to elicit responses of anger to feel gender euphoria and inclusion. Another user described being assigned male at birth and wearing a skirt in public. They felt empowered when they adorned the garment and loved the feeling of air on their legs and fabric swishing around their thighs. They also noted that realizing people were staring as

they walked through a department store added to the effect. Knowing that they were going against the gender binary and existing outside of social norms was freeing to them. They felt the duality of acceptance to the trans non-binary community and rejection by the normative gender binary community. The mixture of acceptance/rejection added to their euphoria.

Desires to be visibly transgender hint at the desire to be acknowledged by the public, which is validating. Experiences that elicit euphoria were when strangers could not decide whether to refer to the individual as a sir or ma'am and when others screamed transphobic slurs. One poster even stated they wanted to change their name to "Stick" to facilitate perpetual confused experiences in public. By changing their name to Stick, they would force others to pause and wonder why they were named Stick and how that was possible. The idea of perpetual confusion was euphoric to them. Both instances of actions taken by individuals and interactions between trans non-binary people were collected in this data set.

The above discourse found in the data relates to moments of improvisatory freedom where non-binary people are imagining and attempting to enact their future as they pull away from the gender binary. The instances of being clocked as transgender in public affirms them, the fact they have been denied their humanity, yet live anyway, means their improvisation is working.

Gender dysphoria was also important regarding public interactions. One poster who identified as an "afab [assigned female at birth] non-binary person now passing as male" described the internal conflict and dysphoria they felt participating in feminist social groups and traditionally woman-dominated spaces. They wanted to support women but did not want to be considered a woman or take up space in the feminist movement now that they are perceived as a man. They wrestled with wanting to be in these spaces because they are still affected by issues

(especially medically), but it triggers dysphoria for them to be in woman-centered spaces, including feelings of worry, stress, and guilt.

Notably, dysphoria in public arose when participating in non-binary visibility weeks. These are online campaigns where people from a community will collectively create social media posts to raise visibility. One user who posted during lesbian visibility week described sensations of drowning, pain, and hurt when it came to feeling invisible as a Black lesbian non-binary person. They discussed how their intersecting identities made them invisible in all the spaces they were supposed to be welcomed, like social media, dating, and social life generally. Another user posted about the guilt they felt from societal pressure for non-binary people to be androgynous. They understand that there is no one way to be non-binary; however, they feel intense pressure to meet the transnormative stereotype of non-binary people. This stereotype includes being thin, white, and androgynous. They noted the frustration of feeling guilty over wanting to be a feminine non-binary person.

One can imagine the range of feelings and considerations these individuals experience when in the public eye. Whether at parties, shopping, or any public activity, a mixture of gender euphoria and dysphoria may occur. Some users recount that they tried to engineer gender euphoria by making the public uncomfortable, thus feeling agency over their identity creation process. Other users recount times they felt like they were publicly drowning. They feel immense pain over being misgendered, excluded, and scrutinized by the public. They feel pain knowing they will never be able to be seen as who they really are. Having to navigate public spaces while dealing with this pain exacerbates feelings of gender dysphoria.

The discussions of gender dysphoria in my data relate to concepts of abjection and social death from the literature. The trans non-binary individuals understand that they embody non-

human identities, and because of that, they experience abjection where the world falls out from under their feet, and they feel as if they want to spit themselves out of their own bodies. The feelings of not belonging anywhere, no longer belonging in spaces you once frequented, and hurt at being misgendered add to the effect of abjection and for some, create the sense that they live in social death daily.

**Reading Private Spaces**

In the data, public spaces provided many instances of happiness and sadness for trans non-binary people, but private spaces were also particularly important affective sites. With many posts commenting on gender euphoria and dysphoria, feelings of joy, freedom, confusion, and dissociation were discussed at length. One poster, who asked for clarification on gender dysphoria, described a feeling of disconnection whenever they looked in the mirror. It was not described as always negative or bad, just weird and uncanny. When they looked in the mirror and realized they did not recognize who they were, they reported sometimes having a mental breakdown. It seems when the poster saw themselves through their own eyes, they were thrown into abjection. Other users describe similar experiences, such as one who reported seeing themselves in photos after a party which caused them to become nauseous and feel hatred over how they looked. They said this was the first time they had gender dysphoria.

Dysphoria came up frequently in discussions of clothing. Users reported feelings of gender exhaustion because they did not want to wear feminine or masculine clothes, but realized there was no “third option.” They wanted to feel good in what they are wearing without having to choose from men’s or women’s clothes. Although shopping is a public activity, the problem this user posed is the private world of having to buy clothes but constantly meeting the gender binary in every store. This poster also describes the exhausting process of having to modify

existing clothes so that they do not represent either men's or women's styles, and of how tired and guilty they feel for not being androgynous enough. This is another moment when other users called out the transnormative idea that to be non-binary is to be androgynous, thin, and white. So, while some users were exhausted at constantly working hard to ungender their clothes, other users were exhausted and felt guilty at working hard to lean into one gender as hyperfemme or hyper-masculine to play the binary differently. One user characterized these experiences by stating "not trans as in gender dysphoria and euphoria, but trans as in gender exhaustion."

These accounts of dysphoria, exhaustion, and pain relate to concepts of abjection. We can see in the data how some trans non-binary people are discussing their relationship to abjection despite not using that specific language. Yet, where self-recognition and clothing produced significant dysphoria, private experiences also produced euphoria. Non-binary people reported feeling euphoria when they simply did not understand gendered inside jokes, or they posted an outfit that made them feel euphoric. Such posts contained images of the person wearing a hyper-femme all pink outfit, wearing a skirt or other highly gendered clothing item, trying different haircuts and makeup styles, or dressing up as various mythical creatures. None of these posts mentioned that the person was going into public with their new look; rather, they were having a quiet day at home and felt it was the perfect time to dress how they wanted without scrutiny. Many stated they felt gender euphoria when wearing too much of something like makeup blush or eyeliner, or when desiring conditions such as heterochromia so that their appearance violated social norms.

Beyond appearance, users stated they sometimes woke up feeling euphoric and wanted everyone else to as well, and they espoused general support for the community and wished everyone to have gender euphoria too. I also found many conversations about the use of chest

binders and the amount of euphoria they brought to individuals, but not in relation to being perceived as having a flat chest. These individuals said they generally felt a sense of discomfort about their body but when they put the chest binder on, their feelings shifted to inner peace and stillness. They discussed crying from joy when putting on the binder and how the resulting mental calmness made everything else in life easier to manage. One user posted that they don't have to feel gender euphoria specifically around their satisfaction with their own gender presentation on any given day, but they experienced gender euphoria through watching others have it. Their comment arose from having heard the song "Man I Feel Like a Woman" for the first time as an adult. Hearing the song, they became emotional and began to cry. They did not feel particularly moved by the "girl power" aspect of the song but were moved by the overall experience of hearing someone else discuss their gender euphoria. These instances of euphoria in the data again connect to concepts of improvisatory freedom and wake work as well. We see people interacting over what clothing to wear to elicit gender euphoria, thus improvising the freedom they hope to have in the future, but which is denied existence currently.

**Reading Digital Spaces**

Depending on how someone engages with digital spaces, it can feel very private or feel very public. This section discusses how users interact with digital spaces through certain social media affordances in relation to their feelings about being non-binary. This is important because the data were collected from digital spaces, and because queer communities have been early adopters of the internet making online life important to their identity work (Miles, 2018; Wight, 2014). In that regard, users explicitly discussed feeling dysphoria and euphoria in relation to technology and digital spaces, particularly in the ways technology and gendering intersect.

Regarding euphoria, websites such as Twitter have algorithms that decide what kind of post you might like on your newsfeed. The settings of the website will also choose a gender for you and allow you to change it as you wish. One user said they did not identify as a man but felt euphoric when Twitter identified them as one based on their activity. Another person used a cell phone app to determine whether their vocal pitch was male or female, and when determined to be androgynous, they felt euphoric over that validation. Whether or not an app can truly determine if your voice is associated with a gender is irrelevant. These situations were euphoric for the individuals that recounted them.

Regarding dysphoria, the mesh of gendering and technology produced negative affect and creative responses. One user who created a TikTok video expressed great frustration and pain over being misgendered online, which was the only space that they were out as non-binary. They recounted how they were receiving hateful comments on their videos for being plus size, so the misgendering caused major dysphoria, pain, and sadness. A different user described feeling detached from being a Black non-binary lesbian when they saw posts discussing whether non-binary people can be lesbians or Black people can be non-binary. This detachment, or dissociation, from their identity caused them not to want to identify with anything at all.

Still other posts discussed the experience of being non-binary and menstruating. One person used a well-known meme of red explosions with stick figures smiling and saying that everything is going to be okay to deal with the experience of menstruation. And some people used memes to express their overall exhaustion. They edited a non-binary pride flag onto a stick figure with dark eye bags laying on a bed in a messy room. These images get at the fatigue but also the pride the users feel as non-binary, and the constant juggling act of taking care of their bodies when their bodies feel as if they are betraying them. These memes are an intriguing way

non-binary people discuss unique experiences in ways that are generally recognizable. Memes are widely shared by nature across and for the most part anyone who understands a meme would be able to relate through it, and analyzing these memes and ones like them could be a study of their own.

## Emergent Themes of Gender in Non-Binary Identity

### Gender Abolition

Cutting across the public, private, and digital spaces, I found significant discourse about gender abolition that included trans non-binary affect. However, this topic was discussed more in long form posts on forums where users could respond to each other in detail. For example, this theme came up when a user asked, "what is gender?" They described how hard it is to find an identity label to use because they realized that gender is all "made up." Gender is something created to categorize people and the poster felt there was no point in having one because it "doesn't actually mean anything." Nothing could help them find their gender because none of it was real in the first place.

Conversations of gender abolition frequently arose from discussions of the pressure and guilt to be androgynous. Many people posted about being upset over the pressure and feeling guilty for wanting to be feminine and non-binary. This opened the door for conversations about gender abolition and how that relates to gender conceptually. One person began the conversation by stating that capitalism is incompatible with non-binary gender identity. They argued that capitalism commodifies identities into stereotypes so that they are easier to "sell" to the public, which is like Cannon's (2021) discussion of media representations of non-binary transgender individuals. Cannon (2021) states that non-binarism is marketed as one's more "authentic self" and therefore encourages consumers to engage in "hyper individualistic purchasing strategies" to

attain that “authentic self,” which in turn commodifies non-binary identity into something you can buy (p. 2). The poster's example was the pressure to be androgynous, which creates opportunities for retailers to market “gender neutral” clothing. New “gender neutral” retailers have popped up as the “solution” for non-binary people when they shop; however, this user pointed out the inherent bias towards masculinity in these brands. Hence, capitalism is creating the concept of a masculinized “third gender” that non-binary people are pressured to adopt.

Similar ideas appeared on a different platform. There, a user heavily critiqued some non-binary people who in this person's view only seemed to care about pronouns, hormones, and surgeries. They argued that to be non-binary is to understand the world is organized in binary terms and attempt to reject it. They felt that to be non-binary is to recognize there is more to life than the expectations placed upon you by the gender you are assigned at birth. They believe non-binary people need to show up differently in their relationships and avoid making assumptions about gender and gender roles. They remarked that while many people decide to start using they/them pronouns, these people have not made the conscious effort to stop perpetuating misogyny in their interpersonal relationships, such as expecting feminine people to shoulder the brunt of the emotional labor in relationships or those non-binary people whose relationships still follow a cis-heterosexual model. In these conversations, gender abolition is much more than just corporeal performance and the use of gender-neutral pronouns. It is an entire way of life dedicated to dismantling the gender binary that begins by reflecting on the ways we perpetuate it.

Other users critiqued the notion of gender abolition altogether. People expressed concern about abolishing gender when some non-binary people identify as genderfluid. Genderfluid is an identity where someone could feel like a man one day, a woman another day, and a mixture of both or neither on other days. What would it look like for genderfluid people if the gender binary

was abolished? Is it even possible to abolish a structure such as the gender binary? For some individuals, gender is still a useful tool in producing their genders. Being able to say "I switch between man and woman, both and neither" is the best way they can describe their feelings. How would it look if the gender binary disappeared and no one had a sense of stability when it came to that aspect of their identity? Can we function in our day to day lives without gender? This brings the debate to a standstill, with some wanting to dismantle the gender binary because its structural violence is too great to bear, while other people craft their identities with and through this gender binary to stay creative in a space of non-being. Debate over gender abolition branched off into other murky waters, such as whether a non-binary person can "pass" or be read as non-binary visually.

Conversations of gender abolition relate to queer abjection because they highlight different ways individuals relate to living in a zone of non-being. Those who feel comfortable abolishing gender are feeling abjection as that long form social death experienced on a day-to-day basis, while those who utilize the gender binary in their identity seem to feel abjection as a singular event that happens in moments of misgendering.

**Passing**

Because passing touches on ethical and conceptual aspects of gender, as well as the experience of recognition and misrecognition, it was a highly emotional subject. Passing generally here means being perceived as non-binary in public. First, I saw this theme in posts about having euphoria from being clock-y in public. Those users who wanted to be identified as transgender, or elicit a confused response from people, were possibly getting at wanting to "pass" as non-binary. Many posts asked how someone could look more non-binary, which suggests they are asking how to pass. This always elicited mixed responses from other users.

Sometimes people would post tips on how to look more like the other binary gender to create confusion over whether someone was a man or woman, or they would post tips on how that person could look otherworldly to be confusing altogether. Tips included ideas for haircuts, the use of makeup, mixing and matching gendered clothing styles, and other modifications like surgery and shapewear to obtain a more androgynous bodily figure.

Others responded that it is impossible to pass as non-binary. Ultimately, these users were arguing that gender expression and the clothes you wear have nothing to do with how you identify. They felt that a cisgender man wearing a dress was not automatically non-binary, and any gender can present their gender in an androgynous fashion. This relates to gender abolition in that by attempting to pass as non-binary, one went against the idea that non-binary people should strive to abolish the binary altogether. Further, passing is considered transphobic for binary transgender people because they feel pressured to pass as the gender they are transitioning to, which may no longer be what all transgender people want. If there are numerous ways a cisgender woman can perform her gender, why can't there be numerous ways a transgender woman performs too? The range of thoughts on passing within my data is significant, from wanting to somehow pass as non-binary all the way to acknowledging there is no way to pass as non-binary and the idea that those discussions are not useful in crafting identity.

I note, however, that discussions on passing have an orientation toward queer futurity much like conversations on gender euphoria. The movement in these conversations goes from acknowledging where the poster is in the present moment to where they want to be in the future when there is not a past to refer to. Passing, whether or not it is possible or helpful, is still a future oriented discussion about how one can craft identity with or without gender.

**Race and Gender**

The relationship between race and gender was a significant part of reflection in the data and I believe it is important to understand blackness for non-binary identity to make sense of that relationship. Blackness in this context means much more than skin color. It is a positionality that someone can hold in the world due to being perceived as inherently transgressing social norms and already always dead socially (Towns, 2018). Non-binary identity certainly transgresses social norms of the gender binary to the point of not existing socially, so it can be seen as a "blackened" space relative to gender. That means those who are non-binary have a complex relationship to race, particularly in terms of how users see their relative agency.

In the data, I see instances of non-binary people expressing their desire to be microaggressed, which suggests a whitened position relative to the otherwise blackened state of non-binarism. The users want to be victimized based on their trans non-binary identity because it makes them feel gender euphoria. I argue, these people are speaking from a whitened space, where they are not socially dead, yet they are also acting aesthetically relative to a zone of gendered non-being. By seeking out the moments of abjection to make them feel included and euphoric, they express a sense of self-efficacy associated with whiteness. There are moments in the data where trans non-binary people even try to engineer those moments of abjection by purposefully naming themselves "Stick" so that people are left confused. In other terms, they see non-binary identity as autopoiesis. It is a distinct white strategy for overcoming a blackened condition.

Other instances in my data describe how people identify as non-binary because they are Black, acknowledging the racialized social death they live in daily. They have an understanding that they are not actually seen as human, which grants a gender identity in society, so they feel

there is no point in trying to force gender to happen. They just exist as non-binary because racially they already exist in non-being. Intersectionally, non-binarism and blackness aren't separate spaces of non-being. As a result, when it comes to the identities produced by individuals, their racial identity matters quite a bit as it mediates how they experience abjection. More whitened individuals seem to see non-binarism as an aspect of themselves they can design rather than a state of social non-being. In that sense, they do not see the intersectionality of blackness as a political category and non-binary identity.

The relationship between whiteness, blackness, and non-binarism is clearly very complicated. In general terms, one can say trans non-binary people are existing in social death, but it is not uniform. Non-binary people of color face additional violence and that shows up in the ways they discuss the aesthetic process of crafting their identity. The non-binary person of color is saying they are not able to engineer these instances of microaggressions like white non-binary people are. That is not to say that white non-binary people don't also exist in social death; however, they exist in relation to racialized violence very differently. Whiteness makes a difference in the context of race and gender in that whiteness can contribute to people viewing gendered abjection episodically, much like Kristeva and Lechte (1982) described. Blackness allows for abjection to be experienced more as a conditioned state such as Fanon's (1990) argued. I say this not to minimize anti-trans violence and its relationship to abjection, but I want to call attention to the ways non-binary people of color's experience with violence cannot be held as equitable to white non-binary people's experiences with violence. We cannot erase these differences and exposure to violence but I also want to call attention to potential for shared aesthetic praxis in thinking non-binarism through Black abjection.

**Freedom**

Among the most powerful threads across all subjects was the relation of freedom to gender. Non-binary people yearn to feel free from stereotypes, and they also feel free when they experience gender euphoria or are validated in their identity. Again, racial senses of abjection produce a difference. As discussed in the previous section on passing and race, some individuals felt that with enough self-determination they could gain freedom from the gender binary. This showed up in my data from people who were conversing about how to look more non-binary, or potentially to pass as non-binary. They felt that with the right combination of clothes and changes to their physical appearance, that they could self-determine their non-binary identity, which would lead to their eventual freedom from the binary. They are playing around with how they can interpret non-binarism because they recognize it is not something they have experienced yet both because they are routinely misgendered and therefore unfree, and because non-binarism is still being invented.

Still others engage in wake work to find freedom despite social death. Black individuals who acknowledge the social denial of their gender assigned at birth create non-binary identity to firstly acknowledge that experience, but secondly to find freedom in the wake of colonialism. This creativity to be non-binary is a form of wake work I believe. The person is not just accepting their status as non-being, but actively creating from that positionality and finding freedom despite recognizing the limits of self-determination.

In that sense, whiteness also makes a difference for improvising freedom among non-binary people. We can see some non-binary people working toward the idea that they have the self-determining power to create their freedom. These people seem to operate from the idea that they can bend the world to their will, and if they just try hard enough to “look more non-binary”

then they will be recognized as such. This is a whitened notion of freedom that not every individual in my data held. Other people pushed back against those that were trying to look more non-binary by stating it is impossible to pass as non-binary and that should not be the focus of crafting this identity. These latter voices are aligned with Moten's (2004) improvisatory freedom in the sense that the person who endeavors to be free is not in control of themselves or their environment, thus they cannot transcend their experience. They are working within that violence to create something that was not there before. Those non-binary people that are closer to a white subjectivity presume they can create their own freedom and overcome the binary and structural violence, in contrast to a blackened view that violence is not going away, yet we can still create freedom.

There is a chaos within my data that does not create a clear picture of how freedom is felt from one individual to another with no clear answer going forward. It is very hard to account for where the white trans person exists in relation to freedom and abjection. They are abjected and living in social death, but still have the power to work around social death in certain circumstances. There currently is no model that can account for the spaces white transgender people exist in.

Despite notions of freedom being highly contextual for this community, there could possibly be an overarching way that this community uses freedom as a tool to produce their identity. Since freedom is such a common theme throughout the data, it is important to see how concepts such as Moten's (2004) improvisatory freedom could be applied to this community. Much of the data I have collected is surrounding imaginative spaces where they are creating a social identity, which is like how improvisatory freedom has been theorized.

# CHAPTER 5

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Considering I take an aesthetic orientation to my work, I find relationships between the sublime, gender euphoria, and gender dysphoria to be useful for analysis. In the context of non-binary identity, gender euphoria has elicited feelings of pleasure, ecstasy, freedom, peace, and contentment in non-binary individuals. Such feelings manifest when people state they do not know whether they are experiencing gender euphoria or the effects of illicit drugs and have conversations about feelings of peace that arise when chest-binding. This shows that gender euphoria can be a sublime experience. Gender dysphoria, on the other hand, is manifested in discussions of pain, hurt, dissociation, terror, and rejection. These feelings arise in the data from conversations about being misgendered and misrecognized, dissociating when you do not recognize yourself in the mirror, and being rejected from the community due to the basis of other intersecting and marginalized identities. Overall gender dysphoria leans towards a negative sublime experience. What is important is that these individuals are talking about aesthetic experiences that are part of crafting their subjectivity.

As previously discussed, scholars such as Edmund Burke (1798) and Immanuel Kant (1952) theorized much of the sublime to be aesthetic achievements that only certain members of society that had the ability and education can experience. These people were presumably wealthy, white, and “free” men. Against the idea that an aesthetic experience is a privilege, I have engaged with aesthetic theory rooted in the Black radical tradition, which is necessary literature to find the language that accommodates the diverse individuals in my data. I drew on concepts of abjection, improvisatory freedom, and blackness as a political category (Moten, 2004; Sharpe, 2014; Towns, 2018).

After analyzing my data, I have produced a few claims based on questions supported by the data and literature. To what extent do trans non-binary people live in abjection and an ongoing state of social death? What forms of wake work do these individuals engage in, and to what purpose does this work serve? To what extent do these individuals see gender abolition fitting with their identity? How is the concept of improvisatory freedom utilized by these people and what purpose does it serve in the production of their identity?

## Abjection

My first claim responds to the question, to what extent are these trans non-binary people living in abjection and ongoing social death? Abjection can be thought of as a single instance of losing oneself through revulsion, or a state of loss that is social death. The more I read and re-read my data, the more I was confronted with the fact that people were working through the experiences of social death. I first encountered stories about individuals wanting to be called slurs in public to generate gender euphoria. I found it interesting that people wanted to feel bad to feel good. One poster stated that if people did not look at them and feel the need to ask their pronouns, then they were not being transgender enough, and stated “please micro agress/hate crime me.” Another user commented on this post stating “being clockably trans is the height of gender euphoria.” This was also evident when users posted about how satisfied they felt breaking social norms by going shopping in a skirt and knowing the other shoppers, who were assumed to be cisgender, were made uncomfortable by them. The poster stated they enjoyed being stared at in public. All users who claimed disturbing others' gender expectations in public said that it made them feel more connected to the trans non-binary community. This received negative acknowledgement, and despite that, any acknowledgement was good in their opinion. They used their knowledge of the gender binary to play at gender in a way that would produce euphoria

through breaking social norms. Being assigned male at birth and wearing skirts, or by engaging in androgyny, they publicly disrupted the binary with the hope of feeling sublimity. These posts included no comments on what non-binarism looks like conceptually or in private.

In this context, these individuals know they are living in abject social death. They understand that wearing certain clothes in public will potentially expose them to ridicule and do it because the social death they exist in allows them that shared experience with a community. Using abjection, knowing they are being judged negatively, people actually produce feelings of gender euphoria.

Although I saw users rely on abjection and social death to create aesthetic experience, a division of opinion within the data calls to question the degree that these individuals exist in social death or experience it selectively. These posts do not give me a sense that the individual posters know to what degree they are living in social death, and some people have responded to these posts to argue as much. The examples outlined above are different from the way that Fanon (1990) describes abjection. Fanon (1990) taps into an aspect of abjection which is the dehumanizing sensation of having your self-determination taken away from you. In the example above, some trans non-binary people know that by wearing certain clothes in public will cause them to be ridiculed and intensify the fact that they are in abjection, and so they do it. They act as if they can choose abjection and how they are abjected and this is the difference. They are negotiating power by selectively affirming or disconfirming the gender binary. This is another instance of how abjection is not lived uniformly for non-binary people. Some non-binary people assume they make choices about abjection and try to engineer moments of violence, utilizing whiteness to do so, while other non-binary people are subjected to unrelenting racial climates of violence and do not have that choice.

The question of how these individuals live in social death became clear when I viewed a video by a Black trans non-binary person. They stated that being non-binary is *not* about being on hormones or trying to look more androgynous; being non-binary meant much more than that to them. They stated that to be non-binary is to see the binary world that we live in and focus on "opting out" of these harmful stereotypes. They also stated that they were tired of people waking up and suddenly telling others to use they/them pronouns for them, "without stopping the ways they perpetuate misogyny and look down on those who are more marginalized."

Coming from a Black social media user, I saw them addressing a mostly white non-binary audience. Whether or not it is possible to opt out of participating in the gender binary is irrelevant here; I took from this video that white non-binary people who verbalize their desire to be hate crimed without acknowledging that they are least likely to be hate crimed out of all trans non-binary people are seen as insensitive. This individual is saying that effectively that abjection is an ongoing state of social death, not a strategic resource for their use. They are critiquing those descriptions of abjection that understand it as a general condition. People live abjection differently and in relation to it, which means it is an important aspect of non-binary aesthetics. Part of the issue also lies in ignorance of the ways other people experience abjection.

This issue arose more than once. On the same social media platform, a white transgender woman who likes to livestream herself eating at restaurants has been heavily criticized for the number of times she corrects the wait staff on her pronouns. She even posted details of how she calls restaurants ahead of time to tell them her pronouns, and then gets visibly upset when the wait staff misgender her. Many social media users criticized her for seemingly using her white and class privilege against wait staff to assert her pronouns, which is far removed from the experiences regarding being misgendered. This transgender woman does not publicly identify as

non-binary, but the behavior is like behavior of some trans non-binary people. Many of the critiques are leveled at how this person handled misgendering through her privilege, but it reveals how she experiences abjection relative to the gender binary. She has the privilege to be less at risk for physical harm for being transgender and therefore her experience of social death is more situational than the ongoing abjection that the Black non-binary person expressed in their video.

Those discussions prompted me to ask to what extent do non-binary people exist in abjection? I was troubled by the ways in which non-binary people used privilege to engage with oppression on their own terms, and other non-binary people were not able to. I think that the more whitened normative identities a non-binary person has, the less abjection feels like an ongoing social death to them. For those closer to whitened normative identities, they experienced abjection the way Kristeva & Lechte (1982) would describe. They have individual moments where they feel the world fall from beneath their feet and experience internal violence and revulsion. They have moments of sickening experiences, where they are misgendered in public and tell the wait staff "it is like a knife through the heart," and moments of abjection when they meet their own eyes in the mirror and realize they don't recognize the face looking back at them. Abjection for them is momentary, terrifying, and singular. They look back on these moments with horror and are forever changed from them. The more blackened the trans non-binary identity someone has, the more they experience what Fanon (1990) meant by social death. They live in a state of abjection. They not only have these moments of terror where they are misgendered, excluded, objectified, and sickened, but they also understand experiences from having been born into non-being, which never truly goes away. These non-binary people deal with misgendering and transphobia with a racial consciousness formed in the wake of

colonialism and transatlantic slavery. Non-binary people live in a world that reduced Blackness to flesh, to matter, and to already dead objects long ago (Towns, 2018).

The differences in abjection affecting concepts of futurity are aligned with ideas about futurity. To have a more whitened normative identity is to have more of a future set in stone (Edelman, 2004). As Edelman (2004) would assert, homosexual men are abjected based on having no reproductive futurity. In turn, heterosexual people who engage in relationships that have the potential to produce a child do have a future and are not in queer abjection. We can see in Edelman's (2004) argument that heterosexual people who have more whitened normative identities are closer to having a future than the homosexual men, who in that sense seem to share space with blackened identities. As noted, the assertion that homosexual people cannot have children has been critiqued on various levels. Some scholars have picked apart Edelman (2004) by pointing out the various ways that homosexual men do participate in the reproductive process via surrogacy and adoption, while other scholars assert that futurity is inherently a queer experience (Muñoz, 2019; Parvulescu, 2017). This shows that we need to take a deeper look at the individual's intersectional identities to understand what social death means for people and how they live in relation to it. These issues are not black and white, figuratively and literally. It is important not to assume that people's identities are based on their dermal signifiers, so we can see that one's racialized relationship to futurity affects how they think they should engage with oppression and feeling abjected.

So, what difference does this all make? It is significant because it shows that the non-binary experience is not universal. Depending on the identities that a non-binary person may have, they will have different privileges and barriers in society. Some non-binary people can use white privilege to avoid negative consequences of being abjected, or even see abjection as a

strategy, while others face abjection in multiple non-discretionary ways. Trans non-binary people are not homogenous, which has implications for conducting research on the community that aims to generalize their experiences. For my own research going forward I am interested in how individuals navigate increasing anti-transgender legislation in the United States. Having a richer understanding of identity will help formulate appropriate research questions.

That being said, it all becomes very depressing to think about. It is easy to fall into the thought process that once an individual or community is in abjection, they stay there forever and are constantly in pain and suffering. Yet, even within my data we see instances of some members claiming to be non-binary to try and escape social death by creating something out of nothing. Sharpe (2014) coined the concept of wake work to not only talk about abjection and social death, but also to foster a sense of creativity and community within the wake. Creating something out of nothing is precisely what Sharpe (2014) asserts in "reading toward a new analytic, as the wake and wake work, and I am interested in plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially" (p. 13). This brings me to my next claim, which is how are these trans non-binary people engaging in something like wake work, and what purpose does it serve them?

## Wake Work

When speaking about abjection, it is easy to fall into a state of despair. To gain that level of self-recognition about your lived experience is difficult and one may begin to feel hopeless about their future. Sharpe (2014) allows us to begin thinking about the ways certain communities still have agency while in abjection. Considering the trans non-binary community also exists in various states of abjection, I wondered if my data could speak for the ways they engage in

something like wake work as well? It is important to understand Sharpe's (2014) wake work is particular to Black experience. Wake work is something that is done specifically in the wake of slavery and anti-black violence. Not all trans non-binary people experience anti-black violence, so the question here is first to what extent do trans non-binary persons either engage in wake work or engage in other practices that are *like* wake work, and secondly how can wake work show us how non-binarism is an incredibly complicated site of intersectionality?

Much of the data I collected were instances where the user asks the community how to "look more non-binary," which I suggest could be a version of wake work. There were discussions of different hairstyles, makeup, clothing, surgeries, and more than the original poster could engage with to create a more androgynous effect. Examples include a video posted by a user that showed them cuffing their sleeves, pants, and hat and stating this is what non-binary people do. Another non-binary user conducted an entire series of videos regarding how to modify garments to either be longer, shorter, wider, or to accommodate a whole host of issues one may have while trying to dress in ready to wear clothing that was not designed with their body in mind. Others asked for suggestions on brands and types of shapewear to create a more curvy silhouette in an effort to present more femininely. Users also shared success stories of various haircuts or uses of a pride flag as sources of gender euphoria. The ideas bouncing around the community are a very creative and iterative process where feedback is given that reminds me of the wake work. These people engage in identity craftwork to create something out of the non-being they exist in. Because it is sometimes impossible in my data to tell an individual's racial history, it is impossible to know if their non-binary aesthetic work is informed by a context of anti-black violence. However, it is possible to find some instances in the TikTok data.

A person posted a TikTok of a video of an artistic photoshoot they directed. They described this gallery of photos as ushering in a new age of non-binary and much of their art focuses on the intersection of being Black and non-binary. Sharpe (2014) discusses how wake work is a way that Black people can know themselves through violence, but not only because of this violence. Wake work is about Black people coming to know themselves, which I see this user doing in their TikTok. They post their art, record the process of them creating this art, and use their platform as a space for other trans non-binary Black people to connect. This is one instance where wake work is relevant for understanding the aesthetics of trans non-binarism.

Discussions of which trans non-binary individuals engage in wake work and which ones do not highlight the complexity of this identity. Individuals in my data are united by the label of non-binary; however, their intersecting identities produce wildly different experiences in life. Some trans non-binary people engage in wake work as Sharpe (2014) means and utilize non-binarism to respond to anti-black violence, while other non-binary people cannot say that and do not use their creativity to know themselves both in and beyond violence. Still others create in the space of non-being but seem to imagine it is an escape from anti-trans violence. Part of the challenge is in delineating violence in terms of racial and gender difference which is exactly what non-binarism confuses so much.

The wake work of non-binary individuals is important to understand because it gives agency back to the individuals who are grappling with abjection. Exploring ways that non-binary individuals create themselves is an investigation of aesthetic praxis within the wake of coloniality. This is important to keep in mind for future research as it aligns with my ethics as a qualitative scholar that this community is not voiceless. They are not in need of help or saving and they are crafting their identity whether it is acknowledged in academic research. This is also

more evidence that the community dwells in a space of social death, which argues for researchers to understand that identity cannot be treated as a variable because trans non-binary identities vary greatly and are an aesthetic *practice* that defies categories, not a *thing*.

Further, wake work's complicated presence in the data demonstrates how these people, and non-binarism in a broader sense, is a project of futurity. The wake work analyzed is framed as what an individual can feel in the future when recognized as non-binary. It is also about what a world is like that recognizes non-binarism. Whether or not it is possible to be recognized as non-binary is one thing, but these conversations are much more than that. Engaging in posts where users share photos of themselves in possibly their most vulnerable moments and asking for feedback on their appearance is a form of creativity in social death and a project of futurity, I argue. They simultaneously create something out of nothing while speculating a shared future among themselves (Johnson & LeMaster, 2020). This aligns with Muñoz (2019), who defines a queer futurity as being "attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing the present" (p. 18). Futurity is an imagination of the future that is "free from oppression, trauma, violence, and discrimination" which is what I see unfolding abundantly in my data (Johnson & LeMaster, 2020, p. 195). Although queer futurity and Black futurity are not new, the futurity of trans non-binary people is. It is, as Moten (2004) described, an improvisatory freedom. What this shows is that transgender and non-binary people belong to and complicate conversations of other abjected communities.

## Gender Abolition

Because trans non-binary people do engage in aesthetic praxis to improvise freedom denied them, it is also a discourse about gender abolition. My thoughts turned to gender abolition when I watched a video that seemingly critiqued more whitened, normative non-binary people,

where the poster questioned “are you dismantling binaries, or are you just another agent of patriarchy with they/them pronouns?” This question struck me and as I investigated more corners of the internet, I saw connections to other users who claimed “non-binary identities and gender abolition are about the erasure of categories that can be easily commodified.” This comment stuck with me because the user presumed that non-binarism is a form of gender abolition. I am unsure about this as many people who identify as non-binary talk about their gender as a mixture of man and woman, or some days feeling like a man and sometimes a woman, other times neither. One group wants to completely dissolve the gender binary and see non-binarism as an identity that is produced and enacted cognitively, while the other group finds euphoria in looking outwardly transgender and being “clocky,” such that their identity is produced at the level of the body.

These people are battling over the ethics of how to produce identity, but I question if gender abolition is what non-binarism is about when some trans non-binary people rely on the gender binary to give language to their experiences. I think this conundrum is like what Marquis Bey (2022) outlines in *Black Trans Feminism.* Bey (2022) takes the stance of recalibrating the ways we understand blackness and transness to uncover hidden truths about how they operate as political categories and not just intersectional identities (p. 9). Bey (2022) argues for gender abolition, much like some members of the trans non-binary community but acknowledges that not everyone will agree that gender abolition is what we need. Gender abolition to Bey (2022) means that borders and boundaries should be dissolved to undermine the power structures that they hold up. This sentiment is similarly echoed within the community as well. So many members’ stories I have collected take Bey's (2022) stance, while others disagree.

Discussions of gender abolition are also reminiscent of Edelman's (2004) reproductive futurism and the queer death drive. Edelman (2004) provides us with a way to disengage from heteronormative power structures and release ourselves from the desire to uphold normative and whitened social and political practices. I see a connection between those trans non-binary people who want to completely abolish the gender binary and those who do not want to participate in any oppressive power structures. I see the project of their futurity being an engagement with the death drive to reject colonial reproductive logics.

This concept of gender abolition also comes up a lot in discussions of "passing." One person in the data questions whether they could "pass," or be read as, non-binary. A commenter argued that one could not pass as non-binary due to non-binarism being an "alternate framework for understanding gender in a non-categorical way that isn't defined against the traditional binary (but may contain elements of the [binary])." This commenter might agree that non-binarism is produced cognitively and is an ethic opposed to the harmful gender binary and supports the abolishment of the gender binary via non-binarism.

This exchange is pertinent when we look at the history of what it means to be a human in the West. Jackson (2020) outlines how to be human was not to be the opposite of an animal, but often enough to be considered a "rational animal" (p. 24). This left room for Black people to be considered humans, but that consideration came at great cost when the recognition of their humanity was used against them in the court of law where they were seen as "lesser humans" as necessary for White identity formation (p. 28). In other words, could a Black person pass for a rational animal? A key dimension for Black abjection is that to be seen as a subject requires one to pass as human. For the trans non-binary community to create their subjectivity, some people seem more attuned to the cost of passing as human and are worried that the more people try to

look androgynous and transnormative, the more they are reinforcing the community's non-existence relative to normative standards.

These arguments about passing and gender abolition are important for researchers to be attuned to because they come directly from individuals grappling with crafting their subjectivity in a state of social death and who are aware that to become a subject is to become human. They realize the cost of needing to subscribe to transnormative standards. The costs include only being recognizable as non-binary when they are thin, white, and androgynous, thus reinforcing racial norms (Johnson, 2016). Transnormative standards are not achievable by many people so to become human means some members remain in the zone of non-being. This will inform my future research because I am now interested in finding the conversations that challenge the idea one must subscribe to transnormative standards to be non-binary.

Because discussions of gender abolition are part of envisioning subjectivity that is presumed not to exist, they are part of the project of futurity. Discussions surrounding gender abolition refer to a life post-gender binary, and post-gender roles and stereotypes. They imagine what life will be like with the gender binary de-institutionalized, meaning one would not have to select gender or sex markers on legal documents or follow careers based on gender stereotypes. The idea that women are nurses and men are doctors would be erased from everyone's knee jerk reactions. Department stores would not separate clothing between men's and women's apparel; maybe they would separate by size and style, which opens up opportunities for extended sizes and styles to address diverse bodies rather than what is trendy for a certain gender to wear. We already can see this happening in various clothing brands that claim all their clothes are gender neutral.

Women's healthcare would no longer be under-researched because healthcare professionals would be knowledgeable in all types of anatomy and diseases. This could also open the door to comprehensive healthcare for intersex patients. The gender pay gap would dissolve in this imaginative future as employees would be promoted based on experience rather than gendered assumptions of capability. Whether any of this is at all possible with the abolition of gender through non-binarism is still up for debate. However, gender abolition within the trans non-binary community is a subplot of the futurity imagined by non-binary people. Gender abolition is a way to express a desire for freedom from the gender binary and offers hope to those currently suffering its effects (Johnson & LeMaster, 2020). The community is divided on whether gender abolition is possible, and if it is, what it might look like. I think what is certain is the community is having these conversations as a part of their shared struggle for recognition in society.

## Improvisatory Freedom

Freedom is critical in the data analyzed. Many trans non-binary people yearned for freedom from the gender binary, freedom from scrutiny, and freedom from the constraints of their worldly vessels. In that regard, being free is the primary issue of living in abjection, including wake work and the possibility of gender abolition. Given no models for trans non-binary freedom are available, individuals must improvise what that looks like as I stated earlier. Thus, I would like to explore how improvisatory freedom is enacted and ask what purpose does it serve in the production of their identity?

As noted in the literature review, Moten (2004) developed improvisatory freedom to explain how enslaved people might imagine themselves as free. I believe this concept is useful for envisioning how trans non-binary people imagine gender without the binary. When trans non-

binary people discuss different ways to be perceived as non-binary in public, swap ideas on how to modify clothing or apply makeup, and work together to define this identity, they enact improvisatory freedom. Because the gender binary is baked into every layer of our society, some might say that it is impossible to imagine a life without it, much less actually achieve it. However, in crafting their identity, we can see ways in which these people imagine freedom from the binary. When trans non-binary people complain about how restricted they feel when they are misgendered or when they don't feel non-binary enough, that also imagines their freedom.

One example as stated earlier was the non-binary TikToker who posted a video of their artistic photoshoot process. This individual filmed themselves directing a photoshoot that was intended to usher in a new age of non-binarism. The video was heavily filtered with glitter and the model was wearing glamorous clothing such as sequins and fur coats. This person was enacting their freedom by envisioning a new era of what non-binarism can be. This video also serves as an example of non-binarism that more trans non-binary people can follow and incorporate into their own explorations of their identity and freedom. The video was framed as if a new era was upon us where non-binary people are exalted and living a glamorous lifestyle.

However, it is still important to acknowledge that whiteness influences how a non-binary person goes about improvising and enacting their freedom. Moten's (2004) concept developed from enslaved people's experience, meaning people who are not in control of their self-determination and subjected to violence. Improving their freedom was not meant to transcend that violence, but to take that violence and find ways to work within it to still imagine freedom. The data has illustrated how non-binary people with whitened normative identities think they can create freedom just from trying hard enough. They discuss how if they just figure out the right

combination of clothing they can begin to pass as non-binary. Their imagination of their future is centered around making decisions that bring it into existence. This is distinct from non-binary people that hold more blackened identities and understand the blackened condition of being non-binary like the TikToker above. They never claimed that the clothing they wore made them non-binary, they simply created this video and space for imagining their freedom, enacted through their art. This is highlighted even more by the fact that their photoshoot was centered around the concept of a new era for non-binary people, hinting at a future where their freedom exists. Their decisions and clothing are not what makes them non-binary; their videos center around how being non-binary can help explain the anti-black violence they face in relation to their gender. Their art showcases how they can still be free despite this violence.

This information is significant because firstly it acknowledges again that non-binary people have agency over crafting their identities and that it is possible for them to imagine a life without the binary. It is also significant to understand *how* non-binary people imagine life without the gender binary because that short circuits arguments against the validity of non-binary identities. Just as the white characters in Uncle Toliver and Equiano did not want to believe these men could imagine freedom, people do not want to imagine what life would be like free of the gender binary, but non-binarism allows for these imaginings to happen. This will inform my future research because it connects back to the privileges that non-binary people with whitened normative identities have and reinforces how careful I must be to navigate intersectionality within this community.

The above discussion on abjection, wake work, gender abolition, and freedom all have an orientation to living out a gender that is not yet. Examples include non-binary people living in abjection and creating from these spaces to others engaging in wake work because of their

existence in social death. Other examples discuss gender abolition and the desire to be free from the gender binary. And finally, enactments of improvisatory freedom allude to a future that is not quite here.

# CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

Ultimately, trans non-binary people produce and conceptualize their identity as a project of futurity, although there are many different futures imagined and many ways to get there. By attending to the aesthetic rhetoric of identity formation in a state of non-being, the orientation to futurity in the data stands out. Discussions of how to look more non-binary presume a future for the non-binary community where they are acknowledged and accepted on their terms. Discussions of gender abolition imagine a future without the gender binary. As Muñoz (2009) states, "queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality." Non-binarism is part of that queer not-yet, as many non-binary people struggle to be recognized. They framed their posts as not yet being non-binary or on the journey to fully stepping into their identity. There is much potential in the horizon that this community imagines when it comes to acknowledgment, acceptance, and the fate of the gender binary.

My analysis suggests, however, that futurity must be understood in relation to a diverse set of abjected states. As the data suggests, some non-binary people feel like they have control over their future. They have discussions surrounding how they can look more non-binary which suggests that if they choose the "correct" combination of clothing, their non-binary futurity will be unlocked. Other non-binary people recognize that futurity is on the horizon. Through political programs like gender abolition, they think the non-binary future can be enacted. To them non-binary identity can only be enacted once the gender binary is dissolved. There is no way non-binary identity can be true if it is just considered a third gender.

Because trans non-binarism is a project of futurity, the aesthetic rhetoric of producing non-binary identities is important. Non-binary people are not arguing about who they are, they are discussing how to actually enact this identity on a day-to-day basis. What this research means is that each individual non-binary person creates their gender in a unique way such that they all seem to be diverse from each other, yet they enact a collaborative practice for a shared future. At this point, I think it would go against the aesthetic practice of non-binarism to try and study them as a community or demographic.

## Limitations

The overall limitations of my research are that my claims are not generalizable in a measurable sense. I have only collected discourses from individuals or small groups of trans non-binary people, so the sample size is not considered representative of the population. However, generalization is not what my work aims to do. The trans non-binary experience is diverse as shown in the data, and questions remain regarding how a researcher could survey this group in a way that is generalizable. Also, the data I used cannot account for several questions. Since I did not conduct interviews, I was not able to track socio-cultural factors for individuals. This leaves out key information regarding country of origin and the contexts in which the trans non-binary people produce their identities. Further, the claims I make do not reach many nuanced perspectives due to the lack of biographical data.

There is also a limit to my conclusion that the trans non-binary experience is a project of futurity. While I claim this because we can see in the data that people are working to craft their identities, it is unclear if that project has an end. This is an interesting limit when studying non-binary identity. If trans non-binary people are always in progress, then how could it be possible to study them as a collective project? It is counterintuitive to the identity to try and categorize it

or homogenize it into a group identity, even based in futurity, so that makes research projects involving non-binary people quite complicated.

## Future Research

What I personally take from this research is that I stand with and work alongside many of these trans non-binary people. The process of doing this research showed me that I participate as much as I study with trans non-binary people which aligns with my research ethic of not claiming to be the voice for a people, but of using research to bring attention to what they already are doing and to explain why it is important for scholars to do likewise.

My research adds to the literature in suggesting the trans non-binary community is radically diverse such that social science researchers may need to be more cautious in their participant selection processes. This is because research calls into question whether it is possible to presume a definition for this gender identity that my data shows is still emergent. In that regard, this research adds another narrative to the field of communication about what it means to be non-binary. Much of media studies, health communication, and other health research fields presume that the identity of non-binary can be treated as unified in some way, but ultimately my research argues that this identity is a work in progress. This means much more research needs to be done on non-binarism so scholars can better understand the identity and how to be inclusive of the community, recognizing inclusivity is hard to define in this context.

Future research I hope to conduct will include inquiring whether trans non-binary groups can be called communities or coalitions. I also hope to explore in more depth the ways that trans non-binary people live alternative lifestyles in relation to their status of social death, and how these lifestyles aid in their identity formation. This is also important when it comes to who uses interpretivist methods of research to work with trans non-binary people.

I am also interested in exploring the concept of gender abolition in relation to non-binary individuals to see whether non-binary individuals feel gender abolition is feasible and how. A survey would be an interesting approach to this question and would also allow for many non-binary people across the country and the world to participate. I would hopefully be able to collect a meaningful sample of data. This research question could also work to further our understanding of whether it is possible or not to survey non-binary. Perhaps the results would vary too much to say anything.

Finally, I am interested in studying how this identity is produced in different environments. I am particularly interested in homesteading and rural areas. I have been active in many queer homesteading communities and wonder if there is a correlation between wanting to create your own community, land, farm, and homestead that is disconnected from the general population (and, oftentimes, from formal utilities such as electricity), and the creation of a non-binary identity. However, the intersections of non-binarism and homesteading might be incredibly niche, so the value of this question is uncertain.

In closing, I hope that this work has spurred new questions, thoughts, considerations, and feelings in those who read it. I hope the ways that I blended my frameworks, theories, and paradigms add to the existing literature on trans non-binarism. I hope that despite not being able to share my data archive that the descriptions do the narratives justice and people are able to see what I see in the data. I encourage anyone who is interested in research such as this to chase these questions and bring their own positionality to this scholarship. Ultimately, I hope this work adds to the bright and expansive future that non-binary people have. This work would have not ever come to fruition without the individuals in my data putting their narratives online and starting these conversations in queer spaces. For that, I am thankful.

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