

'The other kind of coming out': Transgender people and the coming out narrative genre¹

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the importance of considering transgender speakers apart from gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, even where there is significant overlap in the linguistic practices of these groups. Through an analysis of transgender coming out narratives, it is shown that previous accounts of this genre, which have focused on gays and lesbians, do not extend to the entire LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community. Coming out as transgender differs from coming out as gay or lesbian primarily in that there are two distinct ways a person can come out as transgender: before and after a change in gender role. The dissimilarity of coming out before such a transition and afterwards presents a challenge to previous characterizations both of coming out and the narratives that result from this practice. Ultimately, the coming out narrative genre reveals itself as a venue for making sense of stigmatized identities in community-specific ways.

KEYWORDS: TRANSGENDER, GAY AND LESBIAN, COMING OUT, NARRATIVE, IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY

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Introduction

Coming out is among the most widely discussed and theorized aspects of queer life in Western societies. The practice of revealing stigmatized sexual desire in a heteronormative cultural context has frequently been seen as a crucial site of gay and lesbian identity development, attracting the attention of scholars interested in sexuality for at least the past three decades. Of course, some researchers writing on this topic have pointed out the limitations of a continued emphasis on the closet as the locus of gay and lesbian life, given the increasing routinization of homosexual identities (Seidman, Meeks and Traschen 1999), while others have criticized the way the closet serves to reinforce social binaries, not least of which is the dichotomy between homo- and heterosexualities (Sedgwick 1990). Nevertheless, issues of identity management and coming out continue to prove relevant for scholars writing about queer communities (relatively recent work from varied disciplinary perspectives includes Corrigan and Matthews 2003; Fields 2001; Hunter 2007; Morrow 2006; Munt, Bassett and O’Riordan 2002; and Whitman, Cormier and Boyd 2000).

Despite the abundance of work on coming out as gay or lesbian, coming out as transgender remains highly understudied. In discussions of coming out that aim to be inclusive of transgender experiences, queer organizations and scholars alike often treat sexual orientation and gender identity as analogous. For example, the Human Rights Campaign, a major gay and lesbian rights organization, uses a typical definition of coming out on its website (Human Rights Campaign 2009a): ‘the process in which a person first acknowledges, accepts and appreciates his or her sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to share that with others.’ Characterizations such as these, which can also be found in academic works like Chirrey (2003), Coon (2003), Hunter (2007), Morrow (2006), and Rasmussen (2004) suggest that transgender people, by definition, have a gender identity² that clashes with how they are perceived by others. That is, they may self-identify as women, but they are perceived by others to be men – or vice versa. This is a narrow view of transgenderism that ignores the many transgender individuals who complete a transition from one gender role to the other. For these people, whose gender identity may very well align with how they are perceived by others, coming out does not mean revealing a gender *identity*, but rather a particular kind of gender *history* characterized by the movement from one gender category to another. Given the paucity of research on coming out as transgender (or bisexual, for that matter), scholars should take care not to treat coming out as though it were practiced and regarded homogenously across queer communities. However, some scholars clearly conflate the coming out experience of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people. For example, in her discussion of coming out

as a performative speech act, Chirrey (2003) disclaims that while her 'discussion focuses on coming out in relation to lesbians and gay men, [...] it is the case that coming out is crucially important to the lives of other sexual minorities, such as bisexuals and transpersons, and much of what is written here will echo their realities' (34). However, in this article I argue that coming out must be reconceptualized if scholars wish to account for the entire range of coming out experiences of members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) population.

Like Chirrey's analysis, which focuses on the act of coming out itself, studies of the narratives people tell about their coming out experiences have focused on gay and lesbian speakers. Liang (1997), for instance, analyzes the coming out stories told by young gay men in informal 'rap sessions' conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area and proposes a set of core elements to be found in narratives of this genre. Yet, as my analysis demonstrates, neither the findings of Liang's study, nor those presented by Wood (1994, 1997), account for the stories told by transgender speakers. This discrepancy is particularly clear when it comes to the frequently repeated claim that coming out is necessarily a lifelong process. Liang argues that reference to the 'processual' nature of coming out – in other words, the fact that coming out is not a single event but is rather reenacted time and again throughout an individual's lifetime – is a crucial component of the coming out narrative.³ Wood (1997) reaches similar conclusions based on her study of coming out stories told by hearing and Deaf lesbians through email. Like Liang, Wood emphasizes the ongoing nature of coming out, but locates processuality not simply in the content of coming out stories, but also in the formal characteristics of the narratives themselves. However, I argue that processuality, as these authors describe it, is not characteristic of transgender coming out narratives. Although neither Liang nor Wood explicitly address the potential universality of their claims, the narratives they present from gay and lesbian speakers are treated as representative of the coming out narrative genre.

In this article, I argue that transgender people's coming out narratives present a challenge to the assumption that the linguistic practices of gays and lesbians are representative of the LGBT community. Instead, my analysis of the differences between coming out as gay or lesbian on the one hand, and coming out as transgender on the other, demonstrates the importance of considering transgender individuals and their linguistic practices on their own terms, rather than relying on their apparent commonalities with other queer groups. Practices that appear to unify LGBT speakers, like the coming out narrative genre, cannot be fully understood through the study of lesbians and gay men alone. Furthermore, because transgender people tend to orient more to issues of gender identity rather than sexual orientation when providing accounts of their own identities – at least in the narratives collected in the study I discuss

here – the study of these communities is likely to be of particular interest for scholars of language and gender.

I begin this article by offering a view of coming out as transgender that highlights the dissimilar natures of coming out before an individual changes her or his gender role and after. I argue that this distinction, beyond providing a useful way to discuss the experiences of transgender people, is salient to the community and reflected in members' talk about coming out. Next, the work of Liang and Wood provides a point of comparison between the coming out narratives of gays and lesbians and those told by transgender people. I argue that these authors' conclusions, while apparently valid for the populations with which they worked, provide an incomplete picture of the coming out narrative genre. Rather than reflecting the genre as a whole, their observations reveal local practices used by members of the gay and lesbian communities they studied. Based on these findings, I argue that the coming out narrative genre is characterized best as a venue in which stigmatized identities are enacted and negotiated, thus functioning to forge solidarity between members, to socialize those who are new to the group, and to contest the powerful ideologies that marginalize queer identities. These divergent practices demonstrate not only the flexibility of the coming out narrative genre, but also the differences that cut across the LGBT community.

The data that support these arguments are drawn from interviews I conducted during the spring and summer of 2007 with nine transgender volunteers. I recruited these individuals through online transgender communities and electronic mailing lists, describing myself as a researcher and member of the transgender community who was seeking participants for a study of transgender coming out narratives. During the interviews, I asked participants in an open-ended format to share their coming out stories, which were followed by a more structured sequence of questions about their experiences with and attitudes toward coming out. The resulting data set is made up of approximately four hours of talk. Interviewees were all native speakers of English and were raised in various regions of the United States with the exceptions of John, who lived in both Israel and the U.S. as a child and speaks English and Hebrew bilingually, and Elizabeth, who was born in Australia, grew up mainly in Israel and now lives in California and uses a native-sounding American English accent. Although many participants had similar backgrounds in some respects – the majority were European-Americans⁴ from middle-class backgrounds – it would be misleading to characterize this group as either homogenous or somehow representative of the transgender population. Additionally, though all participants had completed, or at least begun, their transition from one gender role to another, they experienced their identities as transgender in quite different ways. For example, when I spoke to Michael, a 33 year-old graduate student and

warehouse manager who identifies as genderqueer and has a generally more radical attitude toward gender than most other participants in this study,⁵ it seemed that being transgender and having a history living as a woman were important parts of his identity. On the other hand, John was a 21 year-old undergraduate who began identifying as male in high school, transitioned in his late teens, and saw himself simply as a man, considering his transgender past in many ways irrelevant to his gender identity.

Despite these differences, all of these individuals had one very significant shared experience with regard to gender as a social phenomenon: they had each come to identify with and live as the gender 'opposite' the one assigned to them at birth. I recognize the potential danger in reducing individuals with complex identities to a single potentially homogenizing category. However, the relatively small sample in my study turned up no evidence for patterns like those found by previous researchers who have examined the coming out experiences of lesbians as compared to gay men (e.g. Markowe 1996) or across different points in the life-span (e.g. de Monteflores and Schultz 1978).⁶ Nevertheless, I want to stress that I make no claims to homogeneity among this group of speakers. Rather, my analysis illustrates how these different individuals draw on experiences and ideologies that are – or, as I will show, are thought to be – common among transgender people without necessarily aligning themselves with other transgender speakers.

While the context in which I collected these narratives matches neither Liang's rap group setting nor Wood's email stories, there is obviously no reason to suppose that any of these contexts necessarily provides a glimpse of some 'true' coming out narrative. Indeed, the situations in which participants in my study reported having told their coming out stories covered a wide range of settings, from lecture halls to intimate conversations and from educational seminars to support groups. Each of these contexts will influence the enactment of a narrative, and the interview setting is no exception (see Briggs 1986). However, it seems useful to think of the stories discussed here as products of both a sociolinguistic interview and a dialogue between two community members. Unlike in interviews performed by community outsiders, the particular combination of roles I filled as an interviewer forced participants to manage a tension between two audiences: the implicit academic readership of this paper, whose awareness of transgender issues cannot be assumed, and the researcher, whose community membership implies a shared body of knowledge. I found examples of speakers orienting to both of these audiences as they chose either to explain or omit an explanation for certain issues. For example, at one point during our meeting I shared a laugh with John about his mother's assumption that, as a man, he would be attracted only to women. In this case there was no need for him to explain that transgender people – just like anyone else – may

be attracted to any combination of genders, even though the uninitiated often assume that they will be heterosexual after their transition. I will discuss the dual role of these narratives at greater length in the discussion section below.

At this point, it is worth noting that my use of the term *transgender* is not intended in the ‘umbrella label’ sense often found in literature dealing with issues of gender and sexuality. Nor is it intended as a pancultural descriptor to be applied to any gender variant community. Rather, my usage mirrors the meaning this term has taken on in many English-speaking transgender communities in the United States, in which it can serve as a demedicalized substitute for the term *transsexual*.⁷ While transsexuality is often seen a concept that arises from the pathologization of cross-gender identification, which assigns the labels of *pre-op* or *post-op* according to whether an individual has been made medically ‘complete’ as female or male, my use of *transgender* emphasizes the social nature of living as a woman or man. Likewise, *transgender*, as it is used here, refers to a culturally- and historically-specific identity rooted in modern, Western conceptualizations of gender and the self. Within this context, then, I treat the category of transgender as comprised of those individuals whose sense of themselves as men or women runs contrary to the gender they were assigned at birth, and who have therefore decided to make a social transition from one gender role to another (regardless of what medical interventions, if any, are pursued). While other definitions may be more productive in other contexts, and while this characterization excludes a number of individuals who might identify as transgender,⁸ my emphasis on the positioning of speakers as male or female social actors is crucial for understanding the distinction I propose between the various ways transgender people come out.

Generic conventions for coming out narratives

As I suggested, the primary goal of the linguistic literature on coming out narratives has been the identification of thematic and linguistic features shared across stories in this genre. At the most basic thematic level, the narratives I collected from transgender people each described how the speaker came to live in their current gender role; in fact, this was the clear overarching topic in the majority of these stories, some of which only peripherally mentioned actual acts of coming out to others as transgender. In this broad sense, transgender coming out narratives are similar to gay and lesbian narratives, which Wood describes as being about ‘coming-into-lesbianism’ (1994:777).

Beyond this very broad level, Liang (1997) in particular seeks to uncover the generic conventions for coming out narratives – in other words, the normative expectations community members share surrounding the telling of stories in this genre. She argues that there are three core elements to coming

out, which are reflected in the organization of coming out narratives: ‘self-definition as lesbian or gay to the self; self-presentation as lesbian and [sic] gay to others; membership in a series of ongoing acts of self-definition, and/or self-presentation as lesbian or gay’ (291). Liang observes that some speakers had relatively unproblematic experiences with coming out to themselves; however, even these individuals would preface their stories of coming out to others with an account of why their initial self-identification process did not present the expected challenges. Liang suggests that moves such as this mark speakers ‘as communicatively competent members of an American gay community’ (1997:307).

I found similar evidence of transgender speakers orienting to norms specific to the coming out narrative genre. The clearest example in the present body of data of speakers’ sensitivity to these kinds of expectations comes from my interview with Gerry, a 64 year-old lesbian-identified transwoman from the Midwest who began her transition in 1998 while working as a software developer at the large corporation where she is still employed. Toward the end of our talk, Gerry explicitly referenced the way her experiences diverged from what she described as a common claim in transpeople’s coming out stories: ‘they’ll say they knew [their gender identity] at four years old’ (lines 421–422).

Excerpt 1: Gerry⁹

420 G: Um, ((sigh)) um, that, y’know you- you’ll talk to a
 421 lot of transgender people and they’ll say they knew at
 422 four years old, and um, I’m not sure that I knew that
 423 early. ((clears throat)) It’s just something was going
 424 on most of my life y’know, that was in the background
 425 and um the older I got the more it occupied my
 426 thoughts and dreams.

Although Gerry does not report an early awareness of her female identity (‘I’m not sure I knew that early’, lines 422–423), she acknowledges that such an experience might be considered typical – and therefore expected – in transgender coming out stories.

While both homosexual and transgender speakers show sensitivity to generic expectations, what those particular expectations are seems to vary across these groups. For example, while Liang (1997) identifies coming out to the self as a crucial element in coming out stories told by gay men, several of the narratives I collected lacked any reference whatsoever to how the speakers came to identify as transgender. Instead, these speakers began their stories at a point when they had already decided to move from one gender role to the other, and were beginning that process. In other words, the speakers in my study did not seem

to orient to the issue of ‘self-definition [...] to self’ (Liang 1997), which Liang posited as a highly salient generic norm.

A more important difference, however, is the issue of what Liang and Wood refer to as the ‘processuality’ of coming out. Here, processuality refers to the notion that coming out is not a single event, nor even a finite series of acts after which the individual may be considered completely out, but rather a lifelong process of claiming a gay or lesbian identity. For Liang (1997), processuality is among the three core elements of any act of coming out (‘membership in a series of ongoing acts of self-definition, and/or self-presentation as lesbian or gay’), and both she and Wood (1994, 1997) find evidence for this claim in the narratives they collected. However, the narratives in my study indicate that coming out as transgender is very often not processual in the lifelong sense that these authors argue for.

A key reason that coming out as transgender lacks the processuality discussed by Liang and Wood is that transgender people experience coming out from two significantly different perspectives: before and after transitioning to the preferred gender role. The differences between these subjectivities must be examined before a full understanding of coming out as transgender, and the narratives that result from this practice, can be achieved. On the one hand, when a person first comes out as transgender, that individual is asserting a self-experienced gender identity that is different from the gender he or she is perceived to be by others. In this case, an invisible gender identity is being claimed in much the same way that gays and lesbians come out by claiming a sexual orientation that is often not visible to others. On the other hand, when a transgender person has assumed a gender role matching their identity, coming out does not involve asserting a hidden gender identity, but rather revealing the fact that they formerly occupied a different gender role. Of course, for those transpeople who are visibly transgender after their transition, coming out as transgender is not necessarily something that must be done verbally; instead, a transgender person’s former gender role may be revealed by their stature, hairline, or voice, for example. However, many transgender people are unquestionably seen as male or female after transitioning, and for them coming out means telling others about a transgender history, not revealing their identity as a man or woman.

I distinguish these two types of coming out through the use of two terms: *declaration*, to refer to the initial claiming of a transgender identity, and *disclosure*, to refer to sharing one’s transgender history after transition. This distinction will allow for greater clarity regarding how transgender coming out stories are structured and, crucially, why they lack the processuality thought to be so important to the coming out narrative genre. Importantly, it is also a distinction

community members are making themselves, as Michael did when he referred to disclosure as ‘the other kind of coming out’.¹⁰

Indeed, the notion that declaration and disclosure are discrete processes is reflected in linguistic practices found among transgender speakers. I will briefly discuss two such practices that appear in these data. First, many transgender people, including a few participants in this study, make use of a set of lexical items that offer an alternative to mainstream ways of talking about coming out and the closet. Yet these terms are only found in discussions of disclosure, indicating that at least some transgender speakers sense the need for a vocabulary specific to that process. Second, when participants in this study were asked for their ‘coming out stories’, without any specific prompting regarding which experiences to discuss, they focused almost exclusively on declaration, rather than disclosure. This indicates that these speakers conceptualized ‘coming out as transgender’ in terms of the initial declaration of a gender identity and not in terms of disclosing a transgender past.

While declaration is frequently discussed using the same lexicon employed by gays and lesbians, including phrases such as *come out (of the closet)*, and *in the closet* or *closeted* to refer to those who haven’t come out, many transgender people use different terminology when talking about disclosure. A few participants in this study made use of the term *disclose* instead of *come out* (the source of my own use of this term) and *stealth* instead of *in the closet*. My previous observations of transgender communities – both as a participant and as a researcher – confirm that these terms are in wide circulation. Each of these words, *disclose* and *stealth*, serves to challenge the ideological weight attached to mainstream coming out discourse – an issue to be discussed at greater length below. In brief, we may recognize that within gay and lesbian communities, *coming out* is typically thought of as a highly valuable process in which a person reveals an aspect of their ‘true self’ to others. This conceptualization is congruent with the dominant attitude in the transgender community toward declaration, which is often seen as coming to terms with one’s ‘true’ gender identity. Disclosure, on the other hand, is seen quite differently. Because transgender people generally emphasize the authenticity of their self-identified gender, rather than the gender they were assigned at birth, disclosure does not involve revealing a fundamental truth about one’s identity in the same way that declaration does. On the other hand, non-transgender people typically assign primacy to a person’s assigned gender role, and upon discovering a person’s transgender status will often conclude that the individual is ‘really’ a woman, for example, even if they may look like and identify as a man. As a result of this schism, disclosing a transgender past may have the effect of undermining what the speaker sees as their true identity rather than illuminating it. By distinguishing between declaration – usually simply referred to as *coming*

out – and disclosure, speakers are able to create a clear distinction between two practices that are regarded quite differently within the community (more about this below), and to indicate that while one of these practices is like gays’ and lesbians’ coming out, the other is distinct. Similarly, *stealth* functions as an alternative to *closeted* that does not carry the negative connotations that the latter term invokes. While describing a person as *closeted* suggests that they are ashamed of and hiding some part of their identity, calling someone *stealth* only entails that they choose not to share certain aspects of their life history or embodiment with others. As a result, while *in the closet* or *closeted* may be used to talk about pre-transition transgender people who hide their gender identities, *stealth* refers specifically and exclusively to post-transition transgender people who opt not to disclose their transgender status. This more neutral meaning reflects the relatively neutral attitude held by many in the transgender community toward being stealth.

In fact, it seems that stance toward coming out may play a significant role in motivating the use of these terms. For example, the participant in this study that made the greatest use of these alternative lexical items was John, a speaker who did not strongly identify with his transgender history and preferred to limit his disclosure. John was one of the few participants in this study who lived a relatively stealth lifestyle, and he was critical toward the idea that transpeople have an obligation to be openly transgender. The terms *disclose* and *stealth* may thus serve as indices for this stance, as well as allowing John and others like him to manage and make sense of their own lack of disclosure without using language that condemns such behavior.

As I just mentioned, the speakers in this study framed their coming out stories almost exclusively in terms of their experiences with declaration. This is true despite the fact that, when asked for their ‘coming out stories’ – a request that I intentionally left open-ended so as to best capture speakers’ own notions of this genre – participants told narratives that differed greatly in their scope. Some speakers focused narrowly on one aspect of their gender transition, such as coming out at work. Others told much longer stories, as when Angie, a 42 year-old Italian-American transwoman originally from Florida who started coming out as transgender in her mid-thirties, told me a narrative that spanned from her early childhood to the present. In fact, it was Angie who was the only speaker to discuss an experience of disclosure without my prompting. This may be related to the epic nature of her narrative, and to the fact that this act of disclosure figured into the way Angie met her current partner, which was a significant milestone in her life story.

While the great majority of speakers in this study limited the scope of their coming out stories to declaration, one participant made a more explicit comment indicating that she thinks of coming out as transgender as having

ended when one has finished the process of declaration. This participant was Elizabeth, a pansexual-identified 24 year-old transwoman from Australia who spent much of her childhood in Israel and now lives in the United States with her non-transgender female partner. In the following excerpt, Elizabeth is finishing a story about her last experience with declaration, which took place after she had been living as a woman for several years. While declaration typically occurs before or immediately after a transgender person begins living in their new gender role, in this case Elizabeth had not yet declared her female identity to her half-sisters in part because they were living in another country and had not seen her since her transition.

Excerpt 2: Elizabeth

207 E: And she said that she hadn't realized, y'know, s- but
 208 she asked me a few questions and, y'know, are you
 209 seeing a doctor about this:? and I told her yes..
 210 Y'know and I'd been s- this had been me for the last
 211 three years. And I showed her a photo, and y'know she
 212 said basically I accept you as my sister. And y'know,
 213 very cool about it.
 214 LZ: Mhm.
 215 E: Not a problem. At all.
 216 LZ: Mhm.
 217 E: And uh she was the last person I came out to.

At the end of this subnarrative, Elizabeth refers to her sister as 'the last person [she] came out to' (line 217). She does this despite the fact that when I inquired later, she reported quite a few experiences with disclosure. This indicates that when Elizabeth talks about the 'last' time she 'came out', she is speaking only of that initial process of declaration, and placing disclosure in a separate sphere.

If declaration serves as the basis of transgender coming out narratives, we can begin to understand how these stories challenge the assertion that coming out must necessarily be ongoing throughout a person's lifetime. Declaration ends when an individual aligns gender role with gender identity, and for the majority of the participants in this study – all but two of whom had been living in their preferred gender role for at least a few years – this process was complete. As a result, these speakers narrated coming out as a process that took place over a discrete period of time in the past. In the section that follows, I analyze the narratives of three such speakers in greater depth in order to demonstrate the lack of processuality in the form, as well as content, of these narratives. I accomplish this by showing how the stories I collected depart from those structural trends that Wood (1997) describes as iconic representations of coming out's processuality.

Iconic representations of processuality

Both Liang and Wood agree that processuality is a significant part of coming out narratives. Wood, however, takes her analysis a step further in proposing that the on-going nature of coming out is reflected in the linguistic form these narratives take. Wood (1997) argues for two distinct linguistic features that do this work: the structure of the narratives' resolutions and codas, and the tense accorded to verbs in the narratives' evaluations. In this section I analyze transgender coming out narratives from my own study using Wood's criteria and argue that they fail to conform to the linguistic patterns she observed.

The bulk of Wood's analysis focuses on the structure of the coming out narratives she collected from four lesbians through email. Following a Labovian model of narrative analysis, she focuses on each story's resolution and coda, the latter of which functions to '[return] the listener to the present time' (Labov 1972:369, quoted in Wood 1997:258), as well as the telling-frame coda, which marks the end of the story-telling frame (Schiffrin 1993:249–250, cited in Wood 1997). Wood observed that the speakers in her study would often begin to resolve one narrative only to interrupt its resolution in order to relate another experience. She argued that, rather than progressing in a linear way through a series of events that can then be resolved and evaluated, these stories linked together disparate instances of coming out, sometimes in haphazard ways. A number of the experiences her speakers described lacked clear resolutions, and codas were sometimes absent or would occur in unconventional positions within the structure of the narrative. According to Wood, this diversion from typical narrative organization is iconic of the fact that coming out as lesbian is never complete. Because this is the focus of Wood's argument, I begin my own analysis here.

In the previous section, I argued that the coming out narratives of transgender speakers generally describe experiences of declaration rather than disclosure, meaning that they do not exhibit the kind of processuality Wood describes. I found no evidence among these speakers of the 'stop-start-stop narrative sequence' (1997:261) Wood observes. Rather, the stories tended to be linear and exhibit the expected sequence of resolution, evaluation, and coda. For example, Gerry, whom I introduced in an earlier section of this article, ended her narrative in a typical way. In her story, she described how multiple traumatic experiences that occurred within a short period of time brought a vague lifelong discomfort to an apex, prompting her to pursue therapy for depression which 'got [her] thinking about, okay, where do you wanna be in five years?' This introspection led Gerry's feelings that she 'should be female' to intensify, and eventually she sought out other transgender people on the internet. She found local contacts to begin her transition, and reports having felt

validated by the similarity her experiences bore to those of other transgender people. The following selection is the end of this story.

Excerpt 3: Gerry

473 G: so once I got into the trans
 474 community, and found that everybody's stories were
 475 kind of matching mine, y'know with minor variations.
 476 Uh, people were sayin' the same things I was sayin'
 477 and so forth. So I knew that I wasn't makin' this
 478 stuff up in my head because you can't have this
 479 disjointed mass hypnosis or something going on. So
 480 that was very reassuring, and that started me
 481 seriously going toward transition. And through those
 482 organizations I found a psychologist who had
 483 experience and uh and started that whole road. And
 484 once you start down that road, ((clears throat)) as
 485 long as you're not doing it for some other reasons,
 486 y'know, as long as it's a valid gender dysphoria,
 487 y'know. You're gonna come out the other end well-
 488 adjusted and hopefully happier and and I did. Y'know,
 489 so.

After describing how she made the necessary connection with a psychologist who could give her a referral for medical transition, Gerry provides a highly general evaluation: as long as one is motivated by 'a valid gender dysphoria,'¹¹ (line 486) transition from one gender role to the other will ultimately be a positive experience. The coda, 'and I did' (line 488), confirms that the generalization holds true for Gerry, and that at this point in her life she is a well-adjusted and happier person. Rather than starting up another narrative as this one winds-down, Gerry provides a clear conclusion that sums up the lesson to be taken from her story.

Another story that clearly progresses in a linear fashion and then closes with an unambiguous conclusion was the one told by Angie. Angie's story was the longest I collected, consisting of many small narratives that covered the major events of her gendered life from childhood to the present. All of these subnarratives advanced a single theme, however, and did so without stopping and starting different stories as Wood describes. The central issue in her narrative, more so for Angie than any other participant in this study, is how she came to be the woman she is today, far more content with life than she had been living as a man. This focus is made even more clear by how she chose to end her story: after describing her transition, she talks about her relationship with her partner and the artistic projects on which they were collaborating. She concludes in the following way:

Excerpt 4: Angie

939 A: Anyway,
 940 so we might do that, we've got another comic book
 941 idea, so anyway, but it's uh, life's pretty good.
 942 ((laugh))

Angie ends her story with a simple statement that serves as both an evaluation and a coda, 'life's pretty good' (line 941). Thus, not only does she provide a narrative coda in the expected location, it is a coda that confirms the suggestion from Wood noted earlier that coming out narratives are less about revealing a new identity to others than the overall process of assuming that identity and the correlating social role – a process which, for Angie and the other speakers under discussion here, is clearly complete. This theme is supported by the fact that instead of ending her narrative with an assessment of her coming out experiences, the evaluation in Angie's story (like Gerry's) serves the additional purpose of establishing her more general happiness in her life as a woman. Because popular notions of transsexuality tend to present the process of transition as unnecessary, misguided, or even a sign of mental instability, asserting the power of her gender role change in producing happiness and satisfaction acts as a powerful authentication of Angie's gender identity. As Gerry says, only someone with 'a valid gender dysphoria' – i.e., a psychologically legitimate identification with a different gender than that conferred at birth – would be happy after changing their gender role.

The other linguistic feature Wood (1997) analyzes in her narratives is the way verbs are inflected in narrative resolutions. She argues that the lesbian speakers in her study exploit the meaning of different syntactic forms in order to signal that their coming out experiences are not yet over. For example, one speaker, Tess, says 'I don't have much of a coming out story to tell, because it *hasn't been* that dramatic for me or anyone else. I guess it *would be* different if I had a long-term relationship' (1997:266, emphasis mine). Rather than saying that coming out '*wasn't* that dramatic' and that it '*would have been* different', the present tense forms *hasn't been* and *would be* indicate that coming out is not conceptualized by this speaker as an event that took place in the past, but rather an ongoing process. In contrast, past tense forms are more common in these sorts of contexts within the transgender coming out stories I collected. For instance, John's coming out story, like Angie's, was a series of narratives that spanned a number of years and various contexts. John began by talking about how he came to identify as male while still in high school, came out and began his gender role change while serving in the Israeli armed forces, and finally told his family of his plans to transition as he began his higher education. At the end of his story, he evaluates his overall experience, much as Gerry and Angie did,

as generally positive (line 482). It is worth noting that John includes ‘getting access to hormones’ (line 505) and ‘going through [...] bureaucratic bullshit’ (lines 506–508) as part of the coming out experience, demonstrating that his narrative too is as much about the general process of assuming a male gender role as it is about telling others about the corresponding gender identity.

Excerpt 5: John

482 J: I just had a really a really positive experience
 483 in general with coming out [to folks, to my=
 484 LZ: [Mhm.
 485 J: =relatives, to folks in the army, to: ah my
 486 friends. Ah I mean I had some friends back
 487 from junior high that I was sort of still in touch
 488 with, [but then, everybody being in the military in=
 489 LZ: [Mhm.
 490 J: =different places, like, didn’t really have much time,
 491 to hang out, but also like, I would s- try to like
 492 still like be in touch with them?=
 493 LZ: Mhm.
 494 J: =And a lot of folks just sort of um dissipated,
 495 [uh in a sense, even though=
 496 LZ: [Mhm.
 497 J: =I (xxx) sort of try to make the effort to: uh
 498 not make that happen. But=
 499 LZ: Right.
 500 J: =I still have some friends from back then who are
 501 still pretty cool and who I still hang out with and it
 502 wasn’t a big deal at all. But yeah, but all in all,
 503 like, a very positive experience, just coming out
 504 and y’know bein’ able to get ac- I mean,
 505 getting access to hormones was: sort of a
 506 nightmare within itself [just going through=
 507 LZ: [Mhm.
 508 J: =different bureaucratic bullshit, [but eventually it=
 509 LZ: [Mhm.
 510 J: =did happen, so that that was that was good too. But
 511 um yeah.

As this segment of talk shows, John tends to use past tense verbs when evaluating his coming out experiences. For example, he says that he ‘just *had* a really positive experience in general with coming out’ (lines 482–483) and that while ‘getting access to hormones *was* sort of a nightmare within itself’ he concludes that ‘eventually it *did happen*, so that *was* good too’ (lines 508–510). This gives an impression quite different from that achieved by the use of present tense forms in Wood’s stories, indicating that the experiences John describes are

complete. John's story is not atypical in this regard; for example, Gerry makes a similar move when she notes that '[she] *did*' end up happier and better-adjusted as a result of her transition (excerpt 3, line 488).

Local ideologies

I have argued that there are significant differences between coming out as transgender and coming out as gay or lesbian, and that these differences are important when considering the linguistic form of coming out narratives. Yet perhaps the most striking dissimilarity between these groups – so much so that it served as the impetus for this project – is in the ideologies speakers draw on when discussing coming out. The most significant and pervasive of these ideological differences concerns what Rasmussen (2004) calls 'the coming out imperative'. This imperative, which has been one of the key tools of gay and lesbian activists, frames coming out as 'a valuable – if sometimes difficult – task, and [claims] that the act of coming out is likely to benefit the individual and their peers' (145). Rasmussen argues that the valorization of coming out relegates those who are not out to 'a zone of shame and exclusion' (144). While the focus of her paper is the role and obligations of queer educators, her critique can be extended to the force with which the imperative is applied across more general contexts. She also mentions the way the imperative acts to further marginalize those whose identities include multiple levels of oppression, such as people of color who are also sexual minorities, by privileging membership in the gay and lesbian community regardless of the consequences in other areas of an individual's life.

Rasmussen argues for the pervasiveness of the coming out imperative, and indeed it appears to be influential in the construction of coming out narratives. For example, Liang (1997) observed a tendency for speakers to present their former, closeted selves as deceptive and morally lacking protagonists. Similarly, Munt, Bassett and O'Riordan's (2002) investigation of coming out in an online lesbian community found that the majority of members' view of coming out was that it marked an individual as mature, brave, and possessing self-respect, suggesting that those who choose not to come out are lacking in these qualities. On the other hand, this was far from the case in the narratives of the transgender people with whom I spoke. While one participant did mention denial as a factor that kept him from coming out until his late thirties, the barrier that was mentioned most often was lack of access to transgender identities as culturally intelligible options. Furthermore, while declaration was certainly presented as a first step on a path toward a more honest and overall happier life, there was no invocation of the coming out imperative with regard to disclosure.

Because this research was prompted by an interest in this ideological issue, I asked each participant, after eliciting their narratives, where they stood on an issue that is frequently debated in many transgender communities: are transpeople morally or politically obliged to be openly transgender after transition, or is it equally valid to remain mostly stealth? Despite (or perhaps partly because of) the controversial nature of this topic, every participant in this study expressed a ‘live and let live’ attitude toward disclosure. Only two participants said that they thought it better for those who feel safe and comfortable disclosing to do so, and even these individuals said they don’t begrudge anyone the choice to be stealth, particularly in unfriendly climates. Several participants – including but not limited to those who themselves prefer to limit disclosure – explicitly mentioned that not every transgender person wants to be openly transgender, or sees their transgender status as relevant to their identity, regardless of how accepting or understanding the communities in which they live. Additionally, nearly every person I spoke with mentioned the ubiquitous danger of disclosing transgender status, even in relatively queer-friendly contexts – such as when Elizabeth made reference to the 2002 murder of San Francisco Bay Area transgender teenager Gwen Araujo, which shocked many residents of the area who had assumed it to be a safe place for all members of the LGBT community.

This study illustrates that transgender people cannot be uncritically grouped with gays, lesbians, and/or bisexuals in social scientific research, but the conflation of these communities happens at least as frequently in non-academic contexts. In fact, researchers who have treated ‘LGBT’ as a cohesive and even homogenous community for study have likely been influenced by gay and lesbian activism that has sought – for what are arguably valid historical and political reasons – to be inclusive of others oppressed as sexual and gender minorities. Yet if organizations truly wish to be inclusive of and serve transgender communities, they must recognize the ways in which both the experiences and the ideologies of these communities differ, or else risk reproducing the marginalization and silencing of transgender people within those few spaces that actively claim to oppose transphobia. For example, as Rasmussen points out, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) in the United States is probably the most influential institutional promoter of the coming out imperative through the organization’s National Coming Out Day project and accompanying website, which maintains dozens of online articles encouraging people to come out. A number of these webpages are directed toward specific communities like bisexuals, people of color, Spanish speakers, transgender people, and allies of the LGBT community. The HRC promotes coming out as a necessary step in eliminating homophobia and transphobia, and maintains at the time of this writing no fewer than seven distinct web articles dealing specifically with coming out as transgender. Yet none of these discussions acknowledge the

special issues facing transpeople after transition, nor even the notion that coming out as transgender might involve something other than revealing one's gender identity. The HRC equates being out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual with being out as transgender, and the coming out imperative is applied with the same force to all transgender people, pre- and post-transition. One article, entitled 'Coming out as transgender: A lifelong journey' discusses coming out as transgender in terms that recall Liang and Wood's discussion of processuality. While this article does acknowledge that 'being out as transgender is not always easy', it claims that,

[being out is] the only way to educate others about gender identity and expression. Facing possible rejection and even violence, transgender people must continue coming out to friends, family, co-workers and community members so that they can, in turn, become more accepting and supportive. (Human Rights Campaign 2009b)

It cannot be doubted that the sacrifices made by openly gay and openly transgender people have paved the way for countless others to follow similar paths. However, the fact remains that not all paths are identical. John objected to the assumption that one person's visibility will necessarily be representative of other transgender people's experience. For instance, the growing visibility of transgender-identifying people has created greater room, at least in some contexts, for transgender as a distinct gender identity,¹² but this visibility does not necessarily create greater social acceptance for the identities of transpeople like John, who see themselves primarily as men or women and might prefer a certain type of invisibility. Furthermore, the HRC's claim that being openly transgender is the only way to educate people on transgender issues diminishes the significant role that non-transgender people can play in combating transphobia. The mismatch between the ideological stance of the HRC and that of many members of the transgender community demonstrates the problematic nature of treating the LGBT acronym as representing a cohesive community outside, as well as inside, academia – particularly with regard to coming out.

Discussion: characterizing the genre

In the preceding analysis, I have argued that the way coming out narratives have been previously characterized fails to account for the coming out stories told by transgender people. Of course, these arguments do not undermine the observations made by Wood and Liang for the communities in which they were working. In fact, my analysis can be seen as providing further support for Wood's claims, in that the features she identifies as marking the processuality

of coming out are absent from these transgender narratives in which coming out is not processual in the same sense. However, this article does illustrate that Liang and Wood's work has given an incomplete picture of the coming out narrative genre as a whole. There is no reason to suppose that either Liang or Wood assumed the patterns they observed would hold true across the queer community; indeed, Liang's observations about the differences between the narratives of White and Asian-American gay men (1997:305–307) suggests that she is sensitive to the possibility that expectations for this genre will vary. However, other authors have more overtly assumed uniformity in the coming out experience, making these differences worth noting if only to underscore the frequently forgotten diversity of the LGBT community.

Rather than attempting to synthesize the commonalities across stories told by these diverse communities of speakers, including those whose narratives have yet to be studied from a linguistic perspective (such as bisexuals), I propose that the coming out narrative genre can be characterized more productively along functional, rather than formal, lines. As I have discussed, transgender and homosexual narratives share the task of describing the process of coming to have, and making sense of, a marginalized identity. Coming out narratives are largely about coming to *be*, and they are stories worth telling because of the challenges inherent in coming to embrace a contested identity. These stories all describe how speakers came to understand their feelings of otherness in relation to normative constructs of gender and sexuality, and how this understanding came to be realized socially as an identity. Yet these communities produce understandings of their experiences and identities in different ways, which leaves the coming out narrative to function as a venue for the enactment of local forms of identity work. This is exactly what is happening when, as Gerry described in excerpt 1, speakers claim that their current gender identity has been present and unchanging since early childhood; through asserting a single and unwavering gender identity, speakers are claiming a kind of authentication that is highly valued in transgender communities. That is, many transpeople do not see themselves as women becoming men or vice versa, and may even assert that it is impossible to change one's gender, insofar as gender is conceptualized as an internal, psychological, or even spiritual – rather than social or biological – state.¹³ In appealing to this system of identity, a speaker authenticates their gender by invoking an ideological norm given great weight within the transgender community. Another form of community-specific identity work is found in the way that similar experiences might be assigned different meanings by members of different communities. For example, the kind of childhood gender non-conformity that might lead transgender people to claim a lifelong sense of themselves as male or female would almost certainly be interpreted through a different ideological lens by a gay or lesbian speaker.

Beyond enacting and legitimating a particular gender or sexual identity, appealing to locally salient ideologies may accomplish other kinds of social work as well. Most immediately, as in many other sociocultural contexts, performing a narrative according to these kinds of in-group norms can be a source of community solidarity; in this case solidarity can be built not only around shared identification with a gender or sexual category, but also around shared resources and tactics for making sense of, and authenticating, these highly contested identities. While the creation of solidarity is an intuitively obvious function of coming out narratives, and has been speculated on by other scholars such as Liang (1994, 1997), Wood (1997) and Pugh (1998), stories in this genre could potentially act in several other capacities as well. First, it is worth noting that transgender coming out narratives are not always told in in-group settings. I asked each of the participants I spoke with where else they had told similar coming out stories, and the sum of these responses represents quite a diverse variety of contexts: churches, employee diversity training sessions, college classrooms, therapists' offices, and workshops for medical providers. In most of these cases, the job of the narrator is to educate listeners through personal narrative. In some sense, the narratives I collected also served this function in that, as I mentioned earlier, speakers seemed aware of both their immediate (in-group) and eventual broader (out-group) audiences.¹⁴ Coming out narratives provide ideal opportunities to educate non-transgender listeners because of the way they introduce and provide support for the ideologies of the transgender community through personal experience. Speakers will often talk about their past selves as being subscribers to dominant gender ideologies until learning about the existence of alternative systems. If speakers are persuasive – and their audiences open to being persuaded – an account of the experiences that led the narrator to doubt and ultimately reject those dominant ideologies may be sufficient to cause listeners to question them as well.¹⁵ A similar type of ideological positioning can be observed in the tendency for gay speakers in Liang's study to promote the coming out imperative by casting their former, closeted selves as morally lacking.

Similarly, transgender coming out narratives serve to help new members become culturally competent within the transgender community. The orientation speakers display to their community's generic expectations acts as an important form of socialization for newly declared transgender people as they begin to shape their own coming out narratives by deciding which experiences are relevant and how to make sense of them. A number of participants in this study explicitly mentioned the importance of exposure to other transgender people's stories in helping them to validate and understand their own experiences.¹⁶ Because of the inseparability of this genre from the dominant ideologies of the community, the socialization provided by coming out narratives prepares

members not only to share their own stories as communicatively competent users of this genre, but also to interact as culturally competent members of the transgender community. Knowing this genre means being familiar with the basic tenets embraced by this group in order to create a legitimate and intelligible space for transgender identities. The striking similarity in the ideologies drawn on by my participants, despite the diversity in the particulars of their identities, testifies to this form of shared knowledge.

The connection between generic and ideological expectations runs so deep that these ideologies may in fact directly shape speakers' expectations of the coming out narrative genre. For example, while Gerry suggested that claiming early childhood awareness of one's adult gender identity is common among transgender speakers, none of the participants in this study made such an assertion. It is entirely possible that the stories Gerry has heard simply differ from those that comprise my data, but the fact that this form of authentication is considered extremely powerful by members of the transgender community suggests that Gerry's idea of a prototypical coming out story may not be based purely on the statistical trends of previously heard narratives. The norms speakers invoke when telling their stories may be based as much on what they imagine an 'ideal' transgender coming out narrative to be as it is on what the majority of such narrators actually say.

However, it is not simply the display of pre-existing norms that occurs in these narratives; each telling becomes part of the body of stories previously heard by listeners, and thus can also represent the negotiation, or even subversion, of the community's expectations. If this were not so, we would wonder why, in the example just discussed, Gerry would invoke such a potentially strong authenticating move only to state that it doesn't apply to her life experiences – that she herself was not aware of a female gender identity as a child. It seems that such a reference would destabilize, rather than support, her claim to a female identity. However, as Briggs and Bauman (1992) have argued, speakers may choose either to minimize or to maximize gaps between generic precedents and their own performances toward accomplishing different rhetorical and interactional ends. In this case, Gerry is maximizing and explicitly commenting on one such gap; what might this accomplish, assuming that Gerry did not hope to undermine her identity as a woman? First, it seems that she is proposing that while this claim may be typical of transgender coming out stories, it is not a necessary one. As I mentioned earlier, Gerry's happiness as a woman serves as its own form of authentication of her previous gender dysphoria, and so to call attention to the relatively late development of her awareness of her gender identity is to point out that one can be a 'successful' transsexual without having had this supposedly typical experience. Thus, she is simultaneously referencing a norm and contesting its power, actively reshaping the very generic convention

she invokes. This kind of negotiation has been characterized by Bauman and Briggs (1990) as a defining quality of performance; because of the heightened reflexivity performance invites from both performers and audiences, a space is created 'that invites critical reflection on communicative processes' (60), such as this particular ideologically-driven generic convention that Gerry invokes. The coming out narrative genre seems to be an ideal setting in which to advance critiques on numerous social levels – against the discourses of powerful members of our society (as Wood 1999 discusses), the mainstream gay and lesbian community, and even the transgender community's own ideological tendencies.

In recent years, scholars such as Cameron and Kulick (2003) have challenged linguists studying sexuality to put a greater emphasis on how heterosexuality is produced as a normative social position, rather than focusing primarily on the practices of the sexually marginalized. However, the focus on queer or otherwise non-normative subjectivity that has come to characterize studies of language and sexuality continues to be missing in many ways from the study of language and gender. Although it has been a decade since Kulick (1999) called for more research on the linguistic practices of transgender people and even longer since Bing and Bergvall (1996) made a similar plea, there remains a serious dearth of inquiries on how members of these communities talk. Great insights have clearly been gained from the study of language and gender variance in the forms of Indian *hijras* (e.g. Hall 1997), Tongan *fakaleiti* (e.g. Besnier 2003), Brazilian *travesti* (e.g. Borba and Ostermann 2007; Kulick 1998) and Nigerian *'yan daudu* (e.g. Gaudio 2009). But it is surprising that a field like language and gender, which very often makes English-speaking women and men its focus, has rarely taken advantage of the potential insights to be gained from the study of how gender is produced and managed discursively by English-speaking transgender people. In this article, I have shown how transgender speakers make use of what might be thought of as a queer linguistic practice – the coming out narrative – in ways that distinguish them from sexual minorities like gays and lesbians. Rather than primarily challenging heteronormativity (as Wood 1999 describes in the case of lesbian speakers),¹⁷ transgender people's coming out narratives chiefly act as contexts in which to negotiate ideologies about gender, identity, and authenticity as they circulate on multiple levels of community membership, reflecting transgender people's status as trans, as queer, and as women and men. The study of transgender subjectivities, then, has the potential to shed light both on the workings of gender as a social and ideological phenomenon and on the nature of queerness as a concept that spans both sexual and gender-based marginalization.

Conclusion

For the wealth of literature that has been published on coming out, little work has been done to reconcile dominant notions of coming out as gay or lesbian with the experiences of those on the margins of the queer community. Indeed, there seems to have been little awareness that such a reconciliation is necessary; gays and lesbians have often been seen as unproblematic representatives of the entire LGBT population. Some authors have gone as far as to reproduce the 'silent T' phenomenon wherein the LGBT acronym is used despite an exclusive focus on issues of sexual orientation. I have argued that how coming out itself is conceptualized must be expanded to fully account for the experiences of transgender people, and that the use of certain lexical items, namely *disclose* and *stealth*, reflect the limitations many transpeople perceive in the established coming out discourse. By introducing a distinction between the processes of declaration and disclosure, I have presented a tool that may enable a more nuanced examination of coming out as transgender. In the case of these narratives, the distinction has enabled and elucidated my argument that transgender coming out narratives differ from those told by gays and lesbians.

Moreover, I have demonstrated that the different forms that coming out narratives take across the communities who make use of this genre reflect the various ways that coming out is experienced by members of these disparate, yet socially and historically linked, groups. For the transgender people in this study, coming out was epitomized – if not characterized exclusively – by the process of declaration, which is complete when a person assumes a social gender role matching their gender identity. For gays and lesbians, on the other hand, the ever-continuing nature of coming out seems to be key. Despite variation in terms of how coming out narratives are enacted by members of these communities, they do seem to be making use of a single genre. Yet this genre is not unified by form or content as much as by function. For both homosexual and transgender speakers, the coming out narrative serves as a site in which speakers authenticate and legitimate highly stigmatized identities. As in many verbal performances, this kind of identity work is realized through the display and negotiation of local norms for the genre, potentially including either the reification or subversion of these conventions. Thus, the capacity of this genre is not only to serve as authentication for the individual's sense of self, nor simply to build solidarity between members of oppressed communities, but to contest the ideologies that sustain the very marginalization and denaturalization of queer identities that makes coming out necessary in the first place.

About the author

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Notes

- 1 An early version of this analysis was presented at the 1st Interdisciplinary Conference on Culture, Language, and Social Practice (CLASP) held at the University of Colorado, Boulder on October 5–7, 2007. First and foremost I would like to thank the volunteers who generously shared their coming out stories with me for this project. Many thanks are also due to my advisor, Kira Hall, for her wisdom and encouragement throughout the writing of this paper and the research on which it is based. Thanks additionally to Andy Cowell, Joshua Raclaw, Jenny Davis, Elijah Edelman, Lori Heintzelman, Bonnie McElhinny, and two anonymous *Gender and Language* reviewers for their helpful conversations and feedback on this paper. Any remaining errors or shortcomings are, of course, my own.
- 2 For the remainder of this article, I use the term *gender identity* to refer to individuals' perception of themselves as men or women – in other words, the gender with which a person self-identifies. I will use the phrase *gender role* to refer to the gender that a person lives as – for example, whether they wear masculine or feminine clothing, whether they and others make use of masculine or feminine pronouns and other forms of reference, and whether they are perceived to be a man or woman by others. *To transition* is a verb used to refer to the process by which a person changes their gender role through medical, social, and/or legal means. All of this terminology is common place both in transgender communities and in the academic literature on transgender issues.
- 3 This emphasis on processuality can be found in non-linguistic discussions of coming out as well (e.g. Morrow 2006).
- 4 Although the use of the term *European* as a synonym for *White* has become controversial, here I use it in order to be inclusive of research participants like John, who identified with the European ethnic group *Ashkenazi*, but did not describe himself as *White*. Thanks to Bonnie McElhinny for bringing this terminological issue to my attention.
- 5 *Genderqueer* is a term that refers to individuals who identify outside of the male/female binary. It includes people who identify as members of a third gender, as non-gendered or bi-gendered, and a virtually limitless number of other identities. However, many genderqueer people live in and even express a strong preference for either a male or female gender role in their everyday lives. Michael, like the other participants in this study, could be described as

transsexual from a medical perspective, lives as a man for practical purposes, and sees himself as being genderqueer ‘from a male perspective’, rather than a female one (cf. Cromwell 1999:130).

- 6 I thank an anonymous *Gender and Language* reviewer for suggesting these references.
- 7 See Cromwell (1999:22–24) for a discussion of these terms as they were used during the 1990s; the principal change I have observed since the time of his research is that *transgender* is no longer used in strict opposition to *transsexual* in the way that he describes. Today, many people identify with both terms, or with the ambiguous shortened form *trans*.
- 8 It is worth noting that the recruiting text for this study invited anyone with a transgender coming out story to participate, regardless of gender identity or status with regard to transition. However, despite the diverse ways in which the participants in this study experienced their identities as transpeople, they could each be classified as transsexuals in a medicalized model of identity.
- 9 Transcription conventions:
 - [] overlapping speech
 - (()) extralinguistic actions (e.g. laughter, coughing)
 - = latching utterances, continued from previous line without pause
 - speech is cut off abruptly
 - : lengthened phone
 - (word) speech was unclear; transcription represents author’s best guess
 - (xxx) unintelligible speech
- 10 This is not to suggest, however, that *being* transgender is not processual, or that it takes place over a discrete period of time. While some individuals do stop identifying as transgender after transition, at least two participants in this study – including Michael – explicitly mentioned that for them, being transgender was a life-long journey.
- 11 *Gender dysphoria* is a psycho-medical term used for diagnosing Gender Identity Disorder, but is also widely used within the community to describe feelings of discomfort, distress, or sadness in a gender role.
- 12 This can be seen in, for example, forms and surveys that offer three options for gender: male, female, or transgender.
- 13 While many people who reject transgender identities also believe that gender cannot be changed, their view is of course quite different from the one I allude to here. The most dominant perspective seems to be that gender is permanently fixed according to one’s sex as assigned at birth. In contrast,

some people who accept transsexuals as members of their gender of identification may only do so when an individual has had genital surgery. In the latter case, gender is seen as corresponding to genitals, but is also seen as potentially changeable (to the degree that genitals can be surgically modified). Transgender people, on the other hand, may espouse the view that a person's internal, 'true' gender is unchangeable, but what can be changed is an individual's social gender role and/or biological sex.

- 14 An interesting exception to this was Elizabeth: despite the fact that I advertised my own transgender status in the recruiting text for this project, Elizabeth skimmed the ad and was not aware of this fact until I made reference to it at the end of our interview.
- 15 I believe that Bacon (1998) underestimates the rhetorical persuasion that takes place during coming out when she says that one need only claim a queer identity to have that identity accepted by a listener. These claims are not always so easily accepted, particularly for transgender people, who are often claiming not (only) to be queer, but to be men or women despite evidence to the contrary.
- 16 Of course, not everyone finds such solace in the communities they seek out. People of color, for example, often feel alienated in mostly-white transgender communities; likewise, genderqueer-identified individuals frequently object to the way many transgender communities accept, reproduce, and even police the male/female binary. Those who do not feel validated by the ideologies dominant within the transgender community may seek out or form other networks that better address their needs and experiences.
- 17 Though certainly a number of these speakers also challenged heteronormativity, as my anecdote about John's mother assuming he would only be attracted to women illustrates.

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