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'Open, and Always, Opening': Trans- Poetics as a Methodology for (Re)Articulating Gender, the Body, and the Self 'Beyond Language'

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'OPEN, AND ALWAYS, OPENING': TRANS- POETICS AS A METHODOLOGY FOR

(RE)ARTICULATING GENDER, THE BODY, AND THE SELF 'BEYOND LANGUAGE'

by

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A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Masters of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

'Open, and Always, Opening': Trans- Poetics as a Methodology for (Re)articulating Gender, the Body, and the Self 'Beyond Language'

by

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Advisor: Sarah Chinn

Poetry is a useful medium for exploring the fluidity and possibilities in language beyond the everyday terms of normative language. For trans- and genderqueer subjects, whose identities cannot be articulated within the linguistic boundaries of binary gender, and whose outward appearance challenges the cultural logic of gendered visibility, poetry becomes a valuable and necessary tool for survival, disruption, activism, and personal and public empowerment. Through syntax, word choice, semantic and non-semantic qualities of language, poetry helps articulate the inexpressible, complex, and unstable gender identities and subject positions, even as they change or multiply. It gives names to *felt* ideas, which can be explored and generated into new language, then into ideas, and eventually, tangible action (Lorde 37). Poetry's capacity for expansive articulation, and its overall compatibility with trans- identities and gender expressions, has spawned a new form of poetry, one that exceeds genre: *trans- poetics*.

Using *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry & Poetics* as a theoretical basis, this thesis explores how trans- poetics is being used as a methodology or political technique for challenging and transcending dominant notions of gender, the body, language, identity, and their spatial and temporal underpinnings. By playing with both content and form,

and a range of other poetic tools, trans- poetic projects engage in relations that seek to radically shift, re-orient, and disarticulate the taken-for-granted relationships between the visual and the linguistic, embodiment and gender expression, and gender expression and identity.

As poems like "who is man," "Boy with Flowers," "in and out of the holy," "February" and "A cut won't kill me" show, the ways in which trans- and genderqueer poets inhabit and express the proliferation of embodied difference are manifold. While trans- poetics manifests itself differently in each poem, these works ultimately reveal that there are inextricable relationships between form and content as well as politics and aesthetics. Rather than compartmentalizing trans- experiences, trans- poetics keeps the dimensions of the corporeal, the psychic, and the political in constant conversation with one another. Using these poems as literary artifacts, this thesis explores and brings into conversation the fascinating ways in which trans- poetics can be used as a strategy for opening up new possibilities of being in the world.

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Introduction: Poetry as Possibility *and* Necessity

Poetry lends form to the inarticulate. It "*translates* existential experience – including experience for which we have no words – into linguistic form, sound and texture" (Ladin "Ours for the Making," emphasis added). This transformative capacity, most notably found within the rhythmic and musical pulse of lyric poetry, creates a specific kind of space in which intangible thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions can be translated into words and brought into articulation in concentrated yet non-restrictive ways. Indeed, poetic language has the ability to transcend everyday speech, but it alone does not fully capture the potentiality of a lyrical poetics. Poetic form, which may include meter, rhyme scheme, and stanzas, as well as the shape or visual arrangement and juxtaposition between words (or characters and symbols) and the space of the page, provides an additional dimension in which composers can playfully articulate their thoughts and ideas. When experimentation with form and aesthetics is coupled with the power of poetic language, the possibilities for creative expression become limitless. These qualities are what make lyric poetry a particularly useful medium for imagining new modes of being and different kinds of meaning and for reconciling the gap between experience and expression.

While there are a number of reasons for reading or writing poetry, it becomes a *necessity* when figuration and self-expression cannot be found in the literal world (Burt 2013), when "relations between body and soul, social self and psyche" (Ladin, "Trans Poetics Manifesto" 306) are in conflict and may not find resolution in the everyday terms of normative language. This necessity resonates with and relates quite specifically to trans-[1] and genderqueer identities whose inward sense of self/selves cannot be articulated within the linguistic boundaries of binary gender and whose outward appearance challenges the cultural logic of gendered visibility.

[1] "Trans-" as opposed to "trans" or "transgender" is an analytic choice, which I expand upon further on pages 11-15 of this thesis.

Though the relationship between the textual and the corporeal can be found in any type of poetry, it carries a particular salience in poetry written by trans- or genderqueer people (Burt 2013). In a highly visual culture where we are judged by how well we embody and express a coherent gender, where the inability to be read as "male" or "female" causes disorientation, fear, anger, and grounds for the exclusion from the language and norms that "govern the recognizability of the human" (Butler, "Doing Justice" 183), poetry becomes a necessary vehicle for exploring the "multiplicities possible in language" (Edwards 252) in order to lend form to bodies that have "been historically illegible" (Shipley, "The Transformative" 197).

While poetry offers possibilities for expression outside of normative and oppressive structures of language, it also provides refuge and catharsis for trans- and other minority subjects who disproportionately experience discrimination, criminalization, and pervasive structural and physical violence in their day-to-day lives. In this context, then, "poetry is not a luxury" – it is not just a leisurely form of word play used to stretch the imagination towards apolitical means (Lorde 37). Rather, it is a necessary means of survival and existence, and a sanctuary where feelings can be explored and spawned into new language, then into ideas, and eventually into tangible action (37). For as Audre Lorde once so eloquently argued, poetry is "the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before […] [It] coins the language to express and charter … [a] revolutionary demand, [and] the implementation of … freedom" (38).

While trans- and genderqueer people have typically turned to memoir as a primary means for self-expression and healing, this genre has ironically proved to be both confining and distorting. Though autobiography may produce healing and empowerment to some trans-subjects by offering "continuity in the face of change" (Prosser 120), particularly for individuals

undergoing gender transition,[2] the genre has also had the potential to confine, fragment, and erase experiences that do not fit within a progressivist arc. Because it implicitly depends on the ability to retrospectively construct a beginning, middle, and end story line, there is an assumed expectation that "the end" will somehow produce a stable or "true" identity. While the generic conventions of trans- memoir can be useful and reassuring, it cannot accommodate other kinds of trajectories. For some trans- and other gender non-conforming subjects who "recognize and live with the inherent instability of identity" (Halberstam, "Transgender Butch" 164), the erasure of such non-congruous experiences may reproduce rather than heal the socio-cultural coercions and demands to fit within the binary system of sex/gender (Amin 220).

By contrast, poetry has the capacity to incorporate fragmented or "fleeting moments" (Amin 220) of experience into the context of poetic articulation. It does not adhere to the generic and temporal conventions of autobiography, or participate in what Elizabeth Freeman has termed "chrononormativity," which is the temporal regulation of bodies and social patterning of experiences in conformity with normative progressivist frameworks (Freeman 3, Amin 220).[3] It instead allows for the articulation of a state of being or moment in time, and to step outside of narrative and chrononormativity altogether. For these reasons, poetry creates a space that both reflects and nurtures the non-normative or "queer" relations to time and space that so many trans- and genderqueer people inhabit.

Because lyric poetry is more of a distillation of experience, rather than a rehearsed and retrospective narrative, it is capable of doing all kinds of things with form, content, time, and

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[2] For a more thorough description of the concept and process of transition(ing), see Julian Carter's "Transition" in the "Keywords" section of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* Volume 1, Numbers 1-2 (235-237).

[3] For a more comprehensive description of "chrononormativity," refer to Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Bonds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010.

space, which is much harder for prose to do. It can suspend or reverse time or allow the writer and reader to exist in several moments at once. Speaking to these very qualities, trans- poet Max Wolf Valerio writes:

> Inside poems, space is dynamic and moving. The spaces between words and phrases fracture and multiply meaning and music. Space is breath, and an invitation to the eye to move, or to linger. Poems can be read from left to right as in convention, but poetry also frees language through an imaginative and musical arrangement of space. Meaning, time, and space are fractured and expanded in the field of creation that the poem enacts. (377)

Poetry's capacity to "free language" and to move outside of linear space and time allows trans- and genderqueer subjects to reject socially imposed binaries by living between multiple realities (Cárdenas 398). Poetry gives breath to a language that is not only resistant to normative discursive flows but one that also has the capacity to speak to and account for bodies that inhabit non-normative or queer expressions of temporality and spatialization (namely, bodies in motion, transition, and flux).

　　　As trans- poet kari edwards argues, poetry can be used as "a tool for disruption, activism, acts of personal and public empowerment" (325). It can usher towards greater political alliances "which challenge the 'find myself' narrative [as a means to] give back to the community, with glorious havoc and come up with new possibilities" (325). How does it achieve this? When poetry is used as a political or methodological tool, it can disrupt the "narrative continuity and the cacophonous comfort of words" (Bhabha 284) by defying or deconstructing the taken-for-granted progressive and linear structures and experiences of time. This kind of re-assemblage invites the writer and reader alike into an unfamiliar territory or alternative experience of time

and space that, though informed by normative temporalities and spatial dimensions, has the capacity to exceed them. Poetry thus ushers us towards the unimaginable – it snatches, yanks, and throws readers into an environment completely unknown by "subvert[ing] the synchronous sense of time and tradition" (285). Attending to the discontinuities or non-chronological, non-normative and "queer" qualities of poetry is particularly useful for trans- and other gender non-conforming people for it can open up new life narratives and relations to time and space that show future promise of a trans-formational justice politics.

Whether one chooses to "make home on the other side" of the gender binary or exists in the multiple interstices or queer spaces of gender, poetry has the capacity to translate the multitude of trans- and genderqueer experiences in a way that everyday language or prose cannot. Through syntax, word choice, semantic and non-semantic qualities of language, poetry is useful for articulating inexpressible, complex, and unstable gender identities and subject positions, even as they change or multiply. (For an eloquent articulation of how poetry can function as a "perfect mode for expressing … uncomfortable gender identities" see Joy Ladin's "Ours for the Making" 2011.) While we do not yet have a language that can readily express trans- identities, poetry helps explore what this language could look like by keeping open "the possibilities for expressing desire, identity, language, and new embodiments" (Shipley, "Poetics Statement" 198). It gives name to *felt* ideas, which are nameless and formless until they are transposed through the poem (Lorde 36). For these reasons, trans- and genderqueer identities hold a special relationship to poetry, one that has justifiably demanded its own genre: *Trans-poetics*. Among many things, trans- poetics is a space for reclamation, transformation, and possibility: "Who knows what we would do if we owned our own lands? […] / If we spoke our

own languages, / owned our own bodies. If. / If." (Bodhrán 29). The possibilities are endless, open, and already taking place.

***Troubling the Line*: Creating a Space for and Dialogue Around Trans- Poetics**

Though trans- poetics is a newly evolving field, a number of trans- and genderqueer poets, scholars, and activists have continued to engage in and contribute to the growing discourse surrounding trans- poetry and poetics. The recent 2013 compilation of trans- poetry, *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, has played a significant role in uniting trans- poets and showcasing their works. With 55 authors and over 150 poems, it has created a meeting place for and entry point into the multiplicities of trans- and genderqueer experiences in search of finding expression outside of normative frames of gender, language, temporality and spatial embodiment. Though it is just a glimpse into the work being done by trans- and genderqueer poets, this collection offers an expansive account of trans- experience and an opening into the range of possibilities for trans- poetic expression (Tolbert, "Open, and always" 10). Its editors, TC Tolbert and Trace Peterson, characterize the volume as a space of community and collaboration but one that also seeks to buttress personal growth and acknowledge individual experience and creative concerns. Their goal was "to create an open-ended container in which … poetry [can] thrive and grow" and a place where "trans concerns and linguistic experimentation appear together and overlap, [where] they inform one another and egg each other on" (Peterson, "Being Unreadable" 20).

Without any strict parameters regarding the content and acceptance of poetic submissions, the intention of this volume was to present the widest spectrum of poetry by those who self-identify as trans-, genderqueer, and/or gender non-conforming, without imposing or

privileging any one form of expression over another. Tolbert and Peterson acknowledge that the process of transitioning and/or coming out and expressing oneself as trans- or genderqueer is not a "one-size-fits all" or homogeneous paradigm (Tolbert, "Open, and always" 10). They straightforwardly state:

> [We] agreed early on that we had no desire to be the gender police. We recognize that transitioning is a very individual process, greatly influenced by many factors including safety, access to resources, and support. We did not (and do not) wish to prioritize one form of embodiment over the other, nor do we wish to perpetuate any sort of homogenous trans and/or genderqueer myth. (10)

By adamantly resisting the minoritizing and ghettoizing of trans- and genderqueer identities, Tolbert and Peterson pledge to do justice to the multitude of ways in which trans- and genderqueer poets navigate and express gender variance. Rather than policing trans- identities, they intend to "make more widely available in poetry [the] different kinds of inbetweenness in relation to gender identification" and to use this text as a "bridge" for connecting trans-, genderqueer, intersex, and other non-gender conforming poets in new and inclusive ways (Peterson, "Being Unreadable" 15). Though each piece of poetry stands on its own or speaks for itself, introducing the collection with these statements of purpose provide us with a more holistic understanding of the text and its intentions.

Along with each poetic submission, Tolbert and Peterson asked participants to provide an author photo and poetics statement. The juxtaposition of these three elements – photo, poems, and statements, in sequential order – is both a methodological and aesthetic choice. They not only function to highlight the importance of individual experience of embodiment and difference

but to also challenge the invisibility of trans- and genderqueer poets. Explaining the rationale behind this decision, Peterson writes:

> Between author photo and poems and poetics statement, I thought it might be possible to create a space in which we could start to see what had been rendered invisible by various ideologies, and in which we could begin to be in dialogue with the ideas of other trans writers, to be read by cis writers, and for a discussion to happen that for various reasons had not been possible before. ("Being Unreadable" 20)

By intentionally structuring the text in this way, Tolbert and Peterson use the combination of these elements as a strategy for making the invisible, visible, and the impossible, possible and for creating a space for and dialogue around trans- poetics.

The connection between the visual and the linguistic mustn't be underestimated here. Peterson, a graphic designer herself, chose to include photographs of each poet in order to emphasize the important "relationship between how trans poets look and how they *look* (at the world, at language), between how they read and how they want to be read (or be unreadable)" (Peterson, "Being Unreadable" 20). By giving each poet the opportunity to assert control over their own visible representation, these portraits function as a strategy for challenging and resisting oppressive assumptions of what a trans- or genderqueer people are expected to look like and how they present themselves. They also force us to "put a face to a name" or body of work – to see what is "genuinely and undeniably here, right in front of you" (20) – and to appreciate, visually, how each author expresses their individual outward or physical embodiment. They add a non-linguistic dimension supplement to the works of poetry they support – works which seek

to attend to the qualities of being and expression that cannot be told or accounted for through the use of everyday language.

Functioning in some of the same capacities, the request for poetics statements was intended to give each poet a chance to showcase their relationship to their work as well as how each of them "make[s] connections between 'transgender' and 'poetry'" (Peterson, "Being Unreadable" 20). Tolbert and Peterson asked poets to respond to a broadly conceived question, "Why does this work come from your particular body/experience?" Their goal was to summon a "[reflection] on intersections (and/or disconnections) between one's experience of the body (as a trans and/or genderqueer person) and the ways one uses language" (Tolbert, "Open, and always" 9). Though not every author submitted a poetics statement, and not all content submitted was related to experiences of gender identity and/or expression (10), the work they did receive was as diverse as it was powerful. In many ways, these statements, when looked at together, form a kind of blueprint for trans- poetics. Indeed, it was my encounter with them that in a large part motivated the theoretical work of this thesis.

While the content of these statements varies a great deal, they provide insight into how each author uses poetry to navigate and explore at least some aspect of trans- or genderqueer experience. Some participants wrote "towards healing, and the journey wholm"[4] (Bodhrán 34), and for "learning how to be more comfortable in that space of ambiguity [and] befriending uncertainty" (Rabiyah 54). Put similarly, they used poetry to write the self into being or to bridge the gap between the corporeal and psychic in order to make sense and create a space of comfort out of their otherwise (uncomfortable) interstitial status. Some also wrote towards more political means: "to [challenge] the notion of visibility and the cultural politics that requires one to always

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[4] "Wholm" is a neologism that refers to being both at home and feeling whole in one's body (and mind).

establish proof of belonging to a particular identity in order to gain recognition" (Luengsuraswat, "Poetics Statement" 86), while others used poetry to "[stretch] the possibilities in words to create new meanings and new ways to engage in an idea or feeling" (Krawitz, "Poetics Statement" 114). Ultimately, these statements demonstrate how poetry can be (and is being) used as a strategy for deconstructing and challenging various dominant (and oppressive) ideologies and for exploring and creating new possibilities of being in the world.

In many ways, the act and art of collecting and compiling these poems has also been both productive and performatively healing. By actively searching for the works of trans- and genderqueer poets, in a field dominated by non-trans- or cis[5] poets, Tolbert and Peterson engage in a community-building project that also performs a political function. Though it is the first and largest central resource for connecting trans- and genderqueer poets and their work, *Troubling the Line* does not claim to be the "be all, end all" of trans- and genderqueer poetry. It instead urges us to search out further the works of trans- and genderqueer poets (Tolbert, "Open, and always" 12) and encourages a future of trans- poetics that is both expansive and constantly evolving. Like the poetic language and varying degrees of form incased within it (or exploding out of it), this compilation embodies the unsettled, constantly transforming, always open

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[5] The term "cis" (from the Latin cis-, meaning on "on the same side as") is a prefix usually attached to the terms cisgender and/or cissexual, which refers to non-trans- identities or people who gain privilege by successfully inhabiting "sex/gender congruence, legibility, and consistency with a binary gender system … particularly when accompanied by the appearance of normative race, class, ability, and nationality" (Enke, "The Education of" 64). Employing cis within the context of trans- discourse and politics has often been used a conceptual tool for destabilizing and denaturalizing the categories "man" and "woman" and "making visible their rootedness in the interested achievement of social hierarchies" (64). While using "nontransgender" as a substitute for "cisgender" "can be viewed as a way of including transgender as a categorical equal" (Aultman 62), not all scholars agree with this point. Some argue that "the compulsion to name cis as that which is not trans" erases gender variance and diversity, wrongfully depicts cis as static and trans- unstable, and reinforces the non-normativity of transness. Rather than being fixed identities, both terms describe locations, effects and their orientations *through* space and time. Recognizing and denaturalizing cisgender's powerful *effects* holds value in certain trans- political contexts (Enke "The Education of" 68).

movement across temporal and spatial planes. It is what Tolbert describes as "open, and always, opening" (7), "not an attempt to usurp space but a prayer to create more" (13).

Though trans- poetics has not been very historically visible, *Troubling the Line* helps put trans- poetics on the map, not as a subfield or genre of poetry, but one that *transes,*[6] or moves across, in-between, and outside of poetic conventions entirely. While not every poem in the collection performs this kind of theoretical intervention, the frame through which Tolbert and Peterson present the text encourages this type of reading strategy. By concentrating on what trans- poetics *does*, rather than searching for ways to define it, they not only "push back against assumed dominant narratives about trans and genderqueer [people]" (Tolbert, "Open, and always" 12) but also invite their readers to experience trans- poetics as a medium for opening up "possibility outside barriers and constructions of identity" (Shipley, "The Transformative" 197). Rather than presenting the text as simply a compilation of poetry by trans- and genderqueer people, they draw attention to the *capacity* of trans- poetics for making visible and supporting the "proliferative modes of gender nonconformity, multiplicity, and temporality" (Getsy 47). For these reasons, *Troubling the Line* can be viewed as a part of a larger strategic initiative to not only make visible the plethora of trans- and genderqueer poetic expressions but to also challenge, destabilize, and reconstruct language, gender, and identity outside of dominant, and many times harmful, discursive frames.

Central Concepts and Methods: "Trans-," "Transing" and "Trans- Poetics"

"Trans-"

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[6] A more concrete definition of "transes" and "transing" to come.

Transgender studies is "a framework or lens through which to theorize the myriad of ways in which people understand, name, experience and claim gender in relationship to such other processes as racialization, class, nationalism, and globalization" (Galarte 145). Since it is still emerging as a field, and one that resists the stabilization or boxing-in of terms and identity categories, there are a number of different terms to describe related concepts. Each term, however, aims towards creating or describing a central theory. Keeping up with "the continually shifting terms and conditions through which gender is named, imagined and theorized" (145), is essential to the field's commitments for creating a space of affective scholarship and activism surrounding trans- and other gender non-conforming people's experiences.

"Transgender" (or "trans") has been most commonly used as an umbrella term to refer to a spectrum of trans-identified and gender non-conforming individuals. It has served as a useful tool for organizing a broad coalition of non-normative gender identities and expressions that seek to challenge "contemporary normative cultural productions of binary sex and gender" (Davidson 61). While in theory the category enables a wide spectrum of trans- and other gender non-conforming people to gather under a common identity sign for political advocacy purposes (i.e. community mobilization, resource accrual, and social, political and legal policy change), it has been less successful in its practice. When used as an all-encompassing term, trans(gender) creates potential exclusions and erasures by claiming to represent all sex and gender non-conforming identities and expressions, even those individuals who do not wish or imagine themselves to belong (Singer 260). It also "implies that all formations of sex and gender are … taxonomically containable" (259) and "translates an infinite multiplicity into a single disciplinary body" (Enke, "Translation" 243). While the term is meant to be flexible, it many times collapses and obscures specific intersections and dimensions of race, class, and cultural notions of

personhood (260). As Finn Enke argues, the term "itself carries institution and imperial discipline: to be named and to name oneself transgender is to enter into disciplinary regimes that distribute recognition and resources according to imperial logics" ("Translation" 243). However, the recognition of transgender's conceptual limitations, imperial tendencies, and exclusions has generated new terminologies.

In order to account for an even wider and more inclusive spectrum of gender identities, expressions, and communities, "trans*" (trans asterisk) was instantiated to open up *transgender* or *trans* to a greater range of meanings (Tompkins 26). Proponents of its usage employ this term as a way of including not only identities prefixed by trans- (i.e. transgender, transsexual, trans man, and trans woman) but also identities such as genderqueer, neutrios, intersex, agender, two-spirit, and genderfluid (27). It is said to have originated from internet search structure, that is, by adding an asterisk to a word, the computer searches for that term as well as any characters after (Bussell in Tompkins 26). While adding the asterisk or star functions in a variety of ways – as a footnote indicator, a figurative bullet point in a list of (unpredictable) identities, and a way of drawing attention to the word – it is ultimately meant to "[push] beyond the trans- prefix and [oppose 'trans'] as the only legitimate way to refer to trans* identities and communities" (Tompkins 27). While *trans** has its appealing qualities, within the context of *trans- poetics, trans-* functions in a much different and arguably more extensive capacity. Rather than just referring to a wide demographic or community of non-gender conforming people, trans- pushes beyond these contextual limitations to include trans- not only as an adjective but also as a verb – a way of doing something, a methodology.

The decision to use "trans-" (trans-hyphen) when describing trans- poetics, is a strategy borrowed from the works of Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, who explicitly

employ this term as a way of keeping trans- open to possibility and for resisting the stabilization and institutionalization of the categories "trans" and "transgender." According these authors, the decision to use the hyphen "matters a great deal, precisely because it marks the difference between the implied nominalism of 'trans' and the explicit relationality of 'trans-,' which remains open-ended and resists the premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix" (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 11). Using "trans-" when speaking of a trans- poetics serves a supplementary purpose to my work. It helps speak to the expansive range of trans- poets, and their poetry, and the extensive and multitudinal ways in which these authors inhabit and express the proliferation of embodied difference and experience.

While trans- "can refer to particular modes of embodiment or communities of people … [it] can also be understood as a theoretical term that points to the crossing and denaturalizing of identity categories" (Love 175). But rather than using it "to identify, consolidate, or stabilize a certain category or class of people, things, or phenomena" or delimiting its conceptual operations to just gender (Stryker, Currah, Moore 11), the concept "trans-," in the context of trans- poetics, is primarily methodological and is meant as a tool for exploring and animating the suffixes to which it is attached (R. Edwards 252). If "poetics" "attempts to account for literary effects by describing the conventions and reading operations that make them possible" (Culler 62) and if "trans-" can refer to "the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an imposed starting place – rather than any particular mode of transition" (Stryker, "Transgender History" 1), then a trans- poetics "refers to diverse and interpretative and compositional strategies attentive to relational movements between/across/within linguistic, embodied, affective, and political domains" (R. Edwards 252). Using a trans- as a frame, trans- poetics explores the types of things

poetry can *do* and the possibilities it creates "for making visible, bringing into experience, or knowing genders are mutable, successive, and multiple" (Getsy 47).

Much as Stryker, Currah, and Moore encourage their readers to approach the diverse content of WSQ's *Trans-* issue as both "stand-alone pieces with their own (in-transitive) integrity, and as fragments whose migrations into this special issue bring new, unanticipated meanings to 'trans-'"(21), the editors of *Troubling the Line* similarly invite their audiences to experience the expansive range of trans- and genderqueer poetry and the unique ways in "which each author takes up, inhabits, and imbues space" (Tolbert, "Open, and always" 9). In short, the intended usage and deployment of "trans-" throughout this body of work functions as a disciplinary and political tool that can help us imagine a transformative language that captures the spatial and temporal unboundedness of trans- identities and experiences. When viewed this way, "trans-" is what Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes describes as, "the core of transformation – change, the power or ability to mold, reorganize, reconstruct, construct – [it is] the transcontinental, transatlantic, but also traversal" (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 18). It is the movement of *becoming* – moving across spatial and temporal boundaries and troubling the distinctions of disciplinary borders (9). *This* is the "trans-" I wish to invoke to help us imagine the previously unimaginable politics and subject positions that trans- poetics makes possible.

Trans-(ing) Poetics:

Like the concept of "trans-" itself, trans- poetics is a "moving target" – it welcomes the fluidity and possibilities of language and resists the settling or boxing-in of identities that does violence to trans- and other gender non-conforming people's experiences. While "trans-" has been used interchangeably throughout this thesis as both a term to describe particular modes of

embodiment or communities of people *and* as a methodology for destabilizing and reorienting cultural attempts to fix gender, identity, and sexual boundaries, in the context of "trans- poetics," "trans-" assumes the latter meaning. When "trans-" is used and conceived as a verb, as concept that *does* something to poetics, "trans- poetics" becomes more complex and useful as a political strategy for conveying and transforming the ongoing realities and experiences of trans- and genderqueer lives. It can be thought of alongside of what Stryker, Currah, and Moore describe as *transing*, or a practice or political *strategy* "that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces … which can function as disciplinary tool when the stigma associated with the lack or loss of gender status threatens social unintelligibility, coercive normalization, or even bodily extermination" (13).

Contrary to what is typically assumed, trans- poetics is not just a function of demographics – it does not just describe poems written by or about trans- people. In her poetics statement Joy Ladin argues that, "It doesn't take a carpenter to hammer a nail [just as it] doesn't take a trans person to sing, sigh, scream or psalm the friction between body and soul" (306). Some poems written by trans- or genderqueer people may not utilize trans- poetic techniques, while some poems written by non-trans- people do (306). Look at it this way:

> None of us makes sense of dominant logics. The trans man, the woman who can't make herself heard on the phone, the fat chair user, the indigenous person who asserts difference and connection beyond cultural stereotypes. We don't make sense for many different reasons, and we are not necessarily allies – but we can be. In [poems] we are journeying toward the roil of embracing what Judith Butler calls (a lesbian) 'cultural unintelligibility' – and what Sandy Stone called for in

the 'post-transsexual' who forgoes passing to 'write one's self into the

discourses.' (Kruppers 612)

Petra Kruppers' description of transing is quite useful for conceptualizing trans- poetics as a

strategy for reflecting through language, form, and aesthetics "the puzzles, problems, exigencies

and insights *characteristic* of transgender experiences" (Ladin, "Ours for the Making" 2011,

emphasis added). Regardless of how the author self-identifies, trans- poetics are ways of

challenging "dominant logics" and, for many, using unintelligibility as a vehicle for resisting

reduction into assumed and constructed identity categories (Shipley, "The Transformative" 198).

While self-identifying as trans- or genderqueer was indeed a requirement for poetic submissions

of *Troubling the Line*, trans- poetic methodologies are not limited to the demographics of

authorship. As Joy Ladin argues, "trans poetics aren't intellectual property, a badge of honor,

compensation for oppression, an inversion of gender privilege system…" ("Trans Poetics

Manifesto" 306). We are all marked in some way by race, class, gender, etc. – "It's just that

some, due to any number of circumstances, can't afford not to pay attention" (Shipley, "The

Transformative" 198).

So, what does trans- poetics *do* and how does it achieve its intended effects? When used

as a frame, trans- poetics can radically shift, re-orient, and disarticulate the taken-for-granted

relationships between the visual and the linguistic, embodiment and gender expression, and

gender expression and identity. It uses poetry to denaturalize and breakdown these taken-for-

granted associations – to obliterate them, at least conditionally (Shipley, "The Transformative"

198) – in order to expose their contingency and respective effects. As David Getsy so powerfully

puts it, "Once gender is understood to be temporal, successive, or transformable, all accounts of

human life look different and more complex" (Getsy 48). Because poetry offers possibility in

language beyond barriers and binary constructions of identity (Shipley, "The Transformative" 197), it is a great place for taking on this kind of work.

Similar to the way in which *trans-* is conceived as a motion or "force that impels indeterminate movement rather than as an identity that demands epistemological accountability" (Puar 80), trans- poetics seeks to reconstruct language in a way that *moves* and resists the foreclosure of terms or categories. As Ely Shipley points out in his poetics statement, "There is violence and destruction [in poetry], but also transcendence, creation, and, importantly, perpetual motion and a sense of continual questioning" (198). This "perpetual motion" and resistance to foreclosure speaks to the *transing* qualities of trans- poetics. Poems can be in permanent transition with the author (Cárdenas 398) or used as a means to resist and deconstruct the discursive realties of gender. This is a concept I expand upon in the sections that follow (see "Trans- Poetics & the Body" pgs 22-24).

Though poetry relies on language and is situated within the discursive structures of gender, sexuality, race, class, nationality, ability and so forth, it has the capacity to reassemble, exceed and transcend these structures through the use of figurative language and experimentations with form. Attending to these deconstructive qualities, trans- poetics seeks to exploit or make use of the limitations, discord, and error produced in language as an opportunity for disrupting cultural attempts to fix gender and sexual boundaries (R. Edwards 252). While the error or limitations of language extends way beyond lack of (pro)nouns (i.e. male/female, man/woman, he/she, his/hers),[7] trans- poetics seeks not only to make visible these blanks in

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[7] See Joy Ladin's article "Ours for the Making." In this piece Ladin argues that, "the problem of gender identity goes way beyond the lack of nouns. The blank in language where words for our gender identities should reflect deeper blanks in culture, psychology, theology, metaphysics. Without gender identities that unite our psyches and our bodies, it can be hard to locate ourselves in relation to space, to time, to nature, to history, to God" (2011).

language but to also fill them by drawing upon the tools of poetic language (metaphor, symbol, imagery, etc.) and other vehicles, like sound and form, as a means to cope with and make sense of living between, within, and outside of multiple realities of gender and identity. Speaking to this sentiment, and poetry's capacity to override and disrupt the structures of power and (gendered) language, Lori Selke writes:

> Gender is a language. It has its own rules, its grammar and structure. There are things you can say in our current cultural gender system, and things that you can't. One of the functions of poetry is to pry language open so that the things that cannot be expressed in traditional grammatical forms can be articulated in another way – through imagery, through allusion, through sound, through word play. We find ways of expressing what should, by rule, be inexpressible. (Selke 366)

The practice of finding or searching out new ways to both articulate trans- experience and challenge traditional grammatical structures and discursive formations speaks to the *transing* qualities of trans- poetics. In our current cultural gender system, which privileges binary gendered positions and linguistic formations, trans- and genderqueer subjects are subalterned[8] or barred from speaking or being heard by mainstream society. While it has been argued that trans-subjects have been subalterned by both feminist transphobia and medical discourse,[9] the incapacities or limitations of our current lingual system are also what denies trans- experience and speech. Trans- poetics both disrupts and speaks back to these dominant discursive frames and linguistic limitations by using poetry as a platform for expressing what is, perhaps paradoxically, "beyond language" (Shipley 197). It actively reasserts trans-, not as an in-between

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[8] See Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1998) and Trish Salah's "Subaltern" in the "Keywords" section of *TSQ*: *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Volume 1, Numbers 1-2 (200-203).
[9] See Sandy Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" ([1991], 1996).

or additional category of gender, but as that which moves and extends well beyond corporeal and

conceptual boundaries or logics.

The Genealogy of Transing

Employing "trans-" or "transing" as a strategy for denaturalizing gender and sexual

norms is a practice implicitly borrowed from the dissident methodologies of "queering,"

stemming from queer theory, and "cripping," from disability studies. "Queer," with historical

roots in forms of U.S.-based political activism stemming from the AIDS crisis of the1980s and

1990s, refers not only to the "range of nonnormative sexual practices and identifications beyond

gay and lesbian" but also to a scholarly or theoretical approach for "recontextualizing queer from

its place within a homophobic strategy of abjection and annihilation" (Butler, "Critically Queer"

24). While queer can refer to "a form of self-identification or assemblage of practices of the self"

(Browne and Nash 3), it does more than just reclaim nonnormative sexual practices and gender

identifications. It is a "situated inquiry" or mode of conceptual engagement that "challenges the

normative social ordering of identities and subjectivities along the heterosexual/homosexual

binary as well as the privileging of heterosexuality as 'natural' and homosexuality as a deviant

and abhorrent 'other'" (Browne and Nash 5 & 7). If queer "depicts a critical orientation to the

world, a positionality, and a process by which oppressive assumptions [about gender and

sexuality] are revealed and disrupted" (Hutcheon and Wolbring 2013), then "queering," as a

verb, refers to the political strategies for spinning, destabilizing, and reorienting gender and

sexuality to reveal how "power relations are constituted and maintained in the production of

social and political meanings" (Browne and Nash 6). By making visible the instability of gender,

sexuality, and their social and cultural underpinnings, queering encourages the destabilization

and re-assemblage of these said categories.

Like "queer," "crip" has been used as a reclaimed identificatory category as well as "a verb to describe a process of critique, disruption, and re-imagining, and includes an orientation and way of living" (Hutcheon and Wolbring 2013). Emerging from disability studies and the queering of disability, crip theory "spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects" (Sandahl 37). It also "questions – or takes a sledgehammer to – that which has been concretized" (McRuer 35) by recognizing, interrogating, and unsettling the entrenched and normative understandings of disability and able-bodiedness. Cripping is a strategy for disrupting and "question[ing] the order of things, considering how and why [able-bodiedness] is constructed and naturalized; how it is embedded in complex, economic, social, and cultural relations; and how it might be *changed*" (19, emphasis added).

Queering, cripping, and transing are all "linked in their activist investments, their dissident methodologies and their critical interrogation of and resistance to [bodily] norms" (Love 172). Each of these terms or methodologies asserts that queer, disabled and trans- people are the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge (173). While queer and trans- studies are directly connected via their commitments to transforming the situation of gender and sexual outsiders, they are also linked to disability studies through intersectional qualities and political and scholarly alliances that seek to interrogate and unsettle entrenched understandings of normative bodies. But rather than viewing these methodologies as separate and distinct conceptual entities that intersect at specific overlaps, recognizing that all three are "implicated within the same assemblages of power" (Puar 78) – powers which seek to normalize

heterosexual, cis *and* abled bodies – can potentiate greater connectivities, new forms of

relationality, and broader alliances (80).[10]

Trans- Poetics & the Body

 Much like how the phenomenology of trans- "offers an expansive conception of the body

in which it is more than merely its materiality, emphasizing the importance of how one feels in

and senses with and inhabits one's body" (Salamon 154), trans- poetics also pays particular

attention to the dynamic relationships between the inside of the body (the psyche, organs, the

endocrine system, etc) and the outside of the body (the surface, self-presentation, etc.), exploring

how the body *feels*.[11] When viewed in this light, trans- poetic projects perform the psychological

and political work of self-making. They explore and work to create adequate representations of

the self, while keeping in mind that these representations may be temporary or change. Though

none of us can ever wholly settle on a single, authentic, and satisfactory self, trans- poetics aims

to reconcile feelings, desire, and the body in order to "articulate that self, [even] as it changes

and multiplies and evades us" (Burt 2013).

 The poem can often be thought of as an extension of, an alternative to, or stand-in for the

body of the writer (Shipley 197; Burt 2013).[12] It can expand the dimensions of the self or create a

separate or alternative entity through which the writer can imagine, experiment with, and

articulate the self and its multiplicities. As the poetry of *Troubling the Line* shows us, trans-

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[10] For a more in depth explanation of the limits of using an intersectional approach to trans- and disability
see Jasbir Puar's "Disability" in the "Keywords" section of *TSQ*: *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Volume
1, Numbers 1-2 (77-80).

[11] For a thorough description trans- phenomenology, see Gayle Salamon's "Phenomenology" in the
"Keywords" section of *TSQ*: *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Volume 1, Numbers 1-2 (153-155).

[12] Ely Shipley's "The Transformative and Queer Language of Poetry" expands upon this reference.
Shipley quotes Charles Olson: "the line comes (I swear it) from the breath," Walt Whitman: "touch this
book and touch a man," Frank O'Hara: "The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages,"
and Robin Blaser: "dear beings, I can feel your hands … our words were / the form we entered" (157).

poetic projects seek to lend form to the culturally unintelligible body and lay the groundwork for being that body in the world. When viewed this way, trans- poetics is an avatar – it is something we try on to see where it's going, to try the poem on to find out where it takes us. Explaining the (r)evolutionary process of writing the body into being, Eric Karin writes:

> We, the bodies, write the bodies – figuratively at first, influencing individual consciousness, until the bodies have enough (social, cultural) gravity to influence the trajectory of possibility – allowing for a more flexible reality. One where the oppressed, the dispossessed are writen (sic) back into the books they were writen (sic) out of. (211-12)

Counter to traditional ontological understandings of language, trans- poetics explore language phenomenologically. Rather than using language or words to connect to actual things, like the trans- body, it explores what words make happen as analogous to trans- bodies.

Trans- poetics draws upon "hidden sources of power" (Lorde 37) within our psyches and the non-semantic qualities of language (imagery, allusion, sound, and word play) to transform and contest the unintelligibility of the trans- subject. While many trans- poetic projects seek to lend form to culturally unintelligible bodies, there are others that wish to "lose [the] self" and identity (Ace, "The Language of" 437) or deconstruct the concept of the self as "coherent as measurable as manifesting some form of wholeness" (Puar 80). (There are others that may, of course, explore a combination of the two.)

In the *TSQ* essay "Trans-ing Disability Poetry at the Confluence," Petra Kruppers describes transing as "playing in the uncertainly of withheld intelligibility" (612). While unintelligibility is something that trans- and genderqueer subjects are forced to occupy in a highly gender dimorphic world, some trans- poetics encourage, play with, or at least engage in,

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unintelligibility as a political strategy for contesting the violence of unintelligibility. Through

poetic content and form, they use unintelligibility as a means or opportunity for deconstructing

and transcending the cultural limitations of the self and its various taken-for-granted

components. They may use poetry to "destabilize or sabotage an idealized sense of self in the

articulation of that self" (Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet" 524). Speaking to this

disarticulation and the trajectory of how it gets achieved or "discovered," Joy Ladin writes:

> Trans poetics transform self-estrangement into self-discovery, self-discovery into
>
> the discovery that there is no self, the impossibility of self into affirmation,
>
> exposition, industrial revolution, a massive conspiracy, a door, a window, a
>
> wrinkle in time, a sob on tiptoe, a song that is singing us. ("Trans Poetics
>
> Manifesto" 207)

Perhaps at first glance this description of trans- poetics might be read as nihilistic. But quite the

contrary is true. By arguing against the absolutism of the self, trans- poetics intends to "offer a

critical perspective on the norms that confer intelligibility" (Butler, "Doing Justice" 192) in order

to find possibility beyond these norms. But rather than searching for alternative ways to define

intelligibility beyond sexed and gendered discourse (i.e. within the discourse of humanism),

trans- poetics refuses the reducibility of the self of any kind. While this may seem politically

counter-intuitive, for identity and self-definition have been traditionally used as a political

organizing strategy, it would be inaccurate to assume that trans- poetics holds no political value.

Is Poetry Political? Trans- Poetics & Politics

Indeed, poetry may not be typically thought of as political, but it, like many art forms,

can perform political work. And, while it may not be the same as protesting or taking an issue "to

the streets," trans- poetics brings with it a certain politics about power. It allows us to see power in relationship to embodiment and gender arrangements and gets us to think about power and human relationships. If language produces and perpetuates subjectivities, trans- poetics does political work by using language (and form) to get these subjectivities to fall apart.

While one must typically conform to a certain discourse in order to be politically effective, trans- poetics reaches beyond these restrictions by refusing the containability of language and subjectivity altogether. As noted in the introduction of this thesis, poetry can be used as a political or methodological tool to reframe dominant discourses and express what is conceivably (and ironically) beyond words. This is why so many trans- and genderqueer people have turned to poetry rather than memoir as a means for personal and political empowerment. Speaking explicitly to this predilection, trans- poet Cole Krawitz writes:

> I came to poetry in part as an opportunity to reframe dominant discourses I found troubling and at times deeply harmful …. I found company in language that offered narrative disruption, was deeply united with the corporeal, and was a powerful location to discuss issues of power, culture, race, faith, nationality, the erotic and illness. (Krawitz, "Poetics Statement" 114)

Put similarly, poetry is a unique platform for discussing the intersectional aspects of identity in relation to power. But it also forms the building blocks of a new type of language – one that draws upon feeling, sensation, as well as lived experience in order to break through discursive boundaries and express through words what was previously unachievable. When viewed this way, trans- poetics is not only a precursor for political action but also sows the seeds for a different kind of politics, one that can effectively resist the kind of imperialist trans- politics or politics about trans- people that we have continually witnessed. It is an incubator of the most

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creative, imaginative, and innovative thought, which may start out as a feeling but eventually transpire into political action. Audre Lorde explains,

> In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare to make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our more cherished terrors. For within living structures defined profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were expected to kneel to thought … (39)

So while trans- poetics isn't about being instrumental or getting us towards a particular political agenda, it can instead lay the imaginative and conceptual groundwork for a certain type of politics. One might even argue that trans- poetics generates a new form or way of doing politics, one that stretches notions of the political beyond what is typically conceived (i.e. street activism, litigation, etc.). With this in mind, I ask: what happens when we use poetry as a new way of thinking about trans- politics? And, what kind of politics can emerge out of trans- poetics that truly honors all identity formations?

Trans(-ing) Poetics: *Troubling the Line*

By producing a language that moves between, across, and over the boundaries of gendered spaces, many of the poets and poems of *Troubling the Line* can be viewed as *transing* the genre of poetry itself. They are taking poetic conventions and *transing* them, revealing a methodology or strategy that uses poetry to denaturalize and reorient the assumed stable and discursive realities of gender and embodiment. They do this by remaking, transforming, and

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experimenting with language and form in ways that test the limits and push past the borders of traditional poetry, the assumed categories of gender (as dimorphic and static) as well as the conventions in which trans- people are expected to narrate their experiences (coherently, retrospectively, chrononormatively). Rather than directly presenting a narrative about being trans-, the poets of this text use poetry as a linguistic strategy to reach beyond autobiography and the "limits of dominant corporeal and conceptual logics" (Garner 30) in order to create a language that can account for the multitudinal ways in which people express and inhabit gender variance. When viewed this way, they are quite literally (and figuratively!) "troubling the line," for they are "challenging the idea of a single trans narrative, interrogating binaries of all sorts, and playing with, delighting in, explorations (explosions) of form" (Tolbert, "Open, and always" 10).

Using the poems of *Troubling the Line* as literary artifacts, this thesis explores how trans- poetics can be and is being used as a methodological or theoretical intervention *about* gender and how it does important work in terms of political identity formation, representations of the embodied self, and the psychological work of self-making. By re-routing the usual frame of analysis from an "outside-in" to an "*inside-out*" approach, that is, using trans- poetics to inform my argument, rather than the reverse, I aim not only to dislodge "trans-" from the normative top-down discursive current, which *speaks for* and not *to* or *from* trans- experience, but to also circumvent and reverse this flow entirely by privileging the often first-person expression of trans- poetics as a locus for trans- experience. Doing so allows us to effectively resist the kind of imperialist trans- politics, or politics *about* trans- people, and to appreciate the previously unimaginable subject positions that trans- poetics now makes possible. As Tolbert and Peterson make clear, this compilation is less of a canon and more of an invitation or "opening gesture …

to provoke a long and productive conversation about trans and genderqueer poetry, a category about which there is currently barely any available commentary" (Peterson, "Being Unreadable" 15). This thesis is an ode to keeping this conversation open and for further exploring and bringing into conversation the fascinating ways in which trans- poetics can be used as a strategy for opening up new possibilities of being in the world.

Trans- Poetic Projects of *Troubling the Line*

The poetry of *Troubling the Line* explores a variety of themes – some are explicitly about the body, some just about politics, and others investigate the inner psyche (though many explore a combination of the three). They also utilize a range of linguistic and compositional strategies, some of which follow more conventional form, while others are nonconventional and experimental. But what these bodies of poems ultimately reveal, however indirectly, is the inextricable relationship between trans- poetic form and content. Rather than approaching these elements separately, the trans- poetic projects of this text keep these three elements – the corporeal, the psychic, and the political – in constant conversation with one another. They do not necessarily rely on content (i.e. explicit depictions of trans- experiences) to do the work of trans-poetics. Nor do they rely on a single aesthetic or *specific* set of strategies for creating or reading poetry, for trans- poetics is as much about process and emergence as it is about product. Rather, these projects engage in broad relations that seek to unite mind and body, content and form, and the textual and the corporeal. For in trans- poetics, "the boundary between the outside and inside, external and internal, recedes [and] takes on new meaning" (Kruppers 608).

While not all poems in this compilation engage in a trans- poetics, the ones that do show us how trans- poetics is markedly different from just poems written by or about trans- and

genderqueer people. They show us how poetry is being used as "revelatory distillation of experience" (Lorde 37) – a technique that draws upon sensations, feelings, and emotions in order to reveal and engage in new modes of speaking, seeing, and being. Drawing upon power from the imaginative and the felt, these trans- poetic projects demonstrate how non-semantic qualities of language – ones that may not typically hold cultural linguistic intelligibility – can be transformed into language through the poem and made real. For as Ladin argues, "Like all poetics, trans poetics are partly fantasy. They only exist when we see them, and we only see them when we need to" ("Trans Poetics Manifesto" 306). As many poems in *Troubling the Line* attest, trans- poetics necessarily draws upon fantasy and dream-like dimensions in order to experiment with and foster the emergence of "radically new possibilities for being in the world" (Stryker, Currah & Moore 14).

While some trans- poetic projects may be easy to locate, others are not. Indeed, trans- poetics may be "unheard of, outlandish, shocking – or they may be familiar poetic means deployed for trans poetic ends" (Ladin, "Trans Poetics Manifesto" 306). The most discernible pieces are experimental – they step outside traditional poetic language and form both visually and linguistically. Those that are less identifiable may at first seem like traditional lyric poetry – they follow standard meter and poetic rhythm, and might be visually unremarkable. Upon closer inspection, however, we find that their content is doing much more than the everyday lyric poem. We may find them disrupting chrononormative constructions of time and space or drawing upon fantasy to explore new language and possibilities for being, beyond what has been socially prescribed. In the selected pieces that follow, I show the how trans- poetics manifests itself differently in each poem and how each poet engages in trans- poetics in their own, unique way. And while there isn't a formula or set of characteristics that can holistically define trans- poetics

per se, these poems, like all trans- poetic projects, are "ways that poetry can happen" (306). We may not "know a trans and genderqueer poet if we saw one" (Tolbert, "Open, and always" 10), but we might be better equipped to appreciate the variety of modes of recognition that trans- poetics allows – for there is no single way for trans- poetics to be transparent as such.

Trans- poetics is an interactive and collaborative process that "transform[s] meaning from a product provided by the poet into a process within the reader" (Ladin, "Trans Poetics Manifesto" 306). They push a level of engagement that forces the reader to become self-reflexive and to reflect "on the lust and impossibility of meaning, knowing, being" (306). Gr Kreer's "who is man" pushes that engagement on many levels. By exploring a combination of corporeal, psychic, and political dimensions, this poem compels the reader to think critically about the way in which reality and *readability* are constructed – a move that consequently beckons a reflection on normatively conceived notions of subjectivity, the body, and the cultural and discursive productions of "realness" (Watson and Shaw 196). By experimenting with content and form, "who is man" complicates and resists the process of being read (as trans-, as male or female) and how we might typically go about reading and interpreting poetic works. When viewed this way, this poem, like many trans- poetic pieces, is pedagogical – it teaches the reader how to read trans- people's experiences while simultaneously refusing the violently imposed readings of trans- and non-gender conforming people. The excerpt below is taken from the poem's opening lines:

> damn, you are
>
>> ug
>>
>> ly
>
> excuse me, sir-- ma'm? sirma'am? i mean

fuck me your cock is so   good

you're not that butch

you walk like a   } girl {

     handsome boy

     young buck

     son

did you have surgery are you on

       T

     you should[n't]

       i can['t] tell

     are you *talking* to someone about this

fag

(221)

Upon reading this excerpt, one feels a sense of disorientation. Are these a series of things heard? What/who are the voices in this poem speaking and why in such asynchronous form? Are these answers to the question "who is man"? Without a question mark attached, is "who is man" even a question or can it be interpreted as a rhetorical statement? Even the title of the poem itself is unsettling. Like many trans- poetic projects, the language (and form) of this poem destabilizes the taken-for-granted components of language. It troubles the distinction of spatial and temporal boundaries by deviating from normative grammar structure and experimenting with incoherence and fragmentation through the use of braces (or "curly brackets"), alternating permutations, and ungrammatical pauses (Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet" 528-29). For the reader, these

techniques give us a sense of disorientation – they, as Joy Ladin so cleverly argues, "make us realize that we are Toto and there is no Kansas anymore" ("Trans Poetics Manifesto" 360).

In what could be interpreted as a series of transphobic comments, "who is man" takes an experience that almost every trans- and genderqueer person has and then strips it of any type of familiar bearings. Rather than being explicitly about a transphobic experience, this poem ventriloquizes a number of transphobic remarks, combines them, and then breaks them apart through the use of various grammatical tools (i.e. line breaks, gaps, and braces). By playing with or reconstructing these common statements, they are no longer the property of the perpetrator(s). The individuality of each perpetrator and their speech is removed and co-opted into the persona of the poem. It's as if these day-to-day experiences were put into a trans- poetic interpretation machine – one that disarticulates and jumbles taken-for-granted truths about gender and then spits out or speaks back to and against the cultural logic of gendered visibility. In reading this poem, we are forced to think beyond the victimizing stories of trans- and genderqueer people, stories that hinder the agential capacity of gender-complicated subjects. This poem (re)claims that agency and forces us to think differently about the politics of visibility.

Braces or curly brackets are traditionally used to group statements or declarations. They have somewhat of a conventional feminine quality about them (i.e. curvy, flowing, and in India they are referred to as flower brackets). Though they are less common in literature, they can be found quite frequently in computer programming where they are used as a means of denoting a "lexical scope," or blocks of code from which names do not escape (VonC 2010). What's interesting about Kreer's usage of this particular form of brackets is that they are set in reverse; "} girl {" is separated and grouped out from the rest of the sentence but not indefinitely. This technique provides a kind of escape route for "man-made" or socially defined gender codes, such

as naming "girl," and points to their social construction by opening up each brace to its outside

signifiers. It's as if Kreer is playing with the recognition of these codes, then turning them upside

down (or inside-out) to dismantle their agreed-upon grouping or meaning. Aesthetically, these

braces also add an animated quality to "girl," especially when coupled with the action of

"walking." Walking and the wavy nature of the brace point not only to the performative aspects

of gender (i.e. gender as a performance, an action, a way of doing) but also to the movement,

instability, fluidity, and the *transing* of gender categories altogether. As you can see, even the

most intricate grammatical details of trans- poetics can tell or teach us a great deal. They force us

to engage with the poem, to reconceptualize what we take for granted as legible, and to

deconstruct what may at first seem like perplexing and puzzling configurations.

Kreer's play on permutations is also noteworthy. "you should[n't] / i can['t] tell" utilizes

an economy of language that creates an almost puzzle-like project for the reader to decipher or

piece together. Though these lines condense speech, any combination of these permutations

contains its own opposite or contradiction and can mean a number of different things – you

should / i can tell, you shouldn't / i can't tell, you should / i can't tell, or you shouldn't / i can tell

– there is no singular meaning to be had but instead an opening to a range of possible speech

acts. Regardless of their range, each is equally violent for different reasons. While the reader is

compelled to analyze and interpret these various permutations, this is precisely what the poem

refuses. It complicates and resists the process of being read and says to the reader, "if you want

to read me, you can't" – no one's body is transparently readable. Thus, "who is man" teaches us

how to read trans- (and genderqueer) people's experiences. It invites the reader to adjust to and

work with the poem, rather than imposing meaning or taking it at face value. When viewed this

way, this poem decolonizes trans- and genderqueer bodies by forcing the reader to do the work of listening. The subaltern has spoken and now it is our job to listen.

While this piece can be interpreted in a variety of ways, in their poetics statement, Kreer speaks pretty explicitly about their own experiences of harassment and questioning as a genderqueer person, and how poetry can be used as a mechanism for challenging the everyday violence of unintelligibility. Kreer explains,

> my ambiguous embodiment requires readings and re-readings, and invites misreadings and rewritings. the questions i am asked regularly include: are you boy or a girl? are you in the wrong place? what makes you this way? to be queer is to be queried. poetry is a vehicle for answer and rebuttal, and a place of engagement, compassion, and resistance. ("Poetics Statement" 228)

And this is precisely what "who is man" does. It creates a (poem) body that is intentionally ambiguous and then uses that body to speak back to and against the transphobic violence of gendered visibility. But it does not do this alone – this poem invites the reader to engage, collaboratively, in the work of that body's decolonization. Thus, "who is man" demonstrates how trans- poetic form and content go hand-in-hand – how aesthetics performs a kind of political function and how these qualities form an inextricable relationship.

Even apparently conventional poems do the political work of transing by interrupting our expectations about gender, time, or subjectivity. Take for instance Ely Shipley's "Boy with Flowers," a poem which follows traditional poetic form but draws upon elements of fantasy and dream-like dimensions to reach beyond generic conventions of temporality, autobiography, and gender transition. Though "biographical material may appear in the oblique form of references to gender ambiguity or transition, [Shipley's] writing is framed in a way that separates the author

from the 'I' of the speaker" (Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet" 524). Indeed, this concept is

conventional in poetic criticism – rather than referring to the speaker of the poem as the author,

the "I," like the poem itself, becomes a persona. While one could even argue that poetry is

inherently equipped to resist and exceed narrative identification and the generic conventions in

which one is expected to narrate their transition, Shipley exploits this tool and takes it a step

further. He creates a persona, or what could be conceived as multiple personas, through the

poem, and represents trans- poetics through these various entities. He does this by shuttling the

reader from childhood (past), to dream present, then actual present, and, in doing so, disrupts the

trajectory of a chrononormative storyline.

"Boy with Flowers" describes what is conceivably a childhood memory and the speaker's

struggle with or desire to be read and treated by his family as a boy when asked to be a flower

girl at his aunt's wedding. Though resistant, he complies with the request by imagining the

chivalrous act of throwing rose petals down the aisle before his aunt. Instead of using this

memory to describe a "wrong body" experience or as a means to introduce a chronological story

about gender transition, the speaker resists the autobiographical impulse towards completion and

fulfillment. We find that the transitioned body isn't the end of the trajectory, but instead a body

still transforming, still becoming, thus undermining the imagined conclusion of bodily integrity

and wholeness. Though aspects of the normative flow of retrospection seem to exist, our sense of

time and spatiality gets twisted, yanked and jolted as we are brought from a memory, then to a

dream world, and then back to the present reality where the speaker awakes from a frightening

dream to find the consolation of his lover.

… She promised

if I wore the dress I could wear anything
I wanted after: army pants, a sheriff
badge, cowboy hat, and pistols. My mother shot her
a look in the mirror where we posed, both of them
angelic in white, and me, not yet

dressed. Today I wake from another dream
in which I have a beard, no breasts
and I am about to go skinny dipping
on a foreign beach with four other men.

I am afraid to undress, won't take off my shorts,
so they grab me, one at each ankle, the other two
by each wrist. I am a starfish hardening.
The sun hovers above, a hot
Mirror where I search for my reflection

I close my eyes. It's too intense. The light
where my lover is tracing fingertips
around two incisions in my chest. Each sewn tight
with stitches, each a naked stem, flaring with thorns.

(189)

Even in this formally conventional lyric poem, we find time and the body to be transing

in actual content of the poem itself. Rather than witnessing the same body change or "progress"

over time, we find a number of different bodies coming into play throughout the course of the

poem: the child body and the adult body, the female body and the trans- body, the intact body of

the child and the trans-forming body of the adult. While we may be inclined to read the

juxtaposition of these various types of bodies as contributing to some sort of progressivist

storyline, that expectation gets disrupted when we are transported into the dream life of the

present day speaker. Temporally, we witness a rather large leap from childhood to adulthood, thus cutting out one of the necessary components of conventional trans- memoir: the middle of the story. The formulaic in-between or middle moment gets eliminated or remains absent and is instead replaced with and/or interrupted by the depiction of a dream.

However, the dream is not a fantasy of becoming or attaining one's desired body, nor is it a climactic moment leading towards a fulfilled or "happy ending." Instead, it is a nightmare and manifestation of the anxiety and vulnerability that comes with being an unintelligible subject. It conveys the danger and scrutiny of this unintelligibility and the sobering reality of the day-to-day experiences of navigating through the world as trans- or genderqueer. Indeed, successfully "passing" as man or woman provides safety from violence. While the speaker passes as a man ("a beard, no breasts") at the start of the dream, he soon becomes in danger of being "outed" as trans- by a group of cis men who aggressively begin stripping his clothes off. In this moment he is a "starfish hardening" – he feels the heat of this exposure as "the sun hovers above." Here, we might be reminded of the "fish out of water" cliché but this is something that the poem refuses – this is not just an uncomfortable situation, but instead a fight or flight, life or death struggle for the speaker. Though he awakes to the relief of reality and consolation of his lover, we do not get the sense of fulfillment or completion typically provided by trans- memoir. Rather, we experience an open-ended and almost visceral glimpse of a body in motion – still transitioning: "I close my eyes. It's too intense. The light / where my lover is tracing fingertips / around two incisions in my chest. Each sewn tight / with stitches, each a naked stem, flaring with thorns" (189).

The register of this last line, and final image of the poem, is one of disassembly, exuviation and transformation articulated through the metaphor of the rose or flowers. The

incisions "each a naked stem, flaring with thorns" brings us back to the flowers reference, but from a slightly different angle. Here, the flowers have been denuded of their blossoms – all that remains is each stem and its thorns. But this is not quite unlike the flowers we witness in the opening scene of the poem, and in retrospect, they are a foreshadowing of the speaker's bodily transformation. Performing the ritual of the flower girl, the child speaker or "boy with flowers" throws down flower petals before his aunt – the very part of the flower that leaves stems and thorns behind. Flowers, or roses, and the deliberate shedding of their petals, connects to the larger work of the poem – the "boy with flowers" is no longer a boy, but a man without flowers.

Paradoxically, fantasy plays out through the depiction of the childhood memory, rather than through the dream. Instead of telling a story of bodily progression ("this is who I've always been, now I get to embody it" or "now I've got the body I've always wanted"), we find the speaker's fantasy body is that of the child's – pre-pubescent, breastless, malleable. The child, in many societies, is typically conceived "as a body that is always in the process of becoming … an unfinished entity that undergoes a specifically developmental and so also normatively progressive trajectory of bodily and social transformation whose endpoint is completion as an adult" (Castañeda 59). Because the child body is in a more ambiguous pre-adolescence, it doesn't take much imagination or (as much) effort to visualize oneself as or don oneself in either gender. Childhood, then, is a moment in time where the speaker could "get away with" inhabiting more than one or a different kind of gender. The adult speaker, on the other hand, had to go through many changes in order to construct the body of his desire: "incisions … flaring with thorns" conveys the healing wounds of top surgery and the reality of the considerable effort it takes to continually build that body.

While children are gendered at (or before) birth, and go through rigorous systems of normalization and gendering throughout childhood, gender deviance, particularly for girls, does not warrant the same punishment or threat to cultural gender norms as it would for an adult. Tomboyism, in particular, is perceived to be "quite common for girls and does not generally give rise to parental fears… [It] tends to be associated with a 'natural' desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys. Very often it is read as a sign of independence and self-motivation…" (Halberstam, "Female Masculinities" 5-6). However, when tomboyism extends beyond childhood, into adolescence and adulthood, there are much harsher consequences. Thus, the childhood memory of "Boy with Flowers" can be perceived as the least vulnerable and dangerous world or time space for the speaker(s). Instead of evoking anxiety and fear, we experience the imaginative energy of the child, even as he negotiates with his family his expected role as a flower girl at his aunt's wedding.

There is some autobiographical truth to this segment of the poem. In his poetics statement, Shipley explains,

> As a child, I inhabited more than one world--like most children. However, my real world and the imaginary world(s) were marked, divided along lines of gender. In my real life I was a girl, or more often, an illegible gender. In my interior life, I was a 'different kind of boy.' My gender expression is not, nor was it fixed, but even now moves in relation to ever shifting contexts. ("The Transformative" 198)

This last line ties quite nicely into the piece as a whole. Though we experience the child in this poem as "inhabiting more than one world," we are reminded that this is one of many "ever shifting contexts" through which the body moves and transforms throughout the course of a lifetime. But rather than producing the effect of a stable identity (again, "this is who I've always

been, now I get to embody it"), Shipley accepts, or better, recognizes that his gender expression(s), like his body/ies (and all bodies), are also and always in flux. They are a never-finalized materializations that constantly transform throughout time as well as space.

"Boy with Flowers" not only illustrates this concept but forces us to rethink notions of "becoming" as not just a phase emblematic of childhood but also one that can describe all the so-called "stages" in life. It asks us to reconsider the limitations of dominant corporeal and conceptual logics and does this in a number of ways. Indeed, the poem rejects any kind of imagined conclusion of wholeness usually depicted in autobiographical accounts of gender transition, but it also gets us to think more broadly about how *all* bodies are entwined in the process of becoming. It counters the presumption that bodies "are simply mired unless they under undergo explicit, visible and transformational procedures" (Garner 31) and does this by blurring the line between the child body and the adult body, the trans- body and the cis body. We are all in the process of (un)becoming, it's just that trans- bodies visibly expose taken-for-granted stability of gender identity and bring this concept into crisis (Thomas 317). They "disrupt the conventional binary formulation of [gender and of] a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood" (Halberstam, "In a Queer Time" 152) and in doing so urge us to reorient and think critically about "the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding" (152).

Unlike traditional autobiographical depictions of trans- experiences, this poem denies an ease of entry or transparency to which the reader can relate. We are denied that one on one relationship with the author and discouraged from feeling a familiar sense of comfort at the poem's conclusion. Instead, we are forced to engage in the reality of trans- and genderqueer experiences, experiences that cannot be contained within or accurately depicted by the

progressivist arc of narration. Rather than writing a "body into submission" (Shipley, "The Transformative" 198) or trying to make sense of the story using a trans- autobiographical frame, we are forced to work with the unintelligibility of the speakers and invited to collaborate with the poem in an unfamiliar way. We are asked to meet the speaker halfway, as if to say "this is my voice, now you must learn how to read it."

Through imagery, juxtaposition, and fantasy, "Boy with Flowers" "allows for a multiplicitous and liminal sense of a self in transit" (Shipley, "The Transformative" 198). Rather than feeding into illusions of wholeness and selfhood, this poem, and its speaker, take us through ever-shifting gender expressions and embodiments that do not find stasis, even at the end of the poem's trajectory. We experience multiple embodiments shifting though various temporalities and spatial dimensions, which refuse to settle or be reduced into the assumed and constructed categories of gender identity (198). In this poem:

> The speaker does not appease hir desire and transform into a whole and fulfilled self, something surely impossible. In fact, the speaker's body is entirely out of bounds, it doesn't make sense to the social world; rather, it is uncontained, and 'secreting.' Instead of trying to write this body into submission, into conformity: boy or girl, he or she, the poem moves outside of these familiar linguistic boundaries. (197-98)

Though aesthetically normative, this poem uses trans- poetics as a methodology for resisting barriers and constructions of identity and for keeping possibilities for new embodiments open (197-198). As Shipley so powerfully articulates, "I struggle towards a sense of self that will never be fulfilled. And yet, that space of unfulfillment is the very source of my imaginative energy" (198). "Boy with Flowers" is, indeed, a product of this creative power.

Using poetry to disarticulate trans- bodies from the monopoly of trans- narrativization is a common theme throughout many trans- poetic projects in *Troubling the Line.* Though each poet or poem approaches this methodology differently, many draw upon queer (or trans-) temporalities and spatial dimensions to achieve this goal. While Shipley plays with and disrupts the progressivist trajectory of autobiography by twisting time, space, and material formations of the body/bodies, there are other poets, like Cole Krawitz, who interrupt this trajectory by using *interstitiality* as a productive site for deconstructing the conventional gender binary and the fixed notions of identity that it perpetuates. Whereas Shipley draws his imaginative energy from fantasy and dream-like dimensions, Krawitz pulls his from the realm of the sacred to inform an alternative perspective of trans- identities.

In his poem "in and out of the holy," Krawitz uses the Jewish ritual of Shabbat, or seventh day of the week allotted to rest, celebration, prayer, and reflection, to get us to reconsider trans- as a positive location of sanctity. Through the poem, the speaker forges a connection between the interstitial trans- body and the in-between time-space of Shabbat as a means to reframe negative cultural designations of trans- identities by recasting them into the realm of the sacred. Rather than attempting to free trans- from the unintelligible or liminal space that it is forced to occupy, this poem privileges interstitiality as a sacred epistemological, spiritual, and diasporic location that has the potential to deterritorialize unnecessary boundaries of gender and selfhood. "in and out of the holy" inhabits the interstitial and liminal spaces, the borderlands and spaces between, where shifting and movement occurs (Bendrof 422-23).

While the interstitial, in general, has been theorized as an "in-between" space or moment of incompleteness, it "does not necessarily connote 'unstable or in between or in the middle of things'" (La Fountain Stokes qtd in Stryker, Currah, and Moore 18) as one might assume.

Rather, "the temporal movement and passage that [interstitiality] allows, prevents identities at either end from settling into primordial polarities" (Bhabha 5) thus "provid[ing] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood" (2). It is from within this space or location that change, contestation, collaboration, and *transformation* takes place. In the context of religion, the interstitial can be thought of as a temporal and spatial in-betweeness found or deliberately performed through prayer or meditation. The speaker of "in and out of the holy" amplifies this concept by calling attention to and praising the "in-betwixt" time-spaces of night/day, beginning of the week/end of the week (i.e. Shabbat), and birth/death and then uses them as an allegory for trans- identity. The interstitial commonality between the liminal time-spaces of the sacred and the interstitial body of trans- makes it easy to draw this connection. However, the poem exploits this relationship and takes it a step further. If holiness itself is a kind of setting apart from the everyday and ordinary, then this poem asks us to think of trans- identity as sacred in certain ways for it is outside of the conventional and the binary.

In his poetics statement, Krawitz writes: "I found company in language that offered narrative disruption, was deeply united with the corporeal, and was a powerful location to discuss issues of power, culture, race, faith, nationality, the erotic and illness" (114). "in and out of the holy" pays tribute to some of these intersectional desires. Though the poem is divided chronologically and numerically, it resists narrative synchrony and progressivist temporality by maintaining a focus on the present – the in-between, in-betwixt, "cracks" or fissures and inhabits them. The poem rests ("if you can call it rest") or makes home in the interstitial – it, like trans-, dwells in the "beyond," a "part of revisionary time, a return to the present … *to touch the future on hither side*" (Bhabha 10). But this poem also weaves together discussions of faith, power, and culture to nurture this temporal and spatial relationship:

i. friday night, kabbalat Shabbat

we praise our bodies
at dusk, before night's
  ever returning release
expected

we live
between birth and death.

in twilight
  we know not

when night begins
nor day ends.

our holiest days
begin
  betwixt –
potential promise of prayer

to be heard.

and so begins our work
of rest, at dusk
  commanded to celebrate
wine and prayer and sex –

the infinite, overlooked
toil
of bodies, running.
humbled,
  between–

ii. day, saturday, shabbat

my least noteworthy, least defining note. the not in between, between. That's irony, again the
bookends are where in-between rests, if you call it rest, arrival and departure, capped with
candles, wine and swaying bodies to distinguish the distinct, the what we do not always want to
see, the seeing what we see and being ok with not filling it all in. the focus on the cracks.

iii. saturday night, havdalah

i hum all week

the prayers that end
another 24 hours
of allotted rest
in this time
between the end
and beginning

between the turn
of the sun's creek
and three stars lighting the sky
their lips painted brighter
than a drag queen working a one am set

senses rekindled
my fingers, lifted
to the six wicks
braided bountiful
light pours through the cracks

the scent of cloves
and cinnamon awaken
wine to measure the lips'
pauses and careful
crescendos, all week

i hum, transfixed

all week, a praise
to the in-between

i know these ceremonies best

(109-111)

Friday evening, the night prior to the major event, is an anticipation of and gesture towards the unknown: "in twilight / we know not / when night begins / nor day ends." It is a moment that is neither here nor there and one that embraces the uncertainty of what's to come. This time-space of liminality that the speaker embodies can be read as a way of speaking and getting us to think about trans- identity and the unpredictability of gender identities and practices. The "holiest days / begin / betwixt –" tells us that this in-between and unpredictable space should be valued, nurtured, and held up as a most sacred sacrament. Ironically, Saturday, the day that should be the focal point of the celebration is anti-climactic. Written in prose, it is the "least noteworthy, least defining note" and not where the action of the poem is. Indeed, there is celebration once Shabbat has finally arrived: "capped with candles, wine and swaying bodies" but this is done in order to "distinguish the distinct" – the "not in between, between" moment that is far less productive and traversal.

What is noteworthy about "part ii" is the speaker's description of the "bookends … where the in-between rests." Bookends, like stairwells, have often been used as literary references for liminal spaces or the in-between designations of identity. While bookends are conceived as objects that prop things up, and stairwells as spaces that allow for the ascension and descension towards a particular destination, the structures that they are implicated in to make them

analogous. While the passage from either end of the stairwell refers interstitial identities, it is not just a temporary in-between moment. Instead, it is a location of perpetual motion, precisely because they are refused access towards settling at either end or in a particular destination. Bookends are the boundaries of identity categories or temporal locations themselves. What they hold in-between them is comparable to the intervening space of the stairwell.

According to Homi Bhabha:

> the hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage prevents identities at either end from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (5)

While the interstitial passage is located *between* each stairwell in Bhabha's depiction, "in and out of holy" locates this space or spaces in the actual bookends themselves. The speaker recognizes the irony of "the not in-between, between" and the reversal of the stairwell/bookend reference: "That's irony, again the bookends are where the in-between rests, if you call it rest, arrival and departure…" While in the bigger picture, the ritual of Shabbat takes place during the intervening day(s) between the end and the beginning of the week, it is the moments leading up to and those that precede it that are most productive and revealing. By "focus[ing] on the cracks" or in-between moments, we can open our minds up to and shed some light upon the fissures of binary constructions of gender, of time, and of life in all of its compartmentalized dimensions. It deterritorializes a fixed notion of borders, and opens up a "horizon of new possibilities" (Stryker, Currah, and Moore 17) and life narratives and arrangements that can exceed normative relations to time and space.

But a focus "on the cracks" also "creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now … and expands the potential of the moment and squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand" (Halberstam, "In a Queer Time" 2). Bhabha refers to this notion in his concept of "the beyond," which is an intervening space that has the capacity to "transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment" (6). A focus on the present not only provides a release from the habitual tendencies of daily life but also makes visible and dissolves social and conceptual hierarchies. It provides a sense of ease and acceptance – "seeing what we see and being ok with not filling it all in."

Part "iii. saturday night, havdalah" marks the symbolic end of Shabbat and ushers in the new week. Havdalah, Hebrew for "separation," is a ritual that commences when it is just dark enough to see three stars in the sky. It involves four blessings recited over wine, spices, fire (lighting a special candle) and separation (through prayer, also over the wine). Through sensory words and simile, the speaker paints a vivid depiction of the ceremony from beginning to end: "three stars lighting the sky / their lips painted brighter than a drag queen working a one am set / senses rekindled / my fingers, lifted to the six wicks / braided bountiful / … the scent of cloves / and cinnamon awaken / wine to measure the lips'" Here, we are brought into the time-space of the present and encouraged to see, smell, and feel what the speaker is currently experiencing. Comparing the stars to a drag queen's lipstick not only enhances the vividness of this description, but also cleverly inserts a queer cultural reference into what on the surface may seem like a poem about religious experience. While havdalah concludes Shabbat, it, like kabbalat Shabbat or Friday evening's ritual, is also considered an in-between, between time-space straddling two worlds – "time / between the end and the beginning."

The poem's title, "in and out of the holy," speaks to the qualities of impermanence and the continual (but not necessarily progressive) movement of space and time. It tells us that while we might be in one place, it's not for long – the mind and body fluctuate between holy and non-holy states. Again, there is irony in this notion – while Shabbat is an allotted time of rest ("if you call it rest"), it, like any liminal time-space, manifests temporal movement and passage. Because it is a ritual, it is performed time and time and again, hence the oscillation of being "in and out of the holy." This poem uses Shabbat as a way to talk about the ritual and performative aspects of gender and the relationship that trans- identity holds to the liminal and traversal. Like the impermanent location of the holy, trans- identity occupies "a spatial notion of … gender formation that highlights incompletion … [a] never-finalized oscillation between … poles of a socially enforced continuum" (Bow 80).

The concept of ritual, or the habitual performance of an act, "can either reinforce or disrupt cultural norms" (Halberstam, "In a Queer Time" 153). To quote Jack Halberstam, quoting Judith Butler, "Liminal subjects, those who are excluded from 'the norms that govern the recognizability of the human,' are sacrificed to maintain coherence within the category of the human, and for them, style is both the sign of their exclusion and the mode by which they survive nonetheless" (153). Indeed, stepping outside of or being excluded from the symbolic and signifying order of gender norms begets unintelligibility (k. edwards in Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet" 529). However, what trans- poetics shows us is that *style* can act as a form of survival or liberation from these norms. For some trans- poets, like kari edwards and Samuel Ace, their solution to challenging the unintelligibility of trans- and genderqueer people "is to deviate from normative syntax and grammar as a gesture toward what is outside of signification, what is liberated not just from grammar but somehow also from gender" (Peterson, "Becoming a

Trans Poet" 529). Even something as simple as defying or playing with the rules of punctuation has profound effects. It is a stylistic as well as aesthetic choice that carries with it political implications.

Punctuation is one of many codes or systems of convention that provide clues that enable the reader to identify and gauge the emotion and the rhythm of a given text (Culler 63). Though there is less of an expectation for poetry to follow these conventions, punctuation functions as an additional element or added effect, which can help readers interpret and make sense of what it is they're experiencing in a poem. While punctuation is often thought of as neutral, a signpost or formality that separates sentences and their elements to clarify meaning, trans- poetics shows us that by shaping how our bodies process written language (pauses, stop, breaks, question, etc.), punctuation *makes things happen*. And, rather than just being an implicit dividing up meaning, punctuation in poetry is a deliberate decision with intended effects.

A number of trans- poetic projects experiment with grammar and punctuation as a technique for playing with intelligibility. Trans- poet Samuel Ace is known for using gaps or several spaces between words in place of periods or semicolons as a means for challenging what we take for granted as natural codes of language and for pushing past these boundaries by leaving the punctuation of the poem open. This stylistic choice can also be interpreted as "utopian gestures for leaving the gender of the poem open" (Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet" 525), an innovative strategy that highlights the inextricability between form and content as well as poetic aesthetic and politics. Explaining the rationale behind this technique, Ace writes:

> I feel controlled sometimes when I'm being told to go down the page using line
> breaks, in a way that clashes with my sense of the musicality of the work.
> Sometimes I find that punctuation is kind of like gender; that it is an agreed-upon

thing, that we agree that the comma means this kind of breath, and a period means this kind of breath, and I've never wanted to impose anything on my readers. (qtd in Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet" 525)

For Ace, punctuation (or lack thereof) can be used as a metaphor and methodology for challenging the taken-for-granted and societally imposed categories of gender and intelligibility. We see this quite apparently in his poem "February":

> I heard the horses wild   sedated and bled   their pee extracted with their good will they lay exhausted but later revived   if they survived they remembered nothing but a few days of strange weakness   they angered more easily   the wind could set off a hundred mad kicks to ward of small owls or field mice   I slept and woke with the drapery   I heard the pursuit   the feather   the wanderer   the Russian dolls   the bridesmaid   I heard the weathering hands   the confession   the rapid breathing   the forgotten border   I heard the pardons and amends   the bakers the favored portraits of older men   I heard the sound of lurid coupling   the thrum of resurgent earth   I heard the pastel loamy clay   the pod of early April   the rescued light and the wings of parenthood   I heard the lord of rotten teeth   a low burn of wild grass   I heard choirs of semen   rancid bones of shredded meat   I heard great waves of salt   I heard a simple wooden box 4 by 4 that held what was left of my scar   I heard all the radios in a 20 mile radius   the cars around the block   the warplanes   the anti-missile missiles   I heard two conversations of people who seemed to understand each other   I heard the tart redness   the thrush of winds
>
> (432)

By removing the punctuation or adding "ghostly line breaks" throughout his work, Ace plays with the intelligibility of both gender and the poem itself (Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet" 525). He creates a kind of "poetry-within-prose" where gaps not only replace periods or semicolons but also act as a substitute for line breaks and stanzas (525). While this may produce a sense of disorientation for reader, the regularity of these gaps create a kind of rhythmic and musical pulse (525) that propels the piece into motion. The use of anaphora or repetition of the phrase "I heard" at the beginning of each sentence also performs a kind of visual or aesthetic consistency and rhythm. It is a rhetorical and stylistic device that evokes comfort in the steadiness of its rhythm while simultaneously provoking readers and asking them to engage in and decode a series of disparate verbal/written arrangements. How does one hear "pastel loamy clay" "choirs of semen" or "tart redness"? What does each of these statements have in common, if anything at all? By inventing or cobbling together language that exists between or outside of existing taxonomies (Berdorf 423), our sense of perception becomes disjointed as the speaker claims to hear what we assume can only be seen.

While aesthetically "February" draws attention to Ace's individual poetic style, there is a great deal of (trans-)action taking place in the fiber or content of the poem itself. The mise en scène, or composition and staging of the poem, draws a deep connection between poetic form and the trans- body. In the first four stanzas, the speaker describes an experience of hearing "the horses wild   sedated and bled   their pee extracted with their good will" which could only describe the origins of Premarin,[13] the brand name of a widely prescribed hormone replacing drug derived (inhumanely) from the urine of pregnant mares. While Premarin has been "used in the treatment of postmenopausal and post-hysterectomy symptoms, regulation of the female

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[13] Premarin is short for Pregnant Mares Urine.

reproductive cycle, osteoporosis, ovarian failure, prostate cancer, and certain intersex conditions, [it has also] been used transxenoestrogenically[14] by transwomen following the now anti-quated yet nevertheless still employed Standards of Care for hormonal transition issued by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health" (Hayward 256).

The speaker is describing a very physical scene or set of scenes about the origin of this drug as it goes into through his body and changes it. Hearing an array of recognizable sounds (radios, cars, conversations, etc.), in addition to what we assume can only be seen or smelled, could also describe the speaker's heightened sense of awareness produced by, or as a side effect of, Premarin. Further along, we find yet another reference to gender transition, but this time through the depiction of surgery: "I heard a simple wooden box 4 by 4 that held what was left of my / scar." The speaker hears a vessel that contains what used to be part of his skin and once attached to his body. Again, we experience through sound the changing or transforming body of the speaker.

Like Shipley's "Boy with Flowers," this poem also "avoids directly presenting a narrative about trans" and is structured in a way that detaches the author from the "I" of the speaker (Peterson, "Becoming a Trans Poet" 524). However, there is a surplus of "I" clauses in this poem, and its deliberate persistency demands an even deeper kind of reading. The repetition of "I" can be read as a technique for subverting and undermining the continuity and stability of the "I" or subject. According to Butler, "'I' is the effect of a certain repetition, one that produces the semblance of continuity or coherence" ("Imitation and Gender" 311), but, "it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined

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[14] For a thorough description of transxenoestrogenics, see Eva Hayward's "Transxenoestrogenesis" in the "Keywords" section of *TSQ*: *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Volume 1, Numbers 1-2 (255-258).

or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm" ("Bodies That Matter" 8). It is from within these gaps between repetitions that subjects have the power to displace, resist, and "transform these mimetic performances through subversive practices like mimicry, satire, drag, exaggeration, and so on" (Voss 60). Indeed, Ace utilizes the repetition of "I" to expose the illusion of its continuity and stability, but he also constructs a visual and spatial representation of the "gaps and fissures" produced by the instability of the subject through the deliberate and exaggerated use of spaces between sentences. And, while "February" animates and illustrates the economies of gender and language in the body of the poem itself, it simultaneously demands their displacement.

While Ace utilizes repetition and exaggeration in order to both expose and disrupt the reiterative performances of gender and subjectivity, there are other poets, like Bo Luengsuraswat, who draw upon elements of mimesis (and a range of other tools) to achieve similar effects. In "A cut won't kill me," Luengsuraswat repeats or spits back what are assumed to be vocalized (mis)perceptions of his body and the day-to-day experiences of gender misrecognition. The effects of this technique are indeed manifold, but they ultimately challenge the notion of "visibility as proof" and reclaim the self or subject amidst the sea of misrecognitions and socially imposed unintelligibility. While "A cut won't kill me" and "February" have very different formal and thematic elements, both utilize or play with form as a means to reinforce the poem's thematic content. We see this quite apparently in Luensuraswat's manipulation of form, which reflects the thematic scope of the poem and even the title of the poem itself.

"A cut won't kill me" is aesthetically perhaps one of the most unconventional poems in *Troubling the Line*. It utilizes a full arsenal of poetic tools to name and convey a specific experience to the reader. Written from the subject position of a racialized trans-/gender non-

conforming person, this poem recounts the everyday violence of transphobia *and* racism and the

widely held assumption that visibility means proof. Formally, the verbal abuse or metaphorical

"cuts" that the speaker experiences are represented through the line breaks themselves – each

line is a jab, an utterance severed by a line break that staggers across the page. What is perhaps

most observable, however, is the visual explosion of female-identified words that creep up

throughout the poem like a time bomb. This erratic and unpredictable visual display of words

and phrases, represented through a wide range of font sizes, sends shock waves through the body

of both the poem and the reader. As female-identified terms burst out of the page, the reader

cannot help but feel a sense of the speaker's frustration, exhaustion, and anger. While the poem

has been intentionally broken up into sections for the purpose of this analysis, its length is also of

a notable significance. Stretching across six pages in *Troubling the Line*, "A cut won't kill me"

can be interpreted as a reclamation of space and an active attempt to expand or push beyond the

confined boundaries of not only gender but also of race and citizenship.

everyday
        all day
     unintentional scars shape the texture of my skin

                                              wounds carried through the wind
                          make me shiver with pain

        people say i have sensitive skin
because
     minor scratches
          leave me with permanent patterns

                                        the patterns of agony
          ……

i guess this is how recognition works

every sight leaves   a scar

a cut

that alters the shape of your body

an icky feeling that reminds you

that this world is not yours

that it's not worth it to take another step

outside the house

to walk

to run

to crawl

to take a bus

grocery shop

buy some pills

get a soda

call 911

in exchange of a temporary recovery

miss-aimed rocks

blazed through the wind

welcome you

to the world

that you don't belong

poetry of the moment

is never enough

to cure the damage of the soul

56

SHE   her   LADY BABY   sister   MAMA

MISS   MA'AM   girl

she   HER   LADY   baby SISTER

mama   miss   **ma'am**   GIRL

SHE   HER   LADY   BABY

SISTER   MAMA   MISS

MA'AM

GRRRRRRL

……

(76-78)

The "*patterns of agony*" – "minor scratches," "wounds," and "permanent scars" produced by overlapping oppressions speak to constant (intentional and unintentional) harassment of gender non-conforming people, particularly in public spaces. Luengsuraswat communicates this violence by drawing upon the mythical "death by a thousand cuts": while one small "cut won't kill," the accumulation of these wounds and their damage can eventually become fatal. And though they are surface wounds, which "shape" and become part of the speaker's skin, they remain scars and painful reminders of the unhomely location(s) of a life residing in multiple cultural interstices. They can be compared to what Sara Ahmed describes as a "constant hammering" or chipping away at one's being, where existence means a continual fight for survival. When one's identity is put into question, we are "thrown into a world that can be hostile

as well as startling …when we are not at home, when we are asked where we are from or who we are, or even what we are, we experience a chip, chip, chip, a hammering away at our being" (Ahmed 1). However, it is through an "affinity of hammers" or the reciprocal hammering back at the systems, like sex, gender, and race, that transformation can occur. Ahmed writes, "to experience that hammering is to be given a hammer, a tool through which we, too, can chip away at the surfaces of what is, or who is, including the very categories through which personhood is meaningful; categories of sex and gender, for instance, that have chipped away at us" (1). "A cut won't kill me" is an experience of "hammering," but it simultaneously hammers back at these systems through the use of poetic articulation. It shows how poetry can be used as a tool for survival and intervention, and a weapon against the violence of (in)visibility.

But this is not all the poem communicates – it also tells us that poetry or any form or amount of self-expression may not be sufficient enough to heal the wounds and cuts of constant hammering of a double displacement. We understand this quite clearly towards the end of the excerpt: "poetry of the moment / is never enough / to cure the damage of the soul." Echoing this sentiment in his poetics statement, Luengsuraswat writes, "I believe there can never be an adequate form of expression to articulate the massive degree of pain that a racialized trans/gender non-conforming person experiences on a daily basis, and no theory of intersectionality can sufficiently account for such violence" ("Poetics Statement" 86). Can a sense of belonging and comfort exist when the visibility of one body obscures another? If intersectionality is "how we pass through at one moment while being stopped at another, depending on who is receiving us; depending on what is being received through us" (Ahmed 1), can an interstitial subject ever manifest any sense of embodied and psychic wholeness? Though these answers are somewhat rhetorical, trans- poetics teaches us to view trans- as "a force that

impels indeterminate movement rather than as an identity that demands epistemological

accountability or as a movement between identities" (Puar 80). Trans- poetics may never

produce a coherent self – but that is precisely the point.

In this next excerpt of "A cut won't kill me," we are again reminded of the cultural

politics of visibility and the overlapping imperatives of both race and gender that require the

speaker to pass not only as a woman but also a particular kind of woman – an Asian woman,

which carries a whole host of expected behaviors, namely, docility, passivity, and overall

silence:

<div align="center">

nice little asian girl

smiley submissive quiet

you can just pass me by

pass

like a girl

a beautiful girl

curvy-ass-tits / sweet-pitched voice / little-nose-eyes

tiptoeing around the corner

coming into your store

your house

your street

your country

</div>

calling you on the phone to spell HER last name for you

a pink cell phone

i must have, one said

such a lovely lady you are

you deserve a pair of

pink slippers

HI LADIES

YES MA'AM

THANKS SISTER

OH…SUCH A BABY GIRL!!!

……

all relational words in the world

and the spider webs they spin

are deadly grids

that catch

and break

the wings of non-conformity

broken   wings

broken   mirror

dreams shattered smashed and beaten embedded into skin

formed a new version of me

a *me*

crushed between zeros and ones

how much is a cut worth?

(78)

Like Kreer's "who is man," this poem combines and ventriloquizes what are assumed to

be a series of oppressive utterances and (mis)gendered appellations commonly heard by the

speaker. Responses like "YES, MA'AM" and "THANKS SISTER" are discursive speech acts that impose dimorphic gendering and perpetuate the taken-for-granted notion of "visibility-as-proof." But the recitation of these utterances are also, what Luengsuraswat describes as, "Rants of Misrecognition" – "explosive scribbles of anger, shock, confusion, hopelessness, and a host of other indescribable emotions…" ("Poetics Statement" 86). Recounting these harmful performative speech acts is not only a form of healing and emotional release, but also a method of intervention and mimetic subversion. By repeating back or writing them "out loud," the speaker is no longer just a referent in an oppressive economy of language, but instead becomes an active agent in their own self-making. There is much autobiographical truth to this methodology, which Luengsuraswat speaks specifically to in his poetics statement. He explains, "By recording these embodied experiences, I make them intelligible to myself and meticulously create a valuable *body of knowledge* that serves as the basis of self-building" (86).

Conclusion!

Rather than entirely conforming to the chrononormative flow that is expected of an MA thesis, I urge you, the reader, to reconsider this segment not as a resolutory gesture towards some imaginative conclusion, but instead an opening and invitation to explore further the possibilities that trans- poetics allows for expanding the corporeal, psychic, and political conceptual dimensions of gender, the body, and subjectivity. Like trans- poetics, this thesis is not about a beginning or end point but instead seeks to embody and embrace "perpetual motion and a sense of continual questioning" (Shipley, "The Transformative" 198). If trans- poetics teaches us anything, it's that what we take for granted as irrefutable truths, like gender, identity, the self, and even temporal and spatial constructions of reality, are just that – they are constructions that can be exposed, dismantled, then rebuilt again using the right tools. But it cannot do this alone.

Trans- poetics "transform[s] meaning from a product provided by the poet into processes within the reader" (Ladin, "Trans Poetics Manifesto" 307) – it is an interactive and pedagogical practice that necessitates a reciprocal relationship with its audience.

Like language, gender is made up of building blocks – trans- poetics disassembles these blocks (of gender, of poetry, of language), and then reassembles them again using these same raw materials. While "one can never step outside of the signifying and symbolic order because one becomes unintelligible" (k. edwards in Peterson "Becoming a Trans Poet" 529), trans-poetics manipulates language, or the lack thereof, through the use of poetic tools, like imagery, allusion, sound, and word play, and dissident methodologies, like mimesis and deviation from normative syntax and grammar, in order to articulate the "in-between" – corporeally, discursively, and politically. As kari edwards so wittily argues, "When you have lack of language, you can make fun of it – things become funny. The joke is that it is all made up" (k. edwards qtd in Peterson "Becoming a Trans Poet" 529).

By keeping an open mind to the transformational powers of trans- poetics, we become more willing to let go of societal constructs like gender, race, ability, and so forth that form the very basis of oppression and exclusion. Again, when we understand gender as "temporal, successive, or transformable, all accounts of human lives look different and more complex" (Getsy 48). It is from this location of the unintelligible, invisible or even hyper-visible subjectivities, that (non)subjects become aware and better equipped or able to challenge and expose notions of visibility and intelligibility that undergird dominant notions of the human. But they can't afford not to. Indeed, poetry is not a luxury – and for trans- and non-gender conforming people it is a necessary tool for survival – for "resisting the persistent erasure of the evidence of trans lives, gender diversity, nondimorphism, and successive identities" (48). For

trans- poetics exists because it has to – it emerges and bursts at the seams when "dimorphic and static understandings of gender are revealed as arbitrary and inadequate" and when "reductive norms [simply] do not hold" (48).

Indeed, there is great hope in making trans- poetics visible and accessible beyond communities of trans- and non-gender conforming people. However, one might ask, how can trans- poetics be truly recognized without the foreclosure or discursive violence that comes with being an established genre? Like trans- poetics itself, the answer to this question is complex and manifold. Firstly, because trans- poetics is a methodology rather than function of demographics, it resists and extends well beyond the definitive categories of genre. While many have voiced concern for the institutionalization of "transgenderism" (as a political and identificatory category) and its "reincorporation of a radical subcultural back into the flexible economy of postmodern culture" (Halberstam, "In a Queer Time" 21) the trans- poetics that I speak of seeks to use poetry as a means for keeping identity signs open and "alive as a meaningful designator of unpredictable gender identity and practices" (21). Again, when trans- is understood "as a force that impels indeterminate movement rather than as an identity that demands epistemological accountability…" (Puar 80), the visibility of trans- poetics becomes far less concerning, as it is imminently and *necessarily* equipped to resist reduction into assumed and constructed categories of gender, identity, or any type of foreclosure for that matter. Anything less, or any dilution of these fundamental elements, wouldn't be a trans- poetics. By remaining true to trans- poetics as a methodology, we can resist the institutionalization of trans- poetics as a genre and offer new ways of reading trans- and genderqueer subjects, not just in poetry, but also in all aspects of being.

Troubling the Line is a jumping-off point for a future of trans- poetics that has yet to be written. Rather than viewing this text as a road map that shows us what trans- poetics *is*, it can be thought of as more of a recipe book – a set of ingredients and basic formulas for *doing* trans- poetics. This thesis explores just a few of these formulas and the various possibilities and combinations for doing trans- poetics. However, there are and will continue to be more. While we cannot predict in advance the trajectory of trans- poetics or where it will take us, we do know that gender arrangements will not remain the same – that is, the rules of gender will undoubtedly shift, and with that shift comes new possibilities for combinations and extrapolations of these rules. Just as vocabulary has expanded and the ways of being in the world have multiplied for trans- and other non-gender conforming subjects in ways unimaginable to us just several years ago, they will continue to change and multiply in unpredictable ways. When viewed in this light, the possibilities for trans- poetics are endless – they are "open, and always, opening" (Tolbert, "Open, and, always" 7), as are the possibilities for creating new ways of being in the world.

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