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## **BULLETIN OF APPLIED TRANSGENDER STUDIES**

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The *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies* (BATS) is the leading venue for academic research addressing the social, cultural, and political issues facing transgender and gender minority communities across the globe. The journal offers a platinum open access forum for research of all theoretical and methodological approaches oriented toward the identification, analysis, and improvement of the material conditions of transgender life.

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# “I Have a Lot Working Against Me”: Trans Precarious Labourers in Canada

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While we know that transgender people are not a monolith, the spectrum of labour precarity that exists for trans workers as well as the additional factors that lead some trans people into deeper levels of life precariousness remain understudied. In this article, we consider how employment precarity impacts trans peoples' quality of life, and how trans peoples' social and material conditions mediate their overall life precarity alongside their experiences of labour precarity. This article is based on 55 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, including 41 interviews with trans precarious workers and 14 with service providers who have worked with trans people experiencing precarious labour. Our analysis highlights participants embodied experiences of labour precarity and explores how varied positions of

marginality and material barriers among trans people mediate the kinds of precarity they face. Examining participants' recollections and personal narrations, we explored relationships among poverty, disability, migration, gender, and labour precarity as well as trans workers' deployments of hope, agency, and resistance.

**KEYWORDS** precarious labour; transgender; migration; disability; labour

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Two-spirit, transgender, nonbinary, and other gender-diverse people's experiences (hereafter shortened to trans) too often remain invisible or sidelined in discussions of precarious labour (Alberti et al. 2012; Liu 2019).<sup>1</sup> The focus of past literature about LGBTQI+ workers primarily discusses sexual orientation in the workplace rather than gender diversity (Thoroughgood, Sawyer, and Webster 2017). Only recently has scholarship begun to examine the distinctive experiences of trans people who find themselves in precarious labour situations. At the same time, precarious labour theories remain relatively absent in much of the literature exploring trans labour experiences (Schilt and Lagos 2017), despite trans people facing disproportionately higher rates of precarious work (Vipond 2024). Furthermore, research on trans people has often perpetuated a "white homogeneous perspective" (Tompkins 2011, 155) and has neglected to address additional axes of power such as class, race, ability, and citizenship (Ortiz 2014; Roediger 1999; Stryker 1998). Finally, while we know that trans people are not a monolith (David 2015; Schilt 2010), the spectrum of labour precarity that exists for trans workers as well as the additional factors that lead some trans people into deeper levels of life precariousness remain understudied.

In this article, we consider not only how employment precarity impacts trans peoples' quality of life, but also how trans peoples' social and material conditions mediate their overall life precarity in addition to their labour precarity. Through in-depth interviews, we asked trans precarious workers, and service providers who have worked with trans people, to reflect on why certain trans people face unprecedented levels of precarity. Examining participants' recollections and personal narrations, we explored relationships among poverty, disability, migration, gender, and labour precarity as well as trans workers' deployments of hope, agency, and resistance.

1 When speaking broadly about participants in our sample or about issues that impact Two-spirit, transgender, nonbinary, and other-gender diverse people collectively authors have chosen to use trans as shorthand. Though, it is important to note that not all Two-spirit, nonbinary, and otherwise gender-diverse people consider themselves transgender, the participants in our sample self-located their gender identities under the trans umbrella during initial recruitment. However, as our article will discuss, the idiosyncratic gender identities, embodiments, and social locations of the trans people in our sample impact the kind of precarity they experience. As such, we used detailed and specific language about identities when discussing specific participants and when relevant referencing past literature.

## PRECARIOUS LABOUR

Precarious labour is generally understood as any form of employment that involves “atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low job tenure, poor working conditions and risks of ill health” (Cranford, Vosko, and Zukewich 2003, 455). These main elements of precarious labour are in contrast to Standard Employment Relations (SER), which include full-time, year-round employment with extensive statutory benefits and entitlements where one can expect to be employed indefinitely by a singular employer (Cranford, Vosko, and Zukewich 2003). Non-SER employment increased in the early 1960s in Westernized economies during a period of expanding neoliberalism and reconfigured local labour relations and employment structures (Walia 2021). However, while scholars can agree that precarious labour is an assemblage of interconnected problems broadly associated with labour insecurity (Standing 2011; Vosko 2010.; Vosko et al. 2009), the definition of labour precarity remains in constant flux (Arnold and Bongiovi 2013; Kalleberg and Hewison 2013), leaving scholars unable to agree on a universally accepted definition of labour precarity (Lobrespud 2020).

Due to this ambiguity, many labour scholars have sought to differentiate between the many dimensions of precariousness, creating models of distinctions between precarious work (Hurley et al. 2013; Kalleberg 2011; Standing 2011; Vosko et al. 2009), precarious workers (Anderson 2010; Kretsos 2010), and overall life precarity (Anderson 2010; Arnold and Bongiovi 2013). Past research has shown that many of these dimensions of precarity do in fact overlap and, in many cases, are intrinsically connected (Breman 2013; Kelleberg and Hewison 2013). However, as Campbell and Price (2015) make clear, being engaged in precarious work does not necessary automatically classify someone as a precarious worker, nor does it constitute life precarity; the effects of employment precarity exists on a continuum. Put another way, it is not the nature of the work itself that leads to precarity; it is the social location and social relations of the worker that moderate, or exacerbate, the risk of general conditions of life precariousness one may face. For example, a migrant worker is someone who may be “hyper precarious” (Lewis et al. 2015) or someone who is at risk of extreme forms of labour exploitation, in addition to being subject to other social conditions of insecurity based on structural inequality. Hyper-precariousness may lead someone to precarity in other areas such as housing, welfare, personal relationships, or mental well-being (Anderson 2010; Arnold and Bongiovi 2013).

Feminist and queer labour scholars have further extended this framework. Johnson (2018) and Thompson et al. (2021) have drawn on Judith Butler’s work to conceptualize precariousness, understanding it as an “embodied feeling and social condition that emerges when one faces marginalization and injustice, which is constantly being reshaped by shifting identity positions, spaces and institutions” (Thompson et al. 2021, 2). According to Butler (2004), people’s experience of precarity is uneven in that some lives are valued more than others. Moreover, certain institutions create more precarious environments for people based on their gender, sexuality, race, class, age, ability, and nationality (Leahy et al. 2018). Furthermore, research has shown that non-normative identities, embodiments, and performances put people at further risk to experience precarity (Butler 2004; Doan 2014; Gorman-Murray et al. 2014).

## TRANS LABOUR

Recent scholarship has shown that trans people face additional workplace challenges beyond those discussed within the mainstream literature on labour precarity (Schilt 2010). Binary and nonbinary trans people often carry the extra burden of having to navigate concerns over disclosing their gender identity at work, being misgendered, and they may be required to navigate on-the-job gender conformity demands that can have detrimental effects on their well-being and their careers (Dellinger and Williams 1997). The identities of gender non-conforming workers are often seen as illegible or are invalidated through normative workplace gender expectations; cisgender employees and coworkers have been found to largely assume sex as recorded at birth as the benchmark against which the gendered performance of trans people is evaluated, rewarded, and penalized (Sumerau, Mathers, and Moon 2019). Additionally, those who are known to be trans at their workplace can be simultaneously held to the gendered expectations of their sex as recorded at birth and to the expectations of their current gender (Irving 2017; Schilt and Connell 2007). A 2020 report by Baboolall found that up to 50% of trans people do not feel comfortable “coming out” as transgender at work because of these concerns. For many trans workers, expectations of gender conformity are double-edged. In fact, Jones (2023) coined the term “cisgender workspaces” to analyze how cisgenderism and cissexism shape workplaces in creating explicit and implicit forms of exclusion for trans workers.<sup>2</sup>

However, we also know that social identity factors, such as gender identity, play a significant role in determining the likelihood of certain groups working under more precarious labour conditions (Gore and LeBaron 2019). Past research has shown that trans people experience disproportionately high rates of unemployment and precarious work (Lawson 2020; Vipond 2020). The report, *Being Transgender at Work*, found that trans people are twice as likely to be unemployed than their cisgender counterparts (Baboolall 2020). Additionally, trans people face higher levels of overall life precarity, economic hardship, discrimination, familial disapproval, and homelessness, all of which make job access and job stability more difficult to obtain (National Transgender Discrimination Survey 2011). Specific research regarding trans workers’ experience of precarious labour remains limited.

Past trans scholarship focused on trans labour precarity has primarily concentrated on how transgender people navigate gender expression at work (Irving 2017); workplace experiences (Mills 2022); and workers’ experiences of fear (Mills 2022), anxiety, and comfort under precarious work conditions (Thompson et al. 2021). So, while there are a growing number of studies on the kinds of labour precarity trans workers experience and its effects, far less research has been dedicated to exploring the conditions that lead trans people to precarious work in the first place, or the intersections of marginality that lead precarious workers into a state of hyper-precarity. A noteworthy exception is Kinitz, Ross, MacEachen, and Gesinks’s 2024 publication, which begins to illuminate the cyclic relationship between mental health and precarious work.

According to Westbrook (2020), not all transgender people are equally at risk of

2 Cisgenderism is an ideology rooted in gender essentialism and presumes that all gender is tied to sex assigned at birth. According to Jones, cissexism is “the systematic privileging of cisgender people” (2023, 2).

violence, and not all trans people experience precarious labour (Thompson et al. 2021). So, what factors make certain trans people more precarious than others? To answer this, we first highlight the emotional and embodied experiences of trans workers, exploring the variables that limit their ability to leave precarious labour. Second, we highlight the material and social conditions that leave trans people in a general state of hyper-precarity, or what is more colloquially referred to as life precarity. Lastly, we explore the often-neglected narrations of trans resistance and hope that emerge from living under conditions of labour precarity and overall life precarity.

## **METHODS**

This article is based on 55 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, including 41 interviews with trans precarious workers and 14 with service providers who have worked with trans people experiencing precarious labour. We asked community contacts working in employment and trans services to circulate and advertise our eligibility survey, which was also posted to Chair in Transgender Studies' social media pages. To qualify, potential participants had to have resided in Canada at the time, self-identified as transgender, nonbinary, Two-spirit, or otherwise gender diverse, and have experienced some measure of employment precarity. More information on the eligibility survey can be found in Appendix 1. After completing the eligibility survey those who qualified were sent an email invitation to participate in a 45–60-minute interview about their experiences with precarious labour. trans interviewees were paid a CAD\$50 honorarium for their time. Interviewees were asked to provide demographic information, to share information about their current employment situation, experiences being trans at work, their overall life precarity, and to reflect on what they thought should be done to improve trans employment precarity. During the interview recruitment process, we targeted recruitment of workers of color, immigrants, unemployed workers, disabled workers, and those who worked in illicit labour markets. A descriptive statistic chart which includes the details the demographic information of the workers we interviewed can be found in the appendix.

Trans participants were encouraged to check all applicable options regarding their gender identity and job sector. As such, many of our participants chose multiple gender categories that best fit their individual trans identify. Overall, 29% of our sample self-identified as transgender, 37% as nonbinary, 5% as Two-spirit, and 24% as other/gender diverse. Some participants chose other gendered terms to self-describe their identity instead or in addition to these broader identity categories, specifically 22% of our sample identified as trans feminine or trans women and 12% identified as trans masculine or trans men. As a result of our targeted recruitment, 41% of our sample identified as people of color (POC), 29% of our sample identified as Indigenous, 29% of our sample identified as migrants, 22% of our sample identified as disabled/a person with a disability, and 20% of our sample were unemployed at the time of their interview.

The service providers we interviewed were recruited from LGBTQI+, trans-specific, and labour organizations that focus on outreach and training. Organizations and service providers were identified from community-based listservs and by way of referrals we received from community networks, collaborators, and contacts, who work

in related fields. More detailed information about the service providers' positions and organizations can be found in the appendix.

Interviews with service providers were conducted over Zoom and lasted for about 45-60 minutes. Service providers were not paid for their time but were offered interview slots during their scheduled paid work hours. Participants were asked a series of questions about their experiences working with trans clients, trans peoples' overall precarity, trans peoples' working conditions, and about barriers and current supports that exist for trans people experiencing precarious labour.

Interview recordings were sent out for professional transcription and then analyzed using NVivo coding software. Data analysis included multiple rounds of coding: an initial round for general categories regarding work precarity, then two additional rounds regarding trans specific precarity and overall life precarity. Codes were based on a coding system created by our research team using themes from our previous in-depth literature reviews on trans employment, precarious labour, and from organic patterns that emerged in the data. Specifically, we noted multiple forms of precarity including traditional work and labour precarity, trans discrimination and micro-aggressions at work, as well as participants' overall life precarity (including various measures of material disadvantage as well as participants' lived experiences of inequality and oppression). From this analysis, we found that, in addition to general emotional and embodied experiences of labour precarity, a focus on participants' multiple positions of marginality, material barriers, and trans peoples' retrospective narrations about their experiences, gave us a deeper and more nuanced understanding of labour precarity.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Emotional and embodied experiences of precarity**

When asked about the impact of trans people's emotional and embodied experiences of precarity, the participants in our sample explained that trans people frequently remain in jobs that can be unfulfilling, unsafe, and unstable. For example, as Calvin, a community engagement and outreach professional working at a LGBTQI+ labour organization, specified, "We have worked with many trans folks who are deeply unhappy in their job or in really unsafe workplaces, who often feel like they don't have any other choice."

When asked further about why trans people do not feel they have other choices and remain in less-than-ideal employment conditions, many participants shared they often feel trapped in their current employment positions, because they experience an enormous amount of fear over whether or not they will be successful in securing another job. They had concerns over whether being trans would impede their ability to get an interview or a job offer. For example, Sean, a trans masculine gig worker of color who recently migrated to Canada from Egypt, described, "I'm always concerned about the ways I will present in an interview because I am visibly trans." Sean believed that, in addition to his being trans, his race might impact his chances of getting an interview as well: "and to top it off my name is very brown sounding, so I feel like between that, and being trans, I have a lot working against me."

Sean isn't the only interviewee who reported these kinds of concerns: seventeen

trans people we interviewed shared that they were constantly anxious over whether prospective employers would be okay with their gender. These concerns left many trans people unsure of whether they should disclose their gender identity at all. For example, Eli, a white nonbinary non-profit-agency worker, expressed that there is a double bind for many trans people when navigating the employment process:

It's kind of like you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. If you tell them [employers] you're trans they may not even hire you, but if get hired and later they clock that you are not cis[gender], it could be even worse... The process of deciding if you're going to disclose, and if that will impact your ability to have a stable income, is really difficult.

One of our participants spoke about how the double bind of disclosure feels like a lose-lose situation for them when navigating the employment process. Quinn, a white trans masculine nonbinary gig worker who started their professional career as a curator in the arts, said that once they started transitioning it was difficult for them to get a job in their field:

Starting transition most definitely affected my ability to get a job. Not in terms of my capabilities, but in terms of job prospects. My income dropped dramatically since I started HRT because [before] I could get hired in my field... I was someone with an established career and now there isn't a sure path forward.

While Quinn's later-in-life transition impacted their ability to work in their field, another interviewee, Greyson, a white trans masculine entry-level worker, asserted that a job interview abruptly ended when the employer found out that they were trans: "I had a job offer verbally, but then I asked if they had gender-neutral bathrooms... and she [the interviewer] was, like, are you transgender? ...Sorry I can't offer you this job."

Greyson believed that their question about gender-neutral bathrooms outed them to their employer and ultimately led to their job offer being revoked. Consequently, Greyson's experience is just one illustration of the many kinds of responses trans workers fear if/when their employer learns their gender identity.

Many participants in our sample explained that disclosure is not always something that someone can choose, and that certain embodiments readily "out" participants without the option of choosing when and how they would like to share this with employers. This was especially the case for those in our sample with non-normative and non-cis-conforming embodiments as well as for many of the trans women and trans femme/feminine participants in our sample. However, for some of the participants in our sample, whose trans' identities were not initially clocked by employers, or had documentation that coincided with their gender identity and perceived gender embodiment, shared that despite the initial privileged of getting to choose if and when to disclose their trans identity, there remained a certain amount of fear that their employer many find out about their gender identity eventually and become hostile. For example, Gavin, a service provider who works with LGBTQI+ immigrants and refugees, explained that many trans people fear more than just being fired if their employer finds out that they are trans:

A trans man I was working with in a fish plant felt it was important nobody knew he was trans. He went to great effort to keep it a secret with chest binding etc. He had a lot of mental anxiety and was certain if

anyone found out he would be assaulted.

According to Gavin, his client believed his bodily safety depended upon no one knowing that he was trans (Schilt 2011) and therefore went to great lengths to keep his trans identity concealed at work so as to reduce the risk of violence he could face. Another service provider, Janet, who worked at a labour union, declared that these fears are not unfounded and that, in her experience, trans people who are out do face unprecedented rates of violence at work: “trans people have a valid fear of violence if they come out, or are outed, at work, either by their inability to pass, or by their coworkers... what I’ve seen is that, people do get hurt. Especially trans women.” Janet continued by telling a story about a past client with whom she had worked:

[her client] was attacked and assaulted at work. Her, and her family, had to leave town. Mind you, this company was a single monopoly entity in a small town. For some context, she was deeply involved in that company, she was an asset, and yet, after she transitioned and people there found out she was trans, she encountered so much violence. She had no other choice but to leave town after, because it was a very small town, and everyone knew. So, how was she going to get hired anywhere? It was heartbreaking.

The story Janet shared about her client highlights the reality that, due to transmisogyny (Serano 2007), Trans feminine people, specifically trans women, will often face more violence than others due to their specific gender identity and gender expression (Westbrook 2020). In Janet’s client’s case, her ability to find future work was restricted due to the company’s monopoly and financial stronghold on the town in which she lived, forcing her and her family to have to relocate for the sake of her safety and livelihood.

We want to be clear that while the severity of this client’s case is not emblematic of the kinds of experience all trans people face in the workplace, it is representative of the experiences many of the trans precarious workers we interviewed shared. Specifically, 52% of the trans people we interviewed shared that they had personally experienced physical or sexual violence and/or harassment at work. Moreover, this experience is characteristic of the kind of experiences that most people in our sample feared they *could* have in the labour market. In many cases, when we asked these participants where their fears came from, it was often a combination of their own personal experiences, as well as experiences they had heard or read about that had happened to other trans people.

For example, as Salem, a white nonbinary sex worker, expressed,  
Doing work like this, you are constantly surrounded by the threat and the possibility of violence. You hear stories. You have your own stories... sometimes I get paranoid. Am I safe? Can I continue doing this? But then it always comes down to well, I’m broke, I need the money.

Similarly, Cynthia, a Mexican trans woman working as a maid, pondered aloud, “People ask me... if it’s so bad, why don’t you just leave? But there is a lot of fear, you think, this place is awful... but what is the next place going to be like? Will it be worse?”

Cynthia’s comment illuminates a common theme that emerged in our data. More than half of the trans precarious workers whom we interviewed shared that they have anxiety that their future work conditions and experiences could potentially be worse

for them than those they had already experienced. These fears often caused them to remain stuck in employment situations where they were experiencing distress, mistreatment, and overall employment precarity with no clear pathway out.

### **Material precarity, disability, and migration**

Employment precarity and overall life precarity are best understood as interdependent and the trans people in our sample identified a plethora of additional life barriers that contributed to their overall employment precarity. While past research has primarily focused on the relationship between precarious employment and overall quality of life (Benach et al. 2018), much less research has focused on the relationship in the other direction.

A prominent theme that emerged in our data was that a lack of resources and conditions of extreme material deprivation were among the most significant barriers trans people faced to accessing and maintaining stable and safe employment. Roan, a BIPOC nonbinary gig worker, declared, “It was difficult to leave the [place of work] where I was being abused because I didn’t have the level of financial stability to be able to go and figure something else out.”

Or as Jasmine, a DEI professional working in a LGBTQIA+ labour organization, observed,

I would say the most common issue trans workers face is a lack of resources and shelter. It’s nearly impossible to exit an unhealthy work environment or have the bandwidth to apply for employment when those basic needs aren’t being met.

This was especially true for the gig and contract workers whom we interviewed. Many participants found it difficult to keep themselves financially afloat, let alone work to improve their employment situation. Dee, a white trans femme gig worker, reflected this sentiment when she shared that her financial situation was so dire she was having to sell her belongings:

The gig I have now is... well, it’s a toxic work environment. I’d leave if I could. But I just have to suck it up because, right now, I can’t find enough gigs to make ends meet. Things are slow, so I’m just selling off possessions... just trying to stay afloat ‘til I can land something else.

Similarly to Dee, more than half of the trans workers we interviewed shared that they were struggling to meet their basic survival needs. Over a dozen of interviewees shared that food insecurity is a consistent issue for them, particularly with raising inflation. Some interviewees like Benji, an Indigenous gender-diverse house painter, even noted that food is secondary when it comes to expenses:

Have I ever struggled with food insecurity? Yeah, like every damn week. A lot of times it’s having decide between paying rent and a bus pass or groceries. Groceries are expensive, they are not always a priority... I need a roof over my head, I need to get to work.

Some of the people we interviewed, like Kory, a white trans masculine construction worker, shared that they frequent food banks to lessen the financial burden.

I do go to the food bank, that helps, but it’s not always enough you know?... I’m going into work hungry. I’m working construction, and we are talking 10-hour shifts with food bank levels of nutrition. So yeah,

that's been a struggle.

However, two interviewees shared that, while they are thankful that they have access to food banks, often the food bank alone is not enough to sustain them properly.

Over a third of our interview participants discussed that, at some point in their lives, they had faced homelessness or housing insecurity. For many of these workers, their income was just barely enough to cover their housing and transportation, which they felt were the most vital resources to keeping them employed. For example, Danielle, a gender-non-conforming trans femme sex worker, reported, "I was booted out after I transitioned. I was living in a tent for five months." As in Danielle's case, some interviewees told us that their housing insecurity was a direct product of being kicked out of their homes for being trans; other participants recounted that their housing insecurity was directly due to employment precarity.

In total, fourteen participants struggled to access employment due to their housing insecurity. For example, Leila, a white unemployed trans woman, reported that getting a job without an address is "logistically impossible," and added that, "the application asked for an address, I didn't have one to put down. So, I just gave the application back." Other participants, such as Nav, a biracial trans masculine retail worker, discussed having to engage in survival sex in the past to access housing: "There was a span of time where I was sleeping with someone to have housing, yeah, essentially trading sex for housing." Our interview sample also included those who continued to live with abusive partners or stayed in unsafe living conditions.

In addition to understanding material precarity, Jasmine, the DEI professional introduced above, explained that taking an intersectional lens is paramount to truly understanding trans peoples' lived experiences of inequality and oppression that led to their precarity,

I think we really must understand the impact of people's multiple intersections. Especially when we consider half of trans people in Canada have mental illness or are disabled. As well as, obviously, the intersections of migration and racism. Because we do see in our work, that for migrant and disabled trans folks there are significant challenges... These folks are much more likely to feel pressure to stay in harmful employment situations and have higher unemployment rates.

Jasmine's assertion that disabled trans people face higher rates of unemployment was reflected in many of our interviews. For example, Tatum, a white disabled trans man, shared that he recently became unemployed after trying to manage his disability while holding multiple gig jobs: "I was holding multiple jobs then, working at multiple places a day. I walk with a cane, and so that kind of schedule wasn't sustainable...I ended up getting burnt out and eventually became unemployed." Sustainability isn't the only issue however, as Oliver, a disabled trans man working in manufacturing, explained:

In one of my jobs, I got injured. Tore my meniscus and before I could even get the MRI, [my employer] had already found an excuse to claim I had quit to [so they could] avoid paying me disability.

In Oliver's case, his disability was caused by an injury on the job, and the company he was working for falsely claimed he had quit, leaving him unemployed and without either disability or medical benefits.

In addition to disability, we found that migration is often associated with higher levels of precarity. Hazel, a service provider working with trans migrants, shared a story about one of her clients that reflected some of the additional challenges Jasmine mentioned above:

I was working with an individual who, when they migrated to Canada, was working in a family-run business and living with their employer... they were not getting paid properly at all. And the money [the employer] did pay, was going to this person's "debt" that they owed them for rent. When [the client] tried to address it, [the employer] said you're not going to tell anyone about this because if you do, we're going to tell the community back home about your [gender] identity.

In the case of Hazel's client, her client's employer used the threat of disclosing her trans identity to her community back home to keep her quiet about their exploitative labour practices. Cynthia, a Mexican trans woman working in hospitality, reported that her employer also exploited her vulnerability as a migrant:

What happened to me was that I felt I couldn't leave because I needed the employment to stay in the country. I had precarious legal status, so I didn't really have many options. [My employer] knew this, and that I was desperate, and always gave me the ugliest parts of the job... they always sent me to do the bad stuff, the stuff nobody else likes.

Cynthia's story is all too common. Unfortunately, migrants are frequently given work that others have refused to do and often feel they do not have the ability or resources to push back. This is especially true for migrants who are on a work visa or for whom, like Hazel's client, access to housing as well as immigration status is under the control of their current employer. Often migrants must navigate labour precarity under remarkably exploitative conditions.

### **Retrospective narrations**

Trans people's lives and experiences cannot be simplified and reduced to their material conditions. While the interviewees above shared their emotional and embodied experiences of labour precarity, our final section includes retrospective narrations of five participants, who after reflecting on their experiences of precarity found brief moments of agency, resistance, and joy amidst their precarity. While this certainly wasn't the case for all participants we interviewed, especially those who were still working under precarious conditions or experiencing overall life precarity that impacted their employment; we believe the narrations shared in this section offer a more complicated and nuanced understanding that some of our participants expressed about their own labour precarity. Moreover, as we discuss below, joy and agency can emerge in resistance to the oppressive conditions and structures.

Take, for example, Ari, a Russian immigrant who is currently working as a social media translation consultant:

For a while it was tough, I'm not going to lie. I didn't know how I was going to eat or pay rent... I had a lot working against me. But eventually I did learn how to frame it and use it. In some ways playing the immigrant card in hiring settings is helpful if you're talking about equal opportunity and diversity. Being able to draw on the strengths of my

diverse cultural backgrounds is helpful and being able to say, these are the things that I can bring to the job, these are the different perspectives my experience offers.

Ari learned how to frame what, in the past, they experienced as a job barrier into a marketable skill. Ari continued,

And the most helpful thing I would say I can offer is languages. Having grown up speaking Russian, then learning English at around four or five, and then at the same time, French. Languages and learning languages became very second nature to me... having multiple languages under my belt became my strongest tool in employment... my current employment relies extremely heavily on my languages, and ultimately it's why I think I got the job.

For Ari, their experience of having to learn multiple languages as an immigrant eventually became the reason they believed they were hired for their current position. Oliver shared a similar sentiment when he decided to make a career shift after becoming disabled on the job in his previous job sector:

During the interview, the manager was incredibly supportive, my internship has the potential to become a job. During the interview, he was talking specifically about how the suit shop that I was going to be an intern at is going to be transitioning into unisex and offer gender neutral options, and how they very specifically wanted more trans people on the line of that development... So, I think he saw me being trans as a positive.

Above, Oliver discussed how his transgender identity was helpful in his interview, because the company where he was interviewing was looking to expand into a unisex market. He reflected further,

I used to think what happened to me before, getting hurt on the job, was going to be the thing that would hold me back for the rest of my life. But it kind of forced me to have to pivot in terms of my career, and now, I've found a place of work who's excited about the parts of me I used to have to downplay or hide.

While some participants, like Ari and Oliver, said that they felt their past hardships led them to their current careers, other participants, like Kennedy, found that their lived experiences could help others avoid facing similar struggles. Kennedy, a Black trans masculine DEI professional, discussed that while his past experiences led him to a career path in DEI, he viewed the kind of work he did as "resistance." He explained,

Having all these experiences shaped my career path for sure. I went into DEI because I had a personal stake in it. I wanted to do something about it. Change things, you know? Now, I get to work with people to make sure what happened to me doesn't happen to anyone else.

While Kennedy felt that his experiences could directly help other trans people who were facing similar struggles, Cam, a white nonbinary therapist, felt that their experiences of precarious labour ultimately helped them to gain a better understanding of themselves, which helped them to better connect with their clients:

I know what I won't put up with anymore. I lived through it. I'm never

going to accept being treated like that again. But I'm grateful I have the knowledge that came from those experiences. It taught me a lot about myself... It makes me a better therapist.

Cam expressed that "while [their] trauma might be different" from their clients, "it can help [them] empathize and strategize with [their] clients about the ways [their clients] can regain power in situations where power was taken." Cam took pride in their ability to help others and to be able to use their experiences to empower others.

Lastly, we return to Danielle, a formerly homeless<sup>3</sup> trans feminine waitress, who reflected on how she was able to find joy in her personal life despite the challenges she had faced,

It's more complicated than saying it was the worst time of my life... I would say it was the hardest time in my life for sure, because I was living in a tent, working a job [where] I was getting harassed at daily... but my friend convinced me to leave that job and move in with her... This was the first time in my life I had a queer community. I felt like I kind of found my family. That sounds cheesy, or whatever, but it's true... and I sometimes wonder, without everything else that happened, would I have found that? I don't know... I'm in a much better place now. My roommate and I are working on launching an arts business... I feel grateful and it's the first time in a long time, where I'm really happy.

Danielle's story illuminates how making connections to queer community ultimately led her to a fulfilling job and personal life. Danielle said that because of her past ostracization from her family, these connections were healing and helped her to feel more stable. Her nuanced understanding of how her past experiences got her to where she is now, gave her a unique experience of gratitude. Danielle's experiences, like those of many other participants, illustrates more fully how resilience, resistance, and joy can be found alongside of precarity.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, we build on existing research on trans people's emotional and embodied experiences of precarious labour. Our findings mirror past research that trans people experience fear and anxiety (Thompson 2021) over the potential of navigating discriminatory hiring practices (Mills 2022), as well as navigating gender presentation (Irving 2017) and gender disclosure in the workplace. However, our research indicates that fear itself is not the biggest barrier mediating precarity. In the first section of this article, we explored some of the conditions that created the level of fear that participants experienced. For many of the trans participants in our study, this fear came from stories they had hear, or from their own experiences of job rejection, past experiences of harassment and discrimination on their jobs, and overall life precarity, that left people feeling trapped in jobs that felt unsafe, unwelcoming, and unstable.

Our research also suggests that trans people are not only precarious because they are in precarious jobs (Campbell and Price 2015). There are other material fac-

3 Danielle used the word homeless to describe herself. However, in certain contexts, using "homeless" instead of "housing insecure" or "unhoused" can be seen as stigmatizing.

tors that exist outside of work for some trans people that lead to states of overall life precarity that extend beyond the scope of their workplace. Conditions beyond their employment, such as material deprivation, food insecurity, and housing insecurity, leave many trans workers in what Lewis et al. (2015) called a state of “hyper-precari-ty.” We also identified a cyclical relationship between employment precarity and poverty, which is similar to past findings on the relationship between mental health and employment precarity (Kinitz et al. 2024) in that both are co-constitutive. As our data show, it is not only that precarious labour can lead to housing insecurity, but also that existing life precariousness, such as housing insecurity, make obtaining employment without an address nearly impossible.

In their recent book, Westbrook (2020) asserts that there are social factors that exist outside of gender identity which increase risks for trans people; having a trans feminine embodiment, being impoverished, or engaging in sex work increase the likelihood of violence. In addition to BIPOC, impoverished, and illicit labourers, our research shows that migrant and disabled trans workers also faced an increased risk of general life precarity beyond job precarity. We found that those social and material conditions that led to their general life precarity also left them trapped in precarious labour.

Scholarship and activism surrounding trans labour has been primarily focused on rights-based frameworks. Mills (2022), however, suggests that an improvement in employment conditions may not lead to an improvement in quality of life. Our data reflect this assertion, suggesting that resources that address the barriers created by disability, housing, migration, food security, and income assistance are necessary for addressing conditions of life precarity.

With this said, trans people’s lives and experiences should not be reduced to being defined by their precarity. Scholarship on trans people often rely on narratives of risk and despair (shuster and Westbrook 2022; Westbrook 2020), thereby obscuring experiences of agency, resistance, joy, and pleasure (Chudyk 2023; Jacobson and Devor 2022; Jones 2020). As our findings show, agency and joy can emerge in resistance to oppressive conditions. In some cases, participants questioned whether they would have found one without the other, thus suggesting joy, resistance, and agency are not mutually exclusive with labour precarity nor overall life precarity. This being said, not all participants shared these sentiments, and those who did, were only able to come to these conclusions retrospectively— participants’ narrations of joy, agency, and resistance were made under post-precarious conditions. Might reflections such as these require temporal and spatial distance from labour precarity? Recent scholarship on this remains limited (see Chudyk 2023; Westbrook and shuster 2022 for exception). Future work should further explore trans people’s ability to access hopeful and agentic narratives under conditions of ongoing precarity.

## CONCLUSION

Past research on trans laborers’ experiences seldom engages exclusively with precarious labour theories. However, we found that applying this framework permitted specific differentiations between precarious work, precarious workers, and overall life precarity, and allowed for a more in-depth analysis uncovering some of what is often

underneath trans people's fear and anxiety regarding their employment prospects. While contemporary trans research has begun to investigate what kind of fears and anxieties exist for trans workers, our approach was to investigate why those fears and anxieties exist; exploring some of the multitude of risk factors that may intersect with workers' trans identities and embodiments.

In doing so, we extended Westbrook's (2020) proposition that not all trans people are equally at risk for violence to help us theorize about some of the mediating factors that can increase trans peoples' likelihood of precarity. As such, we take up calls to resist using transness as an isolated factor; to focus attention on the multiple systems of stratification that maintain inequalities; and finally, to identify factors that pattern precarity when imagining solutions. We found that in addition to gender identity and embodiment, issues such as migration, housing, and poverty are inextricable from trans people's experiences of precarious labour, and that people along those social margins are more likely to experience life precarity that further exacerbates their labour precarity. Lastly, we recounted trans workers' retrospective narrations of joy, agency and resistance, which reflected a nuanced and complicated relationship to their experiences of labour precarity.

To conclude, we suggest recommendations on multiple fronts: ground level supports and outreach for trans people, social welfare policy, and future research directions. First, we suggest increased collaboration, networking, and referrals between trans services and community, government, and outreach services that work in housing, employment, mental health, addiction, disability, immigration, and food security services to address the multiple barriers of additional life precarity that impact trans peoples' ability to access and maintain stable, safe, and supportive employment. We recommend that support services and outreach for trans people increase programming aimed at addressing barriers for trans workers, including support in name and gender documentation changes, access to mental health supports, access to food banks or food stipends, access to affordable and safe housing, access to affordable transportation, support in accessing employment assistance programming, support accessing disability assistance, support accessing immigration services, free legal advice for those in need, and support in addressing workplace harassments and discrimination.

Second, we recommend larger systematic and institutional policy reforms regarding social welfare, including the implementation of a universal minimum basic income, increased income and disability assistance, and more flexible migration status requirements to access social assistance.

Finally, we recommend that future research directions include intersectional, community-led, collaborative, and multi-dimensional research approaches focused on all the social locations that trans people inhabit, because we believe this will provide richer analysis into the additional factors that mediate the unique barriers and experiences trans people face. Research analysis regarding racialization, ableism, xenophobia, migrancy, transnormativity, and transmisogyny still remains relatively absent in our scholastic imaginary surrounding trans specific precarity. In closing, we call for future research that examines conditions under which trans people succeed and thrive; in that these may hold important lessons that can inform future advocacy and policy.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Descriptive Statistics of Trans Workers Interview Sample

Participant Demographics	N	Percent
Gender (many participants chose more than one identity)		
Transgender	12	29%
Non-binary	15	37%
Trans feminine/ trans women	9	22%
Trans masculine/ trans men	5	12%
Two-spirit	2	5%
Other/ Gender-diverse	10	24%
Pronouns		
She/Her	8	20%
He/Him	16	39%
They/Them	11	27%
He/They	2	5%
She/They	1	2%
All Pronouns	2	5%
No Pronouns	1	2%
Province		
British Columbia	8	20%
Alberta	9	22%
Ontario	14	34%
Newfoundland and Labrador	1	2.5%
Quebec	5	12%
Nova Scotia	1	2.5%
Manitoba	3	7%
Person of Color		
Yes	17	41%
No	24	59%
Indigenous		
Yes	12	29%
No	29	71%
Migrant		
Yes	12	29%
No	29	71%
Disabled		
Yes	9	22%
No	32	78%
Job Sector(,any participants work in multiple sectors)		
Social Services	9	22%
Freelance	8	20%
Education	7	17%
Artist/Performer	7	17%
Underground Economy	7	17%

<b>Participant Demographics</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Service/Hospitality	5	12%
Manufacturing/Construction	5	12%
Retail	4	10%
Childcare	2	5%
Unemployed	8	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100%</b>

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **Service Providers' Job Titles**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Organization Description</b>
Calvin	Community engagement/outreach professional	LGBTQI+ labour
Janet	Union representative	Labour union
Hazel	Support professional	Trans migrants
Jasmine	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) professional	LGBTQI+ labour
Debby	Director of programming and housing	Transition housing
Evelyn	Case manager	Community health centre
Olivia	Union representative	Labour union
Ethan	Union representative	Labour union
Claire	Director of skills and programming	LGBTQI+ support
Nora	Program organizer	Employment readiness
Talia	Advocate/organizer	Sex Work Advocacy
Matt	Support Staff	LGBTQI+ Youth Shelter
Remy	Legal Apprentice/Organizer	Work and Labour Advocacy
Gavin	Community engagement/outreach professional	LGBTQI+ Immigrants and refugees

## **APPENDIX 3**

### **Precarious Workers' Qualification Survey Questions**

1. Do you identify as transgender, nonbinary, Two-spirit or otherwise gender-diverse?
2. If you answered yes to the above question, how do you identify? What are your pronouns?
3. Are you currently living in Canada? If so, what province or territory?
4. Are you employed?
5. Have you ever been in a situation where someone was acquiring work for you on your behalf, or a prospective employer withheld important information about the job's duties and pressures?
6. Have you ever felt pressured by a supervisor, an employer, or another third-party (e.g. headhunter, an agency, or individual to whom you are indebted, overseas labour recruitment) into staying in a job when you wanted to leave?
7. Have you ever had wages withheld from you by an employer, a supervisor, or a third party to whom you were indebted?

8. Have you ever been compelled by a supervisor or employer to work overtime?
9. Would you feel comfortable filing a complaint with your employer in the event of physical, sexual, or psychological threats, violence, or harassment from a customer, coworker, or supervisor?
10. Does your job require you to live with your employer (e.g. domestic work)?
11. Are you a person of color?
12. Do you have an Indigenous background?
13. Were you born in Canada?
14. What group below best describes your most current or recent employment?
  - a. Arts/entertainment
  - b. Construction/manufacturing
  - c. Customer service
  - d. Domestic work
  - e. Education
  - f. Freelance
  - g. Hospitality
  - h. Sex work
  - i. Social services
  - j. Unemployed
  - k. Other (please specify)
15. Do you consent to being contacted to participate in an interview?
16. If yes, what is the best way for us to contact you?

## **APPENDIX 4**

### **Precarious Workers' Interview Questions**

1. Are you currently working?
  - a. What kind of work do you do? (Prompt for example, gig work, underground economy, retail, sex work, etc.)
  - b. What's your position?
  - c. What are your job duties?
  - d. Is this your only job? If not, what else do you do to make money?
2. How satisfactory was the outcome of your most recent job search?
  - a. Did you encounter any difficulties when you were on the job market because of being trans (Prompt: for example, documentation that didn't match your current name or gender, lack of call backs for interviews, etc.)
3. In your opinion, what is the minimum education and training necessary for your current position and how does it compare to your own education and training?
4. If you are willing to share this information, what do you expect your annual income to be this year?
  - a. (If participant doesn't know their incoming for this year) What was your last year's annual income?
  - b. Is your income predictable?
5. How many hours a week do you work?
  - a. How many hours a week do you consider yourself available to work?

6. Is your job trans friendly? (Prompts: What does being trans friendly look like for you and how does that play out in the workplace?)
7. Are you out at work? (Prompt: what does being “out” mean to you? Are you out to everyone at work or only out to specific people in the workplace? Are you out to customers?)
8. Have you ever taken time off from work or plan to take time off from work for reasons related to your transition? (Prompt: for example: leave to have surgery; leave to change identity documents.)
  - a. Were your transition related expenses covered by your employer?
  - b. Were your transition related expenses able to be covered by your income?
9. If applicable, do you think that transitioning has affected your employability? (Prompt: do you feel like your success on the job market was highest, before, during, and after transitioning? Why do you think that was?)
  - a. If you have not transitioned yet but plan to, do you have any fear surrounding how your coworkers, employer, or customers, might respond?
10. Has your current work or past work ever required labour that feels gendered in nature?
  - a. If so, how did you feel like you fit within those work dynamics?
  - b. Did they feel in-line with your gender identity?
11. Did your most recent job have a formal employment contract?
  - a. If you did, did that contract included a section with your rights as a trans person?
12. Have you been in a situation where important information about the job’s duties and pressures were not explained to you during recruitment? (Prompt: could you elaborate on that situation?)
13. Have you felt pressured into staying in a job you no longer wanted? (Prompt: could you elaborate on that situation?)
  - a. Have you ever felt threatened in any way by an employer when attempting to leave a job?
14. Have other trans people’s experiences in the labour market that you’ve heard or read about impacted how you’ve made decisions about your job?
  - a. If yes, did you know these individuals personally?
15. Have you ever experienced physical, sexual or psychological threats, violence or harassment on the job? (Prompt: If you feel comfortable, could you describe the events. Was it from a customer, coworker, or employer?)
16. Is there a process to file a formal complaint for physical, sexual or psychological harassment?
  - a. If yes, have you used it?
  - b. If yes, would you use it?
17. Have you ever been compelled by an employer or an immediate supervisor to work overtime? (Prompt: could you elaborate on those circumstances?)
18. Have you ever kept working even though you felt physical pain or mental distress related to the speed or other physical demands of your job? Could you describe a situation in which that happened?
19. Have you ever been unhoused or faced housing insecurity?
  - a. How long would you say that went on for?

20. Have you ever gone hungry because of a lack of income inconsistency?
  - a. How often did/does that happen?
21. Are you able to afford healthcare for you and any dependents you may have when you need it?
22. Are there other forms of precarity that have shaped your experiences?
23. What do you think can be done to help you specifically, as a trans person, in your work situation?
24. What do you feel are the barriers to improving trans employment?

## **APPENDIX 5**

### **Providers' Focus Group/Interview Questions**

1. How often would you say you've worked with trans people in your professional role?
2. Based on your experience as a service provider during this role or past roles, how would you personally define precarity?
3. Based on your experience working with trans people, do you feel like past clients have faced unique forms of precarity in the labour market because they are trans? (Prompt: how do the issues you outlined above compare to the other workers that you have supported?)
4. To your knowledge, have you ever had a trans client go hungry because of a lack of income or income inconsistency?
5. To your knowledge, have you ever had a trans client who has been unhoused?
6. Have you ever had a trans client have important information about a job withheld while being recruited? (Prompt: what were the circumstances?)
  - a. What information was withheld?
  - b. Who was doing the recruiting?
7. Have you had a trans client who felt pressured into staying in a job they no longer wanted? (Prompt: what were the circumstances surrounding that situation?)
  - a. Have you encountered a trans person accessing your services who has been physically or psychologically threatened by an employer when attempting to leave a job?
8. Have other trans people's experiences in the labour market impacted how clients made decisions about their job?
  - a. If yes, did they know these individuals personally?
9. Have you had a trans client who has ever been compelled by a supervisor or employer to work overtime? (Prompt: what were the circumstances?)
  - a. Who applied the pressure?
  - b. What was used as leverage?
10. Have you ever had a trans client who faced sexual or psychological threats, violence, or harassment from a customer, coworker, or supervisor? (Prompt: what were the circumstances?)
  - a. Did they feel comfortable filing a complaint?
  - b. Did they stay in that work situation?
11. Have any of your trans clients been pressured to work despite feeling occupation-related physical pain or mental distress?

12. Have you ever had a trans client feel pressured to keep their trans identity hidden at work?
13. Have you ever had a trans client experience difficulty accessing transition related care?
14. Are there any other noteworthy work experiences that a trans client shared that was not covered in the previous questions?
15. In your experience working with trans people, what were the biggest barriers trans people have faced in attempting to access non-precarious employment?
  - a. What did you do as a service provider to aid in navigating these barriers?
16. Has racialization ever impacted a trans client of yours on the job market or their ability to get employment? If so, how?
  - a. What about immigration status, disability, age, etc.?
17. Please describe your approach to supporting precarious workers.
18. What do you feel like can realistically be done to improve the employment situation for trans people?
19. Do you have any additional experience of relevance to our study?
20. Would you be interested in partnering with us on designing and testing out a pilot project to see if we can do something to help to improve the situation for trans people in precarious labour?



# The Cass Review and Gender Ahistoricism: Rewriting Trans Pasts to Attack Trans Futures

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This article provides a critical appraisal of the Cass Review from a heritage position through the lenses of archaeology, heresiology, myth, and literature. The paper introduces the framework of gender ahistoricism, and the authors highlight instances of gender ahistoric revisionism within the Cass Review's final report. Further, they challenge these historical claims of gender through several case studies demonstrating a broader gender multiplicity than allowed for by the final report. This article, as well as furthering criticism of the Cass Review from these new heritage perspectives, also highlights the impact of gendered pasts

more broadly on the material conditions of contemporary trans lives. It underpins and furthers the efforts that must be taken to ensure heritage practices and frameworks become tools of use, rather than oppression, for trans communities.

**KEYWORDS** Cass Review; gender ahistoricism; archaeology; heresy; myth  
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In 2020 NHS England commissioned an independent review into the care provided for trans children and adolescent trans people considering a perceived significant<sup>1</sup> increase in referrals to their Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS), especially by those assigned female at birth (Cass 2024, 26).<sup>2</sup> Headed by Dr Hillary Cass, the “Cass Review” set out to make findings and provide recommendations in relation to 11 key areas. These notably included the prescription of puberty blockers by the NHS, and the reasons behind an apparent “increase [which] has disproportionately been of natal females” referring to GIDS (Cass 2024, Appendix 1). The Cass Review, which included seven systematic reviews conducted by authors affiliated to the University of York, published an interim report in 2022 before releasing the final report in April 2024.

Concerns about the Review’s rigour were first raised following the 2022 interim report. The interim report, published without peer-review, argued throughout that there was insufficient evidence about the benefits of puberty blocker prescriptions, instead presenting a narrative of their mental health benefits being solely “short-term” (Cass 2022, 10) and their use “controversial” in relation to the supposed “risk” of puberty blockers leading to “irreversible treatments” (Cass 2022, 28). This was criticised by Pang and colleagues (2022), who argued that the interim report failed to engage with any of the studies that demonstrated long-term mental health benefits when gender affirmative care was given to trans youth. Similar criticism about cherry-picking was again levelled at the interim report in March 2024 by Horton (2024), alongside voicing concern that the authors of the commissioned University of York systematic reviews lacked expertise in transgender related healthcare.

In April 2024 the final report was published. This echoed the interim report, arguing that there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate the benefits of puberty blocker prescriptions to out-weigh what it saw as the harm of providing them, recommending instead that puberty blockers should only be made available through a clinical trial designed to bridge the supposed evidence gap (Cass 2024). Since publication, the final report has been cited as the exclusive justification for stopping puberty blocker prescriptions in the UK, both on the NHS and privately (Campbell 2024a; Kennedy 2025). As a direct result of the Cass Review and its recommendations, the UK subsequently introduced a permanent ban on the medication in December 2024 (Campbell 2024b; McCool 2024; Thomas 2024).

- 1 This supposed significant rise has been proven to be an incorrect reading of the referral data by both McNamara and colleagues (2024) and Grijseels (2026).
- 2 The names of all those involved have not been disclosed by the Review and references to the Review will therefore appear as (Cass 2024).

Moreover, the Review has had an impact beyond UK healthcare. The Cass Review was cited as evidence in favour of puberty blocker bans for trans youth during recent court cases in New Zealand (Ngā Kōti o Aotearoa Courts of New Zealand 2026) as well as the *United States v Skrametti* case in the state of Tennessee (Supreme Court of the United States 2025a). Despite becoming *the* go-to document for proponents of puberty blocker bans, and having so immediately impacted services in the UK, the Cass Review has been highly criticised by experts in transgender and adolescent health. Numerous academic reviews have been published, pre-papers shared, and rapid responses to the *British Medical Journal* sent. These collectively declared the Cass Review guilty of cherry-picking studies, manipulating key data, misusing participant quotes, inappropriate analytical methods, double standards, prejudice, failing to prove its own claims, having a high degree of bias, departing from scientific best practice, and being of poor scientific rigour throughout (Berner 2024; Grijseels 2026; Horton 2024; Horton and Pearce, 2024; Kohn, 2024; McNamara et al, 2024; Noone et al., 2024). Resultantly, the British Medical Association (BMA) passed a motion in July 2024 to “publically critique” the Review, calling for the implementation of its recommendations to be paused, and puberty blocker prescriptions reinstated, during its evaluation (BMA 2024). This has been subsequently ignored by the UK government.

Whilst reading the final report, it was noted by the authors of this article that alongside the concerns raised by healthcare professionals, the report was also reliant on a distortion of trans history at several key places in its foundational logic. Our criticism of the final report accompanies those from a healthcare perspective by critiquing the Review’s factual legitimacy from an archaeological, historical, and literary perspective, areas of the final report yet to face detailed scrutiny. Our paper will introduce and develop the concept of *gender ahistoricism*, using it to demonstrate why the Cass Review needed to fabricate an ahistoric account of trans history as part of the foundational logic for its analysis. Our article critiques the Review as a highly consequential example of the impact the ever growing (ab)use of heritage has against the material conditions of contemporary trans lives and equalities.

The paper begins with a discussion by Hurcum of gender ahistoricism. Our paper then continues with a series of interconnected segments wherein each co-author evaluates the Cass Review against our framework of gender ahistoricism in relation to their area of specialty. Newbury addresses the impact of gender histories on gender minority stress through the case study of *The Public Universal Friend*. Girling highlights the hallmarks of historical discussions of heresy apparent in the Review. Richardson-Read then discusses the Review as a gender myth and explores alternative stories of gender from Norse mythology. Lastly, Davison discusses burial evidence from two Anglo-Saxon graves which again run counter to the Review’s ahistorical assertions.

These applications together serve to clearly demonstrate the Cass Review’s use of gender ahistoricism to underpin its consequential assertions on contemporary trans healthcare, furthering the pre-existing critical scholarship of the Review from new disciplines. Moreover, each may individually serve as a possible trans inclusive approach that can be taken when studying the archaeological, historical, mythological, and literary record. These diverse approaches are then brought together in a conclusion written equally amongst all the authors that highlights the impact of trans exclusionary historical narratives on the material conditions of contemporary trans lives.

## DEFINING GENDER AHISTORICISM AND ITS FOUNDATIONAL USE WITHIN THE CASS REVIEW (HURCUM)

As Maude and Perisanidi (2024, 225) succinctly put it: “Trans history enjoys the luxury of disbelief.” This statement distils a sentiment which has long been echoed by others within trans history and archaeology (e.g., Everhart 2022; Hollimon 2009; Power 2020), where the claiming of the long dead as cisgendered is considered a fact *a priori*, whilst to suggest the possibility of trans people in the historical/archaeological record requires exceptional evidence. More than this, as Weismantel (2013, 320) contended, this assumption of cisness and denial of trans possibilities acts as “a form of structural violence perpetuated against people, past *and* present, who do not conform to contemporary norms of gender.” I have elsewhere argued further, asserting that this violence is the *raison d’être* for the obfuscation of trans history by means of exceptionalism or flat denialism, through what I termed “cis-supremacist pasts” (Hurcum 2025).

In this section, I shall begin by defining the through-line which holds our individual analyses in this paper together: the framework we have termed *gender ahistoricism*. It was felt during our examination of the final report that pre-existing analytical frameworks didn’t fully fit the type of historical revisionism the Review espoused when mentioning trans history. Cisnormative histories require the disregarding of trans possibilities through assumptions of a universal historic “cisness,” or by requiring exceptional evidence to deviate from such an attribution (Walley 2021; Weismantel 2013). Cis-supremacist pasts are more calculated, wherein individuals or organisations deliberately erase “trans identities from sanctioned historical narratives” for the explicit purpose of politically dominating contemporary trans people (Hurcum 2025, 177). The Cass Review was more subtle than flat denialism or wholesale erasure when it came to trans history. Namely, it didn’t completely deny, erase, or obstruct the entirety of trans history when such history was briefly mentioned. However, on the two occasions trans history was consequentially cited by Cass (2024, 26, 118), the final report brazenly rewrote trans history on a massive scale. Therefore, as we will show throughout this paper, whilst the revisionism may have leaned into cisnormative histories, erased identities, and had the same calculated goal as cis-supremacist pasts, the revisionism itself was conducted differently—through what we consider acts of “gender ahistoricism.”

We came to the term gender ahistoricism as a simple descriptor for the claim repeated on pages 26 and 118 of the final report. Immediately after declaring that referrals to GIDS have switched to be predominantly those assigned female at birth, the Review argues that “[t]he current profile of transgender presentations is unlike that in any prior historical period” (Cass 2024, 118). At no point does the final report discuss historic periods or the demographics of trans people throughout history, nor does it cite academic literature on this topic. Its own data set of referrals only goes back to 2009—hardly all historic periods. Nonetheless, the uncited and somewhat nebulous comment is stated as a foundational fact to keep in mind when understanding the Review’s arguments. This is a clear example of gender ahistoricism, not least because it goes uncited, but primarily for rewriting trans history to declare that gender has universally been a strict binary, that it is those assigned male at birth who predominated the trans community, and that even at less than 1% of the population we are now more populous than in any prior period. The immediate question now becomes why? *Why rewrite trans history in this way?*

The answer to this question is explored by each contributing author in relation to their specialism during their sections. I, myself, contend that the *why* relates to the Cass Review being an example of “transgender trend” scholarship.

“Transgender trend” ideology supposes that people transition because of a social contagion pathologized under the name of Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD; see Littman 2018). This pathology claims exposure to any trans people will cause children, in particular young girls, to “become trans.” The concept of ROGD as a real pathology has been heavily refuted by the trans community and peer-reviewed publications alike. Indeed, the only academic paper proposing ROGD, Littman (2018), was heavily criticised for its methodology and described as fundamentally flawed from the outset (e.g., Restar 2020). Moreover, ROGD has been further condemned as being nothing more than “a barren empirical wasteland... attempt[ing] to mobilise scientific language to circumvent mounting evidence in favour of gender affirmation” (Ashley 2020, 792).

Another key element of the transgender trend myth relates to who it proposes as the predominant “victims”—these being primarily young girls (e.g., Shrier 2020). Whilst the Cass Review never directly identifies itself as being “transgender trend” scholarship, its contents betray this intent. It declares throughout that there has been an “exponential” increase in young people, specifically people assigned female at birth, seeking gender transition services. Notably, however, this is a complete misrepresentation of its own data, which instead shows a steady increase in referrals between 2010 and 2018 where they then plateau (Grijseels 2026, 279; McNamara et al. 2024, 17). However, even running with the myth that referrals have exponentially increased, the final report again makes a further questionable statement about its data: said referrals exceed what one would expect from the “normal evolution of acceptance for a minority group” (Cass 2024, 26). What such a “normal evolution” is, and how the Review would expect one to present in its data, is left undefined. The purpose of these statements in the final report is not to be ones of concrete fact, clearly, but to suggest to the reader that acceptance could not have caused referrals to increase—despite this being the view of experts in the field (McNamara et al. 2024).

The final report’s gender ahistoricism serves the same purpose. By claiming historic trans people were always a certain way (predominantly male at birth), but that contemporary trans people are now a different way (predominantly female at birth), Cass evokes what Van Leeuwen (2007) calls the “authority of tradition.” In effect, the Review uses gender ahistoricism in conjunction with its questionable data to differentiate us from trans history and declare us something altogether different. *The trans community is no longer what it has always been, therefore some new “transgender trend” must be responsible for that change.* This then lays the groundwork for the Review to postulate on any number of “other reasons” behind people being trans today and even permits it to offer “solutions” to a “change from normality,” which the final report does plenty, as seen with the following example:

Peer influence during this stage of life is very powerful. As well as influence of social media, the Review has heard accounts of female students forming intense friendships with other gender-questioning or transgender students at school, and then identifying as trans themselves. (Cass 2024, 122).

It is no coincidence that this claim, and others like it, appear within only four

pages of a gender ahistorical claim. That some people, including young people, are simply just trans, and coming out following greater social acceptance amongst their peers, is ignored. After all, as the Review's gender ahistoricism set out to claim, transness today should be seen as wholly novel and divorced from any trans demographics in the past. Therefore we, along with somewhat increased levels of acceptance, must be a trend. This paper finds that the Review is self-evidently "transgender trend" scholarship *par excellence*.

## **TRANS HISTORIES AND CONTEMPORARY WELLBEING (NEWBURY)**

It has been tentatively estimated that there are between 200,000 and 500,000 transgender people in the UK (Sharfman and Cobb 2022), and although queer identities have been entering into societal consciousness, there are many issues relating to gender identity today. These issues, such as inequality and discrimination, perpetuated by sources like the Cass Review, are often amplified by the reliance on binaries in contemporary society (Hyde et al. 2019; Ridgeway 2011) and the erasure of queer histories. This erasure refers to the systematic omission, marginalisation, and distortion of LGBTQ+ histories and narratives in historical records, education, and other cultural representations (Salter 2021). As discussed above, the final report's gender ahistoricism distorts trans history through extreme revisionism. In this section, I explore how this act of gender ahistoricism negatively impacts contemporary trans people by exacerbating gender minority stress.

It has been well documented how by erasing, or distorting, transgender and nonbinary contributions and experiences throughout history, society loses valuable aspects of history and heritage, weakening community bonds and collective identity within these queer communities (Namaste 2000; Weismantel 2013). Gender minority stress (GMS) is a framework to understand the elevated risks of mental health disorders within the trans community as not inherent to "being trans," but a consequence of an anti-trans society (Hendricks and Testa 2012; see also Fish 2020; Sadowski and Gaffney 1998). GMS scholarship therefore prioritises deconstructing and challenging these external stressors, highlighting every instance where anti-trans society may contribute towards stress within the trans community.

The study of sex and gender identities within archaeology is useful in enhancing the understanding of the past, however it also plays a role in the present by opening-up discussions and providing historical evidence of diversity. Such evidence can be used to directly challenge and counteract marginalisation and discrimination faced as a result of the erasure of queer history and can confront our contemporary biases (Schofield 2010). Case studies, such as those discussed in this article, that demonstrate the history and complexity of gender and identity can also provide marginalised individuals a voice in constructing their own past (Dowson 2000, 165). This challenges where GMS arises from historical erasure and may improve attitudes towards transgender and nonbinary individuals by promoting awareness and acceptance.

Along with the erasure of queer history by society in general, transgender and nonbinary people are often born into a heteronormative, gender conforming family, which may result in them feeling a lack of trans history and heritage through queer isolation (Abraham 2019, 135). This is equally a GMS stressor. Using archaeological ev-

idence to show trans history and heritage is important for individuals within this dynamic, for knowing gender diverse individuals have always existed challenges myths of presentism and restores a community that is otherwise missing (Bauer et al. 2009; Morris 2019).

The Cass Review does not support transgender and nonbinary individuals (Horton and Pearce 2024) and will lead to discrimination. The use of historical sources to promote awareness and acceptance can make gender diverse individuals safer in the knowledge that positive representation and information is being used to challenge contemporary biases and negative attitudes, such as those in the final report. This support and recognition can result in individuals feeling accepted and understood, as well as reducing the stigma and discrimination prevalent in society (McDonald 2018). Below is a case study that demonstrates the complexity of identity that can be used to open-up discussions around gender and provide a sense of history and heritage for individuals today. Moreover, it is an example of gender history to directly challenge the final report's gender ahistoricism.

The Public Universal Friend (or simply "The Friend") was an American preacher born in Rhode Island in 1752 who, in 1776, after becoming unwell with a fever, claimed to have died and been resurrected by the Spirit of the Lord as a genderless person, neither male nor female, named the Public Universal Friend (Larson 2014). After 1776, the Friend dressed in androgynous clothing, shunned both birth name and gendered pronouns, and had an androgynous hairstyle for the time (Moyer 2015, 94). They began to preach about their spiritual awakening and became part of the New-Light Baptist movement.

Throughout history, the Friend has been misgendered and misrepresented, with some historians suggesting that the clothing and rejection of gender identity by the Friend is a sign of mental instability (Schmidt 2020). This narrative, a clear example of the erasure of genderqueer history, feeds into issues with contemporary mental health and wellbeing of individuals whose identity comes under criticism from others in the same way that people question and criticise the identity of the Friend. By studying the Friend and including their story in the history of gender diversity, we can see that nonbinary and genderfluid people are present in the past and led fulfilling lives. By using this case study in discussions around gender identity today, we can provide evidence of diversity in the past which can be used to support genderqueer individuals today, counteract the transphobic argument that genderqueer identities are a "modern fad" (Bellot 2021)—or indeed "unlike that in any prior historical period" (Cass 2024, 118)—and provide people with a sense of history and heritage and a voice in constructing their own past (Dowson 2000, 165). This, in turn, can help improve contemporary mental health and wellbeing today by promoting awareness and acceptance of diversity.

As emphasised, transgender and nonbinary communities often face a higher risk of developing mental health problems due to the issues faced within society as a result of their identity (Fish 2020). It is imperative that society works towards improving the lives of transgender and nonbinary people in the social, political, and economic climate in which we live, to reduce these societal issues. Case studies from history, such as the Public Universal Friend, can be used to challenge biases and preconceptions and can play a role in removing the stigma and discrimination that the transgender and nonbinary communities face, and therefore contribute to improving contemporary

mental health and wellbeing. Case studies that demonstrate the existence of diverse identities throughout history can help normalise diverse sex and gender identities today, by providing support and validation for the queer community.

### **THE CASS REVIEW IN THE CONTEXT OF HERESIOLOGY (GIRLING)**

Multiple studies have criticised the accuracy of claims in the Review about its impartiality (e.g., Grijseels 2026; Horton 2024; Noone et al. 2024). A further argument can be made that there is a theme of “gender heresiology” in its partiality. The study of heresy, or heresiology, can be understood as “the political claim of an exclusive ideology made through the demonisation, exclusion and silencing of ‘the other’” (Lyman 2008, 296). Initially, the connection between heresiology, a genre of theological literature, and a state-sanctioned medical review of trans healthcare may appear unusual in the secular context of the Cass Review. However, the deployment of a variety of heresiological strategies interlocking “science” and “religion” has been identified as a symptomatic reaction at times of rapid social and historical change (Flower and Ludlow 2020).

Understanding the heresiological functioning of the Review requires appreciating how it operates within a phenomenon of “cultural insecurity” (Eriksen 2019), which often identifies diversity as ahistorical, and which then engenders works performing heresiology. The Review’s final report emerges not as an individual work but as part of a series of inter-propagating discussions by cultural forces identifying transness as a kind of “gender heresy” (Morgan 2023). Concerning its influences, the foreword to the final report (Cass 2024, 12) states: “The review has not been conducted in a vacuum. There have been many moving parts and a significant often challenging public debate/” One of these “moving parts” includes the scale of religious anti-trans financing (Morgan 2023). Ciobanu (2021), for example, demonstrates that funding for “anti-gender” groups totalled 700 million dollars from 2009 to 2018. In the context of this considerable cultural force, regardless of any personal religious associations, the final report operates like any work of heresiology throughout history: it is prompted by, contributes to, and provides grounds for politico-religious opposition to diversity, in this case to transness.

The perception of gender heresy, then, intersects two worlds of discourse surrounding and concerning cultural (in)security: sociology and religion. The labelling of transness as a kind of heresy is something that has even united previously disparate groups with a common “enemy.” Morgan (2023, 32) has demonstrated the “unlikely alliance” between so-called “gender-critical feminists and certain, traditionally anti-feminist, evangelical Christian groups. This is founded on their “intersecting fundamental opposition, on grounds of moral intuition rather than empirical principle, to dualistic philosophies that separate the mind or soul or spirit from the body.”

Transness is perceived by these groups as “a slightly different formulation” of this dualism “that separate[s] biological *sex* from sociological *gender*” (Morgan 2023, 33). Dualistic philosophies are taken to imply a belief in the subservience of the body to the mind, which has been historically received as heresy. The theorisations, implications, and manifestations of dualism are contentious, and their comparability with trans experiences of embodiment are debatable. However, Morgan (2023, 38–39) identifies these comparisons in a foundational document of gender-critical feminism from

1979, Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*. It considers body/mind dualism to be a cardinal problem of trans identity and key proof of trans illegitimacy under feminist critical analysis, concluding that transness poses a threat to women (Morgan 2023, 42). These comparisons equating transness with the heresy of dualism function as acts of gender heresiology operating on a secular or cultural level.

The “exclusive ideology” that the Cass Review has been criticised for is cis-supremacism (Horton 2024). In their critique of the Review, Horton (2024, 4) demonstrates how the final report supported non-affirmative therapies and “creating a climate in which different therapeutic approaches can be discussed and developed without fear of vilification, legal action or complaints being brought,” as evidence of cis-supremacism operating within the Review. Perceiving the heresiological themes that underpin the Review reveals the espoused “climate” to be trans-exclusionary healthcare. Furthermore, if transness is equated with gender heresy, statements such as those regarding the “therapeutic approaches” it wishes to pursue “without fear of vilification” are reframed as a step towards allowing practices of transphobic conversion therapy. In these ways the Review presents gender-critical scepticism of trans existence as neutrality. Although its argument here for more radically exclusionary implementations to be pursued may be inadvertent, the Review itself functions as a justification for subsequent works of gender heresiology to further the creation of that “climate.”

This ideology is rationalised by Butler's (2024) concept of a psychosocial phenomenon called the “phantasm of gender.” It can be understood as a formation of another of Lyman's heresiological strategies: the demonisation of “the other.” The inflated, “phantasmatic” conceptualisation of so-called gender is underpinned by associative logic, which helps to explain Morgan's “unlikely alliance.” Despite differing values and concerns between anti-trans feminists and evangelicals, “the contradiction itself is what works, in effect ‘emancipating’ people from the task of developing a rational position, a pathway to fascism” (Butler 2024, 60). Butler continues:

When people are already living with fear, and they are told that there is in fact more to fear, and that the source of their fear can be named, then the name contains and neutralises the contradictions, serving now as a “cause” of ongoing and ultimate destruction, one that must be rooted out.

The fear on the part of healthcare professionals that is evidenced by Horton's (2024) article is that of litigation. Recommending the removal, or indefinite delaying, of the option of gender-affirming care specifically for trans people is how the final report proposes to protect professionals from that insecurity. As no such recommendations are made for cis gender-affirming care, the recommendations for gender-affirming care going forward operate heresiologically as “hostile exclusion.” This contributes to the growing phantasmatic conceptualisation of transness and its demonisation in wider cultural discourse. In this way, discourses of gender heresiology can focus on trans people at the same time as both perpetrators and victims, metaphorically, of a societal “demon.”

The function of heresiology, in summary, is to evangelise with cherry-picking evidence for the “hostile exclusion” and “silencing” of an “other.” Down to the subconscious ways in which it has been conducted, the Review is influenced by, performs,

and furthers a heresiological response to transness. Appreciating the role of gender heresiology in the influences, and influence, of the Review allows insight into its wider cultural impact: engendering further studies and policy changes for the suppression of transness. This is demonstrated by how, as discussed in the introduction to this article, the final report as an officially commissioned document has been cited as *the* justification for the removal of trans healthcare globally. Even the UK Government has persisted with its recommendations, despite the BMA's call to publicly critique and pause their implementation.

The advantages of observing the heresiological function and functioning of the Review, then, are limited. The intensifying psychosocial phantasms of "gender," like "transgender trend" ideology discussed earlier, are seemingly impervious to expert criticisms as they continue to prevail. To critique and dispel the ideologically exclusive, heresiologically motivated construction of gender ahistoricism, it is not sufficient to *only* point out the flaws or history of gender being examined in such a way (Butler 2024, 9). Nonetheless, such critique may yet contribute towards the solution identified by Butler (2024, 9–10): "defeating this phantasm is a matter of affirming how one loves, how one lives in one's body, the right to exist in the world without fear or violence or discrimination." Unearthing the evidence of transness from history that the Review rewrites with gender ahistoricism and identifying this suppression as a symptom of gender heresiology, helps to "affirm the rights and freedoms of embodied life that we can, and should, protect" (Butler 2024, 10).

## **TRANS MYTHOLOGIES VERSUS THE MYTH OF GENDER AHISTORICISM (RICHARDSON-READ)**

The approach of the final report and cisheteronormative scholarship to trans lives, and bodies, is not new; rather it is an established pathologizing perspective on those who do not conform to cisheteronormative restrictions (Gazzoli 2024, 462). As outlined by the prior contributions to this article, the Review fabricates trans history through gender ahistoricism and related heresiology. In this section, I demonstrate how this fabrication acts as a form of mythmaking, and counter with older myths to challenge the one built by the final report. I use examples sourced from medieval literature around Old Norse myth highlighting the inherent gender ambiguity that has been present for longer than the final report admits to, an approach that avoids pathologizing or categorising genders but supports the open interpretation of identities.

The Old Norse sources in question present complications, not unlike the Cass Review, having been subject to cisheteronormative scholarship that is rooted in the foundations of far right movements (Jefford Franks 2019). In the same way that the final report misrepresents and ignores the evidence and the inherent harm of its position, so too has the scholarship of medieval Scandinavia with Old Norse myth and history. However, despite previous misrepresentations, gender fluidity *is* present in these medieval sources, and this directly refutes the final report's assertion of the current "presentations" being markedly increased now over any previous period in history. For the purposes of this section, the term "gender fluid" will be used as defined by Holleb (2019, 134) which indicates a "gender which is not static" and moves away from the associations of what is ill-fitting or unsuitable found in definitions of incongruence.

Myths are stories told as a society and culture, enabling understanding of the world and environments. Myths are open to interpretation, allowing for individuals and society to be reflected within. The Cass Review is part of a mythology of vilifying trans people that is paraded across media, serving as propaganda. Here are presented two opposing Old Norse myths that enable us to see ourselves reflected in a way that encompasses many identities. These myths demonstrate gender fluidity, predating the present day significantly, both highlighting the final report's gender ahistoricism and proving its "transgender trend" partiality.

The sources used here are from the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas*, both dated to approximately the thirteenth century. These sources represent the majority of what is known regarding Old Norse myth. Written centuries after the Old Norse peoples existed, there is often a drift in meaning and context that permits interpretation. Medieval scholarship has struggled with what Lara Ghisleni and colleagues (2016) refer to as "binary binds." This term describes where scholarship has historically ignored lives and experiences outside of cisheteronormativity (Ghisleni et al. 2016). Within Old Norse studies, the material and lived nature of myth has been carefully considered, and the question asked: What do these myths mean to those who lived them? Connecting the evidence of materiality and lived experience is difficult but there have been interdisciplinary efforts to do so in this field (Wikström af Edholm et al. 2019). Frog (2019, 270–71) interrogates Old Norse text sources to determine how myth, and the symbols within, provided a means of understanding the body in the Viking Age. Frog (2019, 270–71) draws on the supernatural and shape-shifting *berserkr* as one example of how people in the Viking Age understood bodies like and unlike their own and found a means of contextualising those understandings in a way that was accepted within their mythology. Bodily change and, more importantly, difference in bodies was understood as part of Old Norse myth once again highlighting the history of these concepts which are ignored in the final report. Presented below are two examples of Old Norse deities for whom bodily change and identity were fluid, which reflect, and reinforce, possible Old Norse beliefs in how identity could be understood through the Old Norse mythological world.

Neil Price (2019, 267) offers an assessment of Loki's role as a "trickster" which lends itself to the themes of identity discussed here, where Loki enables "socially sanctioned deviance" and this becomes gender fluidity. Loki's ambiguity in the sources, including descriptions of shape- and gender-changing, means that they are separate from the cisheteronormative framing of the narrative that attempts to, restrictively, define them. In this sense Loki as a character of myth refutes gender ahistoricism with their presence in these narratives. Lar Romsdal's (2018) novel interrogation of Loki's sexuality and gender presents a nuanced view, suggesting Loki's ambiguity of body "performs a dual function of both subverting *and* enabling the other god's functions." Loki's "socially sanctioned deviance" is an essential function of the pantheon and is only possible because of Loki's shifting in gender and broad sexuality (Romsdal 2018). Descriptions of gender fluidity are seen in *Lokasenna* in the *Poetic Edda*. Here Loki enters the hall of the *Æsir* uninvited and proceeds to demand a place at their table by insulting each of the deities present who, in turn, respond. Óðinn then responds with what scholarship has interpreted as an *accusation* of changing gender.

yet eight winters you were, beneath the earth,  
a milchow and a woman,  
and there you bore children (Larrington 2014, 84)

Romsdal (2018) summarises this as by defying “binary constructions of gender and sexuality, Loki gives permission for those in society to do the same.” Loki’s changing gender is essential in Old Norse myth; they present the possibility for the society these myths reflect to hold the same understanding of gender fluidity. It is also worth noting the additional example in *Gylfaginning*, where Loki transforms into a mare to seduce a stallion and ultimately gives birth to Sleipnir, the famed eight-legged horse later gifted to Óinn (Byock 2005). This nuanced identity is evidenced in sources that pre-date the Cass Review by almost a millennia and, theoretically, reflects a society of that period. To suggest gender is immutable, and to be determined by oppressive societal structures, is itself a “new” idea, and newer myth, and is refuted even by the examples of mythology discussed above.

*Þrymskviða*, in the *Poetic Edda*, is regarded in traditional scholarship as a comedy (Acker and Larrington 2001, 492-4). I have presented elsewhere an interpretation highlighting trans narratives within, noting that this presents a tragic story of Þórr’s exploration of gender which is ultimately rejected out of fear (Richardson-Read 2021). The assumed comedy relies on viewing Þórr, as a cross-dressing bride, as humorous and, using Cass’s (2024) term, as “incongruent” (Bullough and Brundage 2000, 226–8). This is simplistic and restrictive, and evidence of Ghisleni and colleagues’ (2016) “binary binds.” I draw parallels here between the approach of cisheteronormative scholarship to Old Norse sources and the approach of the Review to the lives of trans people, neither is nuanced or exploratory of the subject in question. In *Þrymskviða* Þórr is asked to present as a bride to convince the giant Þrym to return the hammer Mjöllnir (Larrington 2014, 93).

Then said [Þórr], the vigorous god:  
“The Æsir will call me perverse,  
if I let you tie a bridal head-dress on me” (Larrington 2014, 95)

Þórr’s concern about a change in identity threatens Þórr’s sense of safety within the community of the Æsir. As I noted, Þórr’s acceptance is dictated by the Æsir and any deviation is determined to be perverse (Richardson-Read 2021). However, there is corroboration of Þórr’s new identity from others. Firstly, in Loki’s offer to support Þórr in this new expression.

Then said Loki, Laufey’s son:  
“I’ll go with you to be your maid,  
we two shall drive to Giant-land.” (Larrington 2014, 96)

Second, it is Þrym who offers Þórr validation in desire for Þórr.

Then said [Þrym], lord of ogres:  
“Bring in the hammer to sanctify the bride,  
lay [Mjöllnir] on the girl’s lap,  
consecrate us together by the hand of Var!” (Larrington 2014, 97)

A queer reading of *Þrymskviða* tells a different story of identity and desire as an individual who is ambiguous in their gender albeit in the context of a society that may reject difference and precariously support individuals outside cisheteronormativity. Northcraft (2022) argues for a consideration of *Þrymskviða* for its “trans innovations,”

despite the possibility of viewing Þorr comedically, in that this text still creates a space for trans existences, and in how gender is constructed in reading. Despite the precarity of Þorr's trans existence, Northcraft's (2022) reading supports such an existence no matter how *Þrymskviða* is read and thus reveals the source as trans mythology.

In developing our understanding of myth and story, there is room to evolve stories as our society does the same. This has been demonstrated with the previously discussed examples from Old Norse myth, typically known for its cisheteronormative framing. Gender fluidity is not a new "trend," as the Review's gender ahistoricism would suggest but is, in fact, present throughout history.

## **BONES TO PICK: EARLY ANGLO-SAXON CHALLENGES TO SEX/GENDER ESSENTIALISM (DAVISON)**

As many of the artefacts found in burials from the early Anglo-Saxon period are considered expressions of gender in material culture, they are used by archaeologists and historians to assign a gender to a burial. Broadly, weaponry and equestrian equipment are considered to indicate a male burial; while dress ornaments, beads, amulets, and spinning equipment indicate female burials. Brooches, buckles, and knives are found in masculine and feminine assemblages so are considered neutral items, not expressive of gender (Evison 1987, 82; Marzinzik 2003). These expressions of gender are assessed alongside skeletal features which are considered to be sexually dimorphic. In most cases the gendering of the goods matches the bodily evidence of sex (Härke 1992, Stoodley 1999). There are, however, burials which do not conform to this pattern. Here, I focus on those dated between the fifth and the eighth centuries, the "early" and "conversion" stages of the Anglo-Saxon period, in cemeteries across the early English zones of influence in Britain (Härke 1992; Knüsel and Ripley 2000; Lucy 1997, 2002, 2011; Stoodley 1999).

In a dataset containing 2,243 inhumation burials from 21 Anglo-Saxon period cemeteries, 71 burials were identified where the sex estimated on the basis of skeletal features were in contrast to the gendering of their accompanying artefacts. Of the estimations of skeletal sex, 94% were confident or probable, making it likely that this contrast was deliberate, and it can be argued to harmonise with transness as it is understood in the twenty-first century. A closer examination of two examples explores insights available into transness in this early medieval context, and tests how closely it relates to modern transness.

The person buried in grave 50 in Buckland Cemetery in Dover, whom we will refer to as "50," died between 525 and 575 AD, and was buried in the second phase of the cemetery's use between the late fifth and seventh centuries, and before the establishment of Christianity. They were tall, at around five foot and nine inches, and were classified as "adult or ?adult age unknown" (Evison 1987, 128). They were buried alongside a Frankish spearhead inlaid with silver, a Frankish buckle, a knife, and an iron pin with the top of the shaft curled into a spiral, in what is described as a "medium rich male grave" (Evison 1987, 175).

While much of 50's skull had been damaged, the mandible remained intact, as did the pelvis. These are considered the most dimorphic bones, and their presence allowed for 50's skeleton to be sexed, in apparent contrast to the masculine assemblage,

as “definitely female” (Cox and Mays 2000, 117–19; Evison 1987, 125). The alkaline nature of the soil at Buckland has eroded the human remains in this cemetery to such an extent that both dental enamel and post cranial skeletons were “too eroded to show surface morphology” (Evison 1987, 197–98). This precludes observations of indicators of stress and trauma which can offer details into an individual’s life and experiences. All that we can reliably extrapolate from the available skeletal remains is that 50 had reliable access to sufficient nutrition to reach their full growth potential, which aligned with the status suggested by their goods, and had skeletal features that are considered sufficiently feminine to have been archaeologically estimated as female.

How, then, should 50’s life be understood from this evidence? Conventional explanations might be that 50 was a cisgender man who has been mis-sexed due to feminine features, or perhaps instead a cisgender “warrior woman” who adopted masculine modes of expression but remained female to herself and her community. This is certainly how the now famous occupant of Birka chamber grave Bj.581 has been represented since the publication of their genomic data in 2017 revealed them to have been “female” (Price et al. 2019). I argue that we must also consider the interpretation that 50 was comparable to what we understand as a transgender man or transmasculine person, whose passage into manhood was signified by an association with weaponry and masculine forms of objects worn by both men and women, and whose community signalled their respect for his identity by dressing and equipping him appropriately in death. Which of these interpretations is closest to the truth is impossible to know, but unless we consider them all intimately, we are doing a disservice to those we study.

We will now turn to Grave 63 in the sixth- to seventh-century cemetery in Norton, one of the “highest-ranked female assemblages” in the cemetery (Sherlock and Welch 1992, 91). Its occupant, “63,” died between the ages of 25 and 35, likely in the sixth century. In the grave was found a rich array of grave furnishings. They had been buried with beads in a garland across their chest, wearing a cruciform brooch either to fasten a scarf, veil, or light cloak, over a tubular or *peplos* dress fixed at the shoulders by an annular brooch—an outfit that could not be more typically of Anglian style at the time (Sherlock and Welch 1992, 39, 163–64). The grave goods found give 63’s burial a Number of Artefact Types (NAT) score of 8, impressive against the average of >5 for comparable female burials from the same age range in the cemetery (Sherlock and Welch 1992, 19). It is the number, variety, and quality of these goods that makes 63’s burial high-ranking, and the associations of the items make it a thoroughly feminine burial.

Their skeleton was well preserved, with a complete skull and pelvis, and was estimated to be “definitely male” (Sherlock and Welch 1992, 163–64). This makes the only convenient trans-exclusive explanation for this burial, that 63’s sex has been incorrectly estimated and they were in fact a cis woman, unlikely. While the figure of the warrior woman is well known enough to be a convincing explanation for burials like 50’s, which does not challenge some essential “femaleness,” there exists no counterpart, no “domestic man,” which can hold burials like 63’s comfortably within cisnormativity. Again, I argue that we must also consider the possibility that 63 was comparable to what we understand as a transgender woman or transfeminine person, who lived into middle age and was buried by her community in fine clothes and jewellery representing their life-long acceptance of her and her own high-status in life. The lack of alternatives that can fit within cisnormativity for transfeminine burials is why trans-

femininity appears to be more prevalent in our interpretations of history, which may explain why the final report felt more secure in presenting an ahistoric gender history with trans men written out.

This is not to suggest that every Anglo-Saxon burial like the examples discussed above—the total number is uncalculated and perhaps incalculable—represents a life that equates exactly to transness. The conclusion is rather that we cannot discount evidence for a way of being in the early Anglo-Saxon period, particular to that cultural context, which had meaningful resonances with transness. It is equally true that to be a man or a woman in the same period is not directly comparable to the modern medicalised understanding of men and women today, but meaningful resonances between the two conceptualisations exist. The broader array of explanations that exclude transness for 50, unlike 63, might also offer insight into the final report's claims that there is a recent upsurge in transgender boys and young transmasculine people presenting to gender services. There are simply more ways to frame such people in history in a way that does not challenge cisnormativity. If we strive to be rigorous in our historical and archaeological practices, we must refuse to be satisfied and must strive to incorporate more nuance and possibility into our practices when they are offered.

## CONCLUSION

Since the publication of its final report, the Cass Review has drastically shifted the landscape of trans healthcare in the United Kingdom and beyond. The Review is responsible for the UK's puberty blocker ban, and global attempts to do likewise. We have noted throughout our paper the outstanding criticism that the Review has faced from experts in adolescent and trans healthcare. Further, our paper offers new criticism against the final report on the grounds of history, archaeology, myth, literature, and heresy-making. The gender ahistoricism seen throughout the final report has been done for a purpose. The erasure of gender multiplicity across deep time propagates anti-trans myths of transgender presentism. This presentism is, in turn, used as evidence for the transgender trend myth and "corrective" approaches to transition.

The final report's revisionisms of trans perspectives through gender ahistoricism have been demonstrated as hallmarks of heresiology, contributing to cultural discussions treating transness like a heresy. Moreover, the narrative of gender ahistoricism was further expounded by reading it as a work of mythopoesis, constructing an anti-trans myth that runs counter to historic mythology and the archaeological record; a construction that drives GMS. The sections in our paper demonstrate significant issues with the consequential recommendations of the Review. However, as cautioned, simply highlighting these facts won't break anti-trans ideology on its own, but we hope by presenting them here they become building blocks to be used in the effort to dismantle anti-trans bigotry writ large.

Furthermore, whilst the Review was the focus case study for this paper, our work has highlighted how and why gender ahistoricism might present itself in any work of gendered history that seeks to attack trans presents. Our paper challenges us to think more critically of revisionisms of history in this area, which may not appear as obvious as outwardly cis-supremacist historic exclusion, and to challenge anti-trans assertions from every avenue at our disposal.

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# “It Is Hard to Believe You Are Real and Enough When the World Is Constantly Telling You That You Are Not”: Understanding Nonbinary Impostor Phenomenon

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This qualitative study explores nonbinary impostor phenomenon (NIP), a phenomenon in which nonbinary individuals experience self-doubt about the validity of their gender identity. This study aimed to evaluate how nonbinary individuals define NIP and identify factors that influence NIP. To address these aims, we used reflexive thematic analysis and an intersectional lens to analyze data from 24 nonbinary adults who participated in either an individual interview or a focus group. Results showed that participants characterized NIP as internalizing the belief that being nonbinary is not real or that one is not nonbinary enough. These beliefs were accompanied by feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and lack of belonging, indicating that NIP may be tied to worse mental health. Factors that contributed to NIP included binary normativity, nonbinary normativity, interpersonal invalidation, and misgendering. In contrast, factors that protected against NIP included community validation, interpersonal validation, and internalized validation. Identity development and concealment were also identified as individual factors that influenced NIP. Overall, these results underscore how NIP is a result of broader systems of normativity. Further research is needed on NIP and its mental health impacts.

**KEYWORDS** nonbinary; minority stress; impostor phenomenon; normativity; thematic analysis

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Visibility and awareness of nonbinary identities (i.e., gender identities outside of the male/female binary) have significantly increased over the past decade (Holland and Kahlor 2023). The Williams Institute recently found that approximately 1.2 million Americans identify as nonbinary (Wilson and Meyer 2021), with nonbinary people making up over one-third of the broader transgender population (James et al. 2016). However, with this increased visibility, there has also been a recent surge in anti-trans legislation in which hundreds of bills have been introduced over the past few years that aim to limit or ban gender-affirming medical care, participation of trans girls/women in sports, LGBTQI+ curriculum in schools, and drag performances in public (Peele 2023). These bills represent a larger cultural stigma towards trans and nonbinary (TNB) people and the prevalent attitudes that discount TNB identities as valid or acceptable (Paceley et al. 2023).<sup>1</sup> Nonbinary people in particular have their identities invalidated daily (Johnson et al. 2024; Matsuno et al. 2024a). Whereas trans men and trans women may have their identities invalidated when others question whether they are “truly men or women” or “truly trans,” nonbinary people contend with both questions about whether they are “truly nonbinary” and messages that nonbinary identities are not real or valid altogether (Johnson et al. 2020). As a result, nonbinary people may feel insecure and doubtful about the validity of their own nonbinary identity (Matsuno et al. 2024b). This qualitative study aims to explore these experiences by defining and describing the experience of nonbinary impostor phenomenon (NIP) as well as understanding the factors that influence NIP.

1 We use the acronym TNB to encompass all people whose gender differs from their sex assigned at birth and those who do not exclusively identify as a man or woman. We use TNB rather than transgender or trans as some nonbinary people do not identify with a trans gender modality.

## IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON

The experience of impostor phenomenon or impostor “syndrome” is well documented in education literature. Impostor phenomenon is defined as when high-achieving people feel as though they are incapable or unintelligent despite their educational or career success (Bravata et al. 2019; Clance and Imes 1978).<sup>2</sup> Impostor phenomenon can be experienced by individuals in many different career domains (Barrow 2019; Fried-Buchalter 1992) and at various levels of achievement (Harvey 1981), regardless of an individual’s social identities (Chae et al. 1995; Clance et al. 1995). However, impostor phenomenon is more common in marginalized groups such as women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC; see Bravata et al. 2020; Mullangi and Jagsi 2019), and early definitions of impostor phenomenon codified marginalized identities such as being a woman as a core component of feeling like an impostor compared to peers (Clance and Imes 1978). Although most definitions of and research on impostor phenomenon focus on an individual’s achievements and success in areas like academics and career, some newer research suggests that individuals may experience impostor phenomenon related to other aspects of themselves, such as their identification with a group (Lahav et al. 2020). For example, one study found that some veterans report feeling like impostors when claiming their status as a veteran if they do not fit the cultural ideal of a “war hero” (Lahav et al. 2020).

There is not yet any published research that specifically focuses on nonbinary individuals’ experiences of impostor phenomenon or situates nonbinary individuals’ experiences of self-doubt within this framing. However, there are accounts within qualitative research in which nonbinary individuals describe feeling “not trans enough” or “not nonbinary enough” (Darwin, 2020; Garrison 2018; Matsuno et al. 2024a). Further online social media, blog posts, and anecdotal evidence suggest that nonbinary people sometimes describe their experiences of self-doubt around their gender identity as impostor phenomenon (Griswold 2019; Luna 2020). Given that most conceptualizations of gender are rooted in sex essentialism (i.e., the belief that sex determines gender) and binarism (i.e., the belief that only two genders exist; see Garrison 2018), nonbinary individuals may question the validity of their own gender (Johnson 2020). Further, nonbinary individuals contend with pervasive experiences of invalidation from others, in which others question the validity of their nonbinary identity or the validity of nonbinary identities altogether (Johnson 2020; Johnson et al. 2024; Matsuno et al. 2024a, 2024b; Rosati et al. 2025). This external invalidation may lead nonbinary individuals to be more vulnerable to questioning their own identity and struggling with feelings of self-doubt.

## THEORIES OF NORMATIVITY

Theories of normativity provide a framework for understanding NIP and how NIP may develop. *Normativity* refers to the cultural messages and structures that suggest there is both a “normal” way of being as well as a “morally correct” way of being (Copp 2001;

2 We use the term impostor phenomenon rather than impostor syndrome in order to avoid insinuating that this experience is due to an individual’s pathology. However, this phenomenon in previous literature and colloquially is most commonly referred to as impostor syndrome.

Smith 2010). Heteronormativity was the first theory of normativity introduced as a concept by Michael Warner in 1991. Heteronormativity can generally be defined as the social pressure to be and act heterosexual that stems from overarching beliefs that it is normal and moral to be heterosexual and that it is abnormal and immoral to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. (Marchia and Sommer 2019). Theories of normativity have been applied to gender, with cisnormativity referring to the social pressure to be and act cisgender and societal beliefs that being cisgender is normal, expected, and preferred to being transgender (Worthen 2016). Matsuno and colleagues (2024b) describe a new concept labeled binary normativity, which describes cultural systems and structures that are set up to prioritize people with binary genders (e.g., gender markers, bathrooms), leading to the erasure of and stigma towards nonbinary people.

These systems of cisnormativity and binary normativity were created and perpetuated through colonialism. Several Indigenous cultures have traditionally celebrated genders outside the gender binary (Robinson 2019). However, Indigenous genders outside of the binary have been usurped by binary narratives of gender stemming from white, European cultures (Darwin 2020; McNabb 2017), and the history of nonbinary genders has largely been erased. Nonbinary individuals are denied historical models and perspectives with which to understand their nonbinary identity and can feel adrift when trying to navigate their gender (Jackson et al. 2022).

### **Transnormativity and Transgender Legitimacy**

In addition to pressures from cisnormativity and binary normativity, TNB individuals face additional pressure in the form of transnormativity, the social pressure that stems from the belief that medically transitioning in a binary way is the “ideal” or “normal” way to be trans (Johnson 2016; Lindley and Budge 2023). Transnormativity is strongly connected to the history of gatekeeping gender affirming medical care, in which psychologists conducted lengthy evaluations to determine whether someone was “truly trans” and thus allowed to proceed with medical transition procedures (Marrow 2023). These evaluations required trans people to meet strict binary narratives of gender expression and report extreme and longstanding gender dysphoria (e.g., hating one’s genitalia) (Fraser et al. 2021; Vipond 2015). These institutionalized gatekeeping practices have since seeped into TNB communities, perpetuating a hierarchy of legitimacy that privileges and prioritizes those who meet the normative narrative of being trans (Johnson 2016; Sumerau and Mathers, 2019; Sutherland 2023). Further, transnormativity is situated within other oppressive structures such as racism, classism, ableism, sizeism, and so on. Therefore, the ideal notions of cis and trans “womanhood” and “manhood” are based on a combination of interlocking hierarchies with upper or middle class, white, able-bodied, thin, binary conforming trans people dominating social representation of transness (McIntyre 2018; Vipond 2015). TNB people enforce hierarchies of legitimacy through arguments about who “legitimately” falls under the TNB umbrella and questioning the authenticity of TNB people who fall outside of transnormative narratives (Darwin 2020; Shuster, 2017; Sumerau and Mathers, 2019).

Due to ongoing healthcare gatekeeping practices and gender policing within TNB communities, TNB individuals may internalize transnormative narratives, question the legitimacy of their own gender, and pressure themselves to “do transgender” correctly (Darwin, 2020; Fraser et al. 2021; Garrison 2018). Indeed, research on how

transnormativity impacts nonbinary individuals has found that nonbinary individuals can, at times, feel “abnormal” and “deviant” in their nonbinary identity, particularly when they do not match normative narratives such as the expectation of being binary and white (Nicolazzo 2016). Since nonbinary individuals who do not align with transnormative narratives, they report feeling as if they do not fit in with trans communities and feel as though they are not “trans enough” to claim membership of the trans label (Bradford and Syed 2019; Darwin 2020; Garrison 2018).

Nonbinary people may similarly feel social pressure to meet the dominant narrative of what it means to be nonbinary (Matsuno et al. 2024b). For example, one qualitative study found that nonbinary people reported self-doubts about whether they were “nonbinary enough” to identify as nonbinary, which the study describes as “self-invalidation” (Matsuno et al. 2024b). Participants described attributes of “looking nonbinary enough” as being “white, thin, able-bodied, trans masculine, assigned female at birth, young, and androgynous” (Matsuno et al. 2024b, 208). While it appears that nonbinary people contend with normative narratives of nonbinary legitimacy, research has yet to fully explore these narratives and how they impact nonbinary people.

## **CURRENT STUDY**

The combination of cisnormative, binary normative, transnormative, and nonbinary normative pressures may lead nonbinary people to experience an impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity. The pervasiveness of invalidation that nonbinary people experience and the lack of access to nonbinary history and role models may make nonbinary people question or doubt the validity of their own identity. In sum, nonbinary individuals may be uniquely likely to experience an identity-based impostor phenomenon, but this phenomenon has not been explored in the research. Given the lack of conceptual clarity about what nonbinary impostor phenomenon (NIP) is, how it is experienced, and what contributes to it, qualitative research is the most appropriate method for defining and describing the experience of NIP. The current qualitative study aims to answer the following research questions: How do nonbinary individuals define impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity? What factors influence nonbinary impostor phenomenon?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Our sample included 24 nonbinary adults living in the United States of America. Table 1 provides participants’ self-chosen pseudonyms, pronouns, age, race, gender identities, and sexual identities. Participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 53, with an average age of 33 ( $SD = 9.3$ ). Two-thirds of participants (67%) identified with at least one racial/ethnic minority identity, and the majority of participants were assigned female at birth (79%). Participants resided in 15 states in all regions of the US, with most reporting to live in an urban environment (54%), followed by suburban (33%), and a few living in rural areas (13%). In a check-all-that-apply format, participants described their gender as nonbinary (100%), trans (50%), genderqueer (42%), agender (21%), demi-girl (8%), demi-boy (4%), bigender (4%), trans woman (4%). No participants endorsed identify-

**Table 1. Participant Demographics**

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Age	Race	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity
afreketete	they/them/theirs	53	African American	Nonbinary Gender-Nonconforming	Queer
Ambiguity	they/them/theirs	35	white	Nonbinary	Bisexual
Arbor	they/them/theirs	28	white	Nonbinary, Agender	Pansexual
Aviva	they/them/theirs	27	Black	Nonbinary, Cute Boi	Lesbian, Demisexual
Billie	they/them/theirs, she/her/hers	33	African American	Transgender, Nonbinary	Queer
Cat	they/them/theirs	21	Asian	Nonbinary	Bisexual
Cosmic	they/them/theirs, she/her/hers, he/him/his, depends on context	32	Black	Agender, Nonbinary	Queer
Dorian	they/them/theirs	29	white, Ashkenazi	Genderqueer, Trans Masc	Queer
EJ	she/her/hers	21	Black American	Nonbinary	Straight
Enby	depends on context	38	Multiracial	Enby	Queer, Omnisexual
evening	they/them/theirs	30	white	Nonbinary Transfemme	Pansexual, Queer, Mostly t4t
Geoffrey	they/them/theirs, depends on context	27	Multiracial (Chinese, Jamaican, White)	Nonbinary, sometimes as a Gay Man (but Not as a Man Singularly)	Queer, Gay, Bi/Pan
Jae	they/them/theirs, she/her/hers	43	white	Agender, Genderqueer, Nonbinary	Bisexual, Pansexual
Jane	they/them/theirs	25	Chinese	Nonbinary	Pansexual
Kayla	they/them/theirs	23	Mexican-Filipino, Latinx/Latine, Asian	Genderqueer, Nonbinary	Queer
Lint	they/them/theirs	25	Peruvian	Nonbinary, Qariwarmi	Bisexual, Queer
MayBoo	they/them/theirs, depends on context	41	Colombian, Chibcha	Nonbinary	Queer, Lesbian, Bisexual, Pan
Mayhem	they/them/theirs	37	Asian	Nonbinary	Queer
Mickey	they/them/theirs, she/her/hers, depends on context	53	white, Celtic	Nonbinary	Straightish, Queer
Milka	they/them/theirs	29	white	Nonbinary	Queer
Quinn	they/them/theirs	37	Black	Nonbinary, Genderqueer, Agender	Queer, Pansexual
R	they/them/theirs, he/him/his, depends on context	27	South Asian	Nonbinary, Transmasculine	Queer
Stella	they/them/theirs	29	Native American (Creek)	Nonbinary	Pansexual
Tam	they/them/theirs, he/him/his, no pronouns	49	white	Nonbinary	Pansexual, Most Attracted Primarily to Characteristics often Labeled as Femme

ing as cisgender or Two-Spirit. The majority of participants used they/them pronouns (92%), and 38% used multiple pronouns or changed pronouns depending on the context. The majority of participants had a Bachelor's degree or higher (79%) and were employed full-time (63%) or part-time (20%). Half of respondents reported household annual income was less than \$50,000 (50%), 38% between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and 13% reported an annual income of over \$100,000.

## **Procedure**

All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Palo Alto University. Participants were eligible for the study if they identified under the nonbinary umbrella, were at least 18 years old, and lived in the US. Participants were recruited through social media advertisements on Facebook and Instagram, email listservs, and snowball sampling methods in June and November 2021. Participants initially completed a brief (5 min) online demographic survey and then were invited to either an individual interview or a focus group based on their preference. To obtain as diverse a sample as possible, we used purposeful sampling methods (Patton 2002) to invite participants from a variety of demographic backgrounds in terms of race, age, gender expression, geographic environment, etc. We prioritized inviting demographic groups that are often underrepresented in nonbinary samples, such as participants older than 40, BIPOC, those assigned male at birth, and those from rural areas. Further, we reviewed the open-ended responses on the screening survey to check for possible bots or fraudulent responders (e.g., identical written responses across surveys) and checked for demographic consistency (e.g., IP address and reported location match). There were no notable instances of bots/fraud. Initially, 154 individuals completed the initial demographic/screener survey, 35 individuals were invited to a focus group or interview, and 25 completed a focus group or interview. One participant was removed from our sample due to providing minimal responses during the focus group (e.g., "I agree"), and therefore, we did not have enough data to include them in our data analysis. There were no other instances of suspected fraudulent responders within the focus groups or interviews, as each participant gave detailed descriptions of their experiences of NIP. The research team decided to conclude data collection when data saturation was reached, or no new information was attained through interviews (Fusch and Ness 2015). Detailed notes were taken after each focus group and interview, with information about common patterns in the data. The research team had regular meetings during the data collection process to discuss initial themes from the data and to determine whether saturation had been reached.

We completed eight individual interviews and three focus groups to capture both the breadth and depth of nonbinary people's experience with impostor phenomenon. Focus groups provide an opportunity to obtain many diverse perspectives and allows participants to build upon one another's responses. We felt that focus groups may also be a validating experience for focus group members. However, we also felt that an interview format offered substantial benefits, such as the opportunity to ask multiple follow-up questions and an environment in which participants may be more open to sharing vulnerable experiences. We decided to offer both formats to attend to participants' preferences for sharing in a group or individual

setting. Combining focus group and interview data has been argued to maximize knowledge about the phenomenon being studied (Capielo Rosario et al. 2020; Purcell et al. 2016).

Each co-author facilitated one or two interviews and one or two focus groups. One focus group and all eight interviews were conducted via video on Zoom. Participants were also permitted to use the chat function during focus groups, and these responses were integrated with audio transcripts for data analysis. Audio transcription was produced through the Zoom software and then audited for errors (e.g., incorrect or missing words) and de-identified. The other two focus groups were conducted via synchronous text chats on Zoom. We chose to utilize text-based focus groups to reach participants who may have high levels of nonbinary impostor phenomenon and thus be less likely to participate in a video-based focus group with other nonbinary participants. Text-based focus groups have been recommended to help reach stigmatized populations by increasing anonymity (Abrams et al. 2015) and have been used with TNB populations who may prefer text-based formats due to experiencing increased gender dysphoria in video-based Zoom discussions (Matsuno et al. 2024b).

The interviews and focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured format with pre-existing questions, as well as the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and reorder questions as necessary. During data collection and recruitment, we used the term nonbinary impostor syndrome as we felt this would be the most recognizable term, and therefore, our interview questions used this terminology. We asked participants to describe their experiences of NIP, factors that influenced their feelings of NIP, and experiences of community connection and belonging. See the Appendix for the full list of focus group and interview questions. In both video and text-based focus groups, interactions between participants were encouraged. Participants in text-based focus groups interacted with each other by using the ^ symbol to indicate agreement with the previous statement and the @ symbol to address a specific focus group member. In both focus groups, participants often addressed one another and validated each other's experiences. Focus groups took 2 hours to complete, and participants received \$25 compensation. Interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes, and participants received \$10 compensation. We analyzed all questions asked during the interviews and focus groups, and the current manuscript is the only planned manuscript using this dataset.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

Our authorship team is diverse in terms of age, race, ethnicity, immigration status, neurodivergence, socioeconomic status, gender identity, gender expression, sexual identity, and professional role. Four out of five authors identify under the nonbinary umbrella, and all authors identify under the LGBTQI+ umbrella. Two of the five authors identify as people of color, both from Asian backgrounds. The researchers' professional roles at the time of data collection and analysis consisted of two doctoral students, one postdoctoral fellow, one assistant professor, and one full professor.

Our team actively and intentionally reflected on our positionality (i.e., socio-cultural identities, power and privilege, and lived experiences) throughout the data collection and analysis process. For example, we debriefed with each other after each focus group and wrote memos throughout the entire data collection and analysis pro-

cess to track our immediate reactions and reflections. We also had group discussions throughout the data analysis process about our own experiences of NIP and what factors influenced NIP for each of us personally (e.g., intersectional identities, identity development, etc.). These discussions helped us critically reflect on our interpretations of the data, such as whether we overemphasized themes we personally related to. We attended to privilege and power within our team (e.g., cisgender vs. nonbinary, professor vs. student) and strived to ensure that those with less power felt their input was equally valued (Lazard and McAvoy 2020).

### **Reflexive Thematic Analysis Approach**

We utilized reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019), which emphasizes the continual reflection and questioning of the researchers' assumptions and how they inform data interpretations. In this approach, researcher subjectivity is understood as a resource rather than a potential threat to finding an "objective truth" (Braun and Clarke 2019). We believe that research cannot be truly "objective," and we did not aim to "remove our biases" when analyzing the data. Rather, we aimed to be reflexive in identifying the potential gaps in our perspectives. We used both inductive and deductive approaches in our data analysis. We began with an inductive approach (bottom-up) by employing open coding. Once we reached the theme-generating stage of analysis, we all agreed that theories of normativity (e.g., Copp 2001; Johnson 2016; Smith 2010) seemed to be a helpful guiding framework in organizing our themes. We also recognized that we gravitated towards organizing our themes based on ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner 1994), such as recognizing influences on NIP from a broader societal level, an interpersonal level, and an individual level. Therefore, we used a deductive approach to refine and organize our themes. We also aimed to analyze the data using an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1991; Moradi and Grzanka, 2017) by taking into account how intersecting forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, ableism, sizeism, etc., influenced normativity, which in turn influenced NIP.

We followed the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019): familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report. The first four authors met regularly to create, define, and revise codes in an iterative process of coding, revising the codebook, and re-coding each transcript. We then grouped conceptually similar codes to generate overarching themes while using theories of normativity as a guiding framework. These themes were then reapplied to the transcripts to further evaluate the conceptual clarity of each theme. The fifth author served as an auditor and reviewed the transcripts, codebooks, and themes, and provided feedback on three occasions at different stages of analysis. The auditor provided useful feedback, which helped with the clarity and accuracy of the code and theme definitions.

## **RESULTS**

We organized our thematic analysis according to our two research questions: "How do nonbinary people define impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity?" and "What factors influence NIP?" Participant quotes have been cleaned with

unnecessary words and grammatical errors removed for readability. Theme definitions and examples are presented in Table 2.

### **Research Question 1. How do participants define impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity?**

#### *Nonbinary Impostor Phenomenon*

Participants described impostor phenomenon as holding or struggling with two belief systems: 1. that being nonbinary is not real, and 2. they are not nonbinary enough. These beliefs were often accompanied by feelings of self-doubt and insecurity and by questioning the authenticity and legitimacy of one's experiences and identity. When describing the first belief system, that being nonbinary is not real, participants brought up examples of a variety of cognitions, such as wondering if they were "crazy" or "insane" when trying to explain their nonbinary gender to others. For example, Ambiguity shared,

A lot of people have no idea what a nonbinary person is, and they are only really familiar with the gender binary. So I've been trying to explain to them that I am nonbinary or what it is. They're just like, that's not a thing... I know this is a thing, but all these other people don't, so like, am I the crazy one? I don't know.

Several participants similarly reported questioning themselves and ruminating on whether nonbinary identities are valid. Geoffrey reported questioning the validity of their gender identity "every 45 minutes." They described having the thoughts, "Am I nonbinary? On good days, I know that for myself, and on most other days, I don't." Several other participants regularly revisited thoughts that nonbinary gender may not be real, particularly when having to assert their nonbinary gender in a cisnormative society.

Among our sample, it appeared that the second belief system was more common, as almost every participant described NIP as wondering about the validity of their own nonbinary identity, often phrased as questions of whether they were "nonbinary enough." Dorian stated, "I think nonbinary people often feel that we are not 'nonbinary enough' unless we fit into a very narrow archetype of what the media portrays as androgynous, which is almost always white, young, very thin, non-disabled and masc/alternative presenting." Even participants who more easily refuted the belief that nonbinary identities are not real had lingering worries that they were somehow "not nonbinary enough." Some discussed worrying about how other trans or nonbinary people would view their gender. For example, Tam said, "There's a constant wondering if I'm not trans enough or if I'm not nonbinary enough to be part of the club." These quotes demonstrate that there is an underlying narrative about who is "nonbinary enough" and that this narrative is perpetuated within trans and nonbinary communities to determine and enforce group membership.

Beyond the belief systems that make up NIP, participants reported feelings associated with these beliefs, including self-doubt, insecurity, and lack of belonging. The feeling of self-doubt was one of the core defining feelings connected to NIP. Billie stated, "Sometimes that can kind of make me feel like, 'Well, you know you're just a fake, you're just phony, because you're trying to rebel' or something like that." Others like Jane similarly mentioned that "with this constant lack of basic respect and acknowl-

edgment as an individual, you may begin to feel fake and question yourself.” Lack of belonging was another feeling connected to NIP that came up. For example, Mickey shared, “I haven’t actually had a chance to really spend any time in any nonbinary communities... I find myself hesitating feeling like, do I really belong there?” Feeling like an impostor made participants question whether they belonged to nonbinary communities, and a lack of belonging appeared to increase NIP.

## **Research Question 2. What factors influence nonbinary impostor phenomenon? *Contributing Factors***

Participants received messages that reinforced the notion of the gender binary or messages about what the “right” way of being nonbinary was on a broader societal level, such as through social media, and on an interpersonal level, such as comments made by others. Using theories of normativity as a lens for understanding the messages participants received, we generated four subthemes to describe factors that contributed to the experience of NIP: *binary normativity, nonbinary normativity, interpersonal invalidation, and misgendering.*

### ***Binary normativity***

Many participants noted that most systems and structures are set up under the assumption that everyone exists within the gender binary, such as gendered bathrooms or gendered uniforms, etc. Jane stated, “When society/societies invalidate our identity, it makes us feel uneasy and unwelcome for just... being. For existing. Who could feel real when YOU know you’re right, but everyone else says you’re wrong?” In a similar vein, Dorian summarized, “Put simply, it is hard to believe you are real and enough when the world is constantly telling you that you are not.”

Many participants noted how the gender binary was assumed in most contexts and that there was a general sense that others did not believe that nonbinary gender identities existed, even if not said by others directly. For example, Tam said, “People don’t recognize that there is anything outside of the binary, basically. If I have to explain it, you can see the look on their face, like, ‘What is that? That doesn’t sound like a thing.’” Tam’s statement demonstrates an underlying social pressure felt by most participants to conform to the gender binary. Even among people who acknowledged the validity of trans identities broadly, there seemed to be a pressure to identify as either a trans woman or a trans man. “Are you a pink trans or a blue trans? No one has directly asked me that, but I feel it in how people respond,” evening. Participants were constantly absorbing binary normative messages, whether directly or indirectly, which contributed to feelings of NIP.

Additionally, many participants noted that they had little exposure to nonbinary people in media, which made it difficult to have an understanding of and confidence in their own nonbinary identity. Tam described thinking, “Well, what even is non-binary? Let alone what I’m supposed to be, look like, act like, talk like, etc.” Participants noted that not only did the lack of nonbinary people in media contribute to NIP, but some media explicitly denied the validity of nonbinary genders. Dorian explained,

There is also active antagonism towards trans and especially nonbinary people in a lot of media and political discourse, e.g., “I sexually identify as an attack helicopter,” and stuff like that. So sometimes it isn’t just the

**Table 2. Study Themes, Definitions, and Examples**

<b>Research Question 1. How do nonbinary people define impostor phenomenon related to their nonbinary identity?</b>	
<b>Themes</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<p><b>Definitions</b></p> <p>NIP can be defined as when a nonbinary individual internalizes aspects of one or both of two systems of belief:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That being nonbinary is not real</li> <li>2. That being nonbinary is real, but that one is not nonbinary enough</li> </ol> <p>These belief systems are typically accompanied by feelings of self-doubt, insecurity, and lack of belonging</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinking that one is a fraud or fake as a nonbinary person</li> <li>• Thinking that one's nonbinary identity is less valid than others</li> <li>• Feeling self-doubt and/or insecure about one's nonbinary gender</li> <li>• Feeling a lack of belonging among other nonbinary people</li> </ul>
<b>Research Question 2. What factors influence nonbinary impostor phenomenon?</b>	
<b>Themes/Subthemes</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
Contributing Factors	Factors that were reported to increase NIP
<i>Binary Normativity</i>	Cultural norms, messages, structures that convey that having a binary gender is expected, normal, and preferred
<i>Nonbinary Normativity</i>	Cultural norms and messages that convey that there is one singular normative way to be nonbinary
<i>Interpersonal Invalidation</i>	Behaviors or statements made by others that convey either 1. that being nonbinary is not real, or 2. that being nonbinary is real, but that one is not nonbinary enough
<i>Misgendering</i>	When others use names/pronouns or gendered language that do not affirm the person's gender
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies that enforce the gender binary, such as binary dress codes</li> <li>• Social pressure to fit within the gender binary</li> <li>• Lack of nonbinary representation in media</li> <li>• Dominant representations of nonbinary people as young, white, thin, androgynous, and trans masc</li> <li>• Social pressure to align with dominant portrayals of nonbinary people</li> <li>• Cisgender/heterosexual people denying that nonbinary is a valid identity</li> <li>• LGBTQI+ people gatekeeping who is "nonbinary enough"</li> <li>• Being referred to as a man or woman</li> <li>• Being misgendered after making intentional effort to be gendered correctly</li> </ul>

<b>Themes/Subthemes</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Protective Factors	Factors that were reported to decrease NIP	
<i>Community Validation</i>	Community environments and messages that convey either 1. that being nonbinary is real, or 2. that there are many valid ways to be nonbinary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diverse representations of nonbinary people usually online or on social media</li> <li>• Being part of a community (nonbinary, trans, or LGBTQ+) that validates nonbinary people who do not fit the normative narrative</li> </ul>
<i>Interpersonal Validation</i>	Behaviors or statements made by others that convey either 1. that being nonbinary is real, or 2. that there are many valid ways to be nonbinary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receiving social support related to one's nonbinary identity</li> <li>• Having one's gender affirmed by having others use the correct pronouns or gendered language</li> </ul>
<i>Internalized Validation</i>	Believing that one's nonbinary identity is real, valid, and enough, and rejecting binary and nonbinary normativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing self-confidence, self-acceptance, and pride</li> <li>• Believing that there is no "right" way to be nonbinary</li> <li>• Living in a way that is authentic to one's gender</li> </ul>
Individual Factors	Individual factors that influenced nonbinary people's impostor phenomenon	
<i>Identity Development</i>	Stage of identity development of their nonbinary identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The recency of identifying as nonbinary</li> </ul>
<i>Concealment</i>	Level of identity concealment of their nonbinary identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not being "out" at work, among family, etc.</li> </ul>

absence of validation and representation, it is also active cultural denial of our existence.

Dorian's example shows how media often portrays nonbinary identities as a joke and perpetuates the notion that they are made up and not valid. It was also common for participants to not know other nonbinary people personally, which also made it difficult for participants to have confidence in the validity of their nonbinary identity. R stated, "Also, I've never met another nonbinary person of my own ethnicity anywhere except online. Not seeing anyone like me be out as nonbinary, including myself, makes me feel like I don't exist sometimes." Binary normativity came both in the form of a lack of nonbinary representation as well as more direct messages that nonbinary identities were not valid.

### *Nonbinary normativity*

In addition to experiencing binary normativity, participants described receiving messages about the "right" or "valid" way to be nonbinary. The theme of nonbinary normativity was pervasive across almost all participants. Several participants discussed not seeing themselves represented in nonbinary media, which led them to question the validity of their own identity or have feelings of not being "nonbinary enough." Kayla spoke to the impact of nonbinary normativity,

When I was kind of coming to terms with my own identity about ten years ago, the only nonbinary representation I had seen was basically androgynous, white, skinny people, and, as somebody who grew up in a very traditionally Catholic Mexican house, only seeing white people as this model for nonbinary definitely kept me from being able to claim that nonbinary identity for myself for so many years.

Kayla's quote illustrates how nonbinary normativity, especially the stereotypical depiction of nonbinary people as white, prevented them from being able to claim their nonbinary identity.

Several other participants shared a similar view that the dominant narrative of what it meant to be nonbinary was associated with being young, androgynous, white, and thin. Stella commented on how only seeing representation of young nonbinary people increased their sense of NIP,

The majority of nonbinary people I see are like through TikTok or on Facebook. And even then, a lot of those people are significantly younger than me. You know so it's just difficult to feel included in that space. Like, I don't think I've ever seen anyone in their 50s who is nonbinary, you know what I mean? It almost feels like this is something that you're supposed to grow out of.

Other aspects of the nonbinary normative narrative were that nonbinary people must have gender dysphoria related to their bodies and use they/them pronouns. Participants discussed feeling social pressure from others to conform to these stereotypes in order to be viewed as "nonbinary enough." For example, Billie shared, "I think for a while I did kind of feel like, well, if I'm nonbinary, does that mean I have to use they/them?" Enby shared the social pressures of needing to have gender dysphoria to be trans or nonbinary, "Even as I navigated questioning my gender, I was told I couldn't be trans or nonbinary because I didn't feel dysphoric. So that made me question if I was

really nonbinary or not.” Others discussed how these social pressures to be “nonbinary enough” led them to question and doubt their own choices related to transition steps. Jae stated, “I have a very large chest, and I happen to like that about myself... I know some people like to have top surgery or wear binders and things, and that was never an issue for me. But sometimes I feel like someone might look at me and say like well, you don’t look nonbinary.” Participants were keenly aware of the dominant messages about what it meant to be “nonbinary enough,” either by receiving social pressure from others or through social media depictions of nonbinary people and narratives, which led to NIP.

Another important aspect of nonbinary normativity was that it was sometimes perpetrated by other LGBTI+ people, which appeared to carry a significant influence on NIP. R shared, “Even within the LGBTQ community, there’s an expectation for nonbinary people to be 100% neutral/androgynous in all aspects.” Dorian explained how nonbinary normative expectations are reinforced within nonbinary communities,

I also see a lot of reinforcement of stereotypes in many nonbinary spaces and communities. It looks like the people who fulfill the stereotypes getting the most praise and attention, and “passing” and affirmation advice tending to center whiteness and thin/muscular/medically transitioned bodies.

Dorian’s quote shows how nonbinary normativity may be perpetuated in more subtle ways by rewarding and centering those who meet the nonbinary normative narrative. There appeared to be the notion of a hierarchy within the nonbinary community of who was deemed the most “valid” versus who was seen as less valid. Cat further demonstrated this experience,

It almost feels like - because I do not fit a certain structure of what it means to be nonbinary or queer, I’m automatically just not considered a part of it. It’s not overt, but almost like the way things function and how people interact and the narratives that have shaped queer culture that has - that kind of affects how welcome or unwelcome I feel in the queer community in general.

Due to nonbinary normativity being perpetrated within LGBTQI+ communities, some participants, such as Cat above, described being unsure about whether they belonged in these communities. Arbor explained, “I definitely experience feelings of not being ‘queer enough’ for the community, and would fear being seen as a gate crasher somewhat, so that gives me pause as well.” Nonbinary normativity was a pervasive underlying pressure that was felt by almost every participant and was experienced broadly and within LGBTQI+ communities specifically.

### *Interpersonal Invalidation*

In addition to experiencing the often subtle, but constant binary normative and nonbinary normativity messages, many participants recalled instances of experiencing explicit invalidation from others. Mika discussed how invalidation from others impacted their feelings of NIP and pressure to conform to the nonbinary normative narrative,

There are people that have said, like nonbinary people don’t exist to me or why do they have to make up terms like nonbinary blah blah blah.

Which I think then pressures me to present in a way that is more clearly nonbinary to show, like, no, this does exist.

Others, too, expressed experiencing direct invalidation when asserting their nonbinary identity. EJ said, “People always have a way of telling nonbinary people that their gender is fake, which is difficult to deal with.” Mickey discussed how other people tried to convince them that they were actually a woman instead of nonbinary.

[Others] comparing me to very sporty cis women or you know tomboys or all of those sorts, and they say ‘they’re women, see, you’re a woman too! You know, just because you like to do these things doesn’t mean you’re not a woman.

Similar to nonbinary normativity, participants noted specific instances when other LGBTQI+ people made statements that invalidated their nonbinary identity. For example, Enby shared, “I’ve had a lot of toxic experiences with the greater trans community...It’s very much a ‘you’re not one of us,’ and I don’t get it. Because I thought that trans folks might understand the struggle a little more.” afrekete expressed how they felt that this often occurred in white queer spaces, “I feel like in the white queer community, I know that in like those spaces, there’s a lot of like well ‘you’re not really trans.” Cosmic explained, “I’ve seen people invalidate nonbinary people because of their own imposter syndrome or because they feel it threatens their own gender.” Cosmic’s quote shows how some trans or nonbinary people may invalidate others in order to justify the validity of their own identity. Quinn stated, “I’m definitely aware that there are trans people that wouldn’t accept me, and that hurts because I’ve got nothing but love for them,” demonstrating how invalidation from those within the LGBTQI+ community was particularly painful.

### *Misgendering*

Although misgendering had a similar impact as interpersonal invalidation, as it made participants question the validity of their nonbinary identity, it appeared to be a distinct experience. Misgendering was often unintentional, but nevertheless, it represented the underlying binary normative and nonbinary normative views of others, whereas interpersonal invalidation was more explicit and intentional. Participants noted that the consistency of being misgendered led to NIP. “I think that nonbinary people experience imposter syndrome related to their nonbinary identity when a nonbinary person is constantly misgendered,” Lint. Many participants described the frustration of almost never being seen as their true gender and how this made them question whether their identity was “enough.” For example, Arbor said, “I also get ‘sir’d’ a lot by strangers, like baristas or the checkout clerk. It makes me feel like I’m not doing enough. Has even happened when wearing my pronoun pin.” Arbor’s quote shows how constant misgendering can lead to internal questioning about one’s own identity. Misgendering was often a painful experience. Jane described that it “cuts like a knife.” While misgendering didn’t typically directly invalidate the existence of nonbinary identities or the validity of a person’s nonbinary identity, it indirectly left the impression that the person’s nonbinary identity was not real, which was then internalized, leading to NIP.

### *Protective Factors*

Validation emerged as the overarching critical factor for protecting against NIP. Participants described experiencing validation of their nonbinary identity in different contexts and socioecological levels. Therefore, we identified three subthemes: *community validation*, *interpersonal validation*, and *internalized validation*.

### *Community Validation*

Participants discussed how community-level validation was important to affirm that being nonbinary is real and can be uniquely expressed. Community validation included seeing diverse representations of nonbinary people and being a part of a community that affirms nonbinary people, especially those who do not fit the normative narrative. Participants described how online groups helped increase the visibility of the various ways to be nonbinary, thereby helping participants accept themselves more. Quinn illustrated the importance of an online community when they said,

Thankfully, because I'm in a lot of Facebook groups where people are constantly affirming others who ask if they're nonbinary enough, I've built up confidence and combat those thoughts with "you ARE enough" when it happens. Without those groups, I'd be more lost because I don't know any nonbinary people in real life.

As Quinn described, having a space to connect with other nonbinary people about shared experiences of doubting their identity seemed to help participants develop more confidence in their nonbinary identity. Furthermore, Aviva said, "It's the camaraderie of like making fun of the things that like make us sad most of the time... sometimes nonbinary trans people can feel very alone in their experiences, and I feel like memes are a quick way to just be like you're not alone, I have that shared experience." Aviva's quote depicts how online support can help nonbinary people feel less alone, which may also protect against NIP.

Community validation most often stemmed from LGBTQI+ communities or nonbinary communities. Ambiguity said, "The queer people that I have around me are really awesome and really affirming, and I've never had any sort of pressure from them, like maybe you should do this instead." In this example, the LGBTQI+ community provided Ambiguity a safe space in which they did not have to conform to pressures to fit a nonbinary normative mold, which encouraged them to express their gender more authentically. Mayhem (also described how connection to non-cis communities helped them feel less isolated, "I've had the fortune of building spaces, where it's predominantly non-cis...for me, these spaces are a lifeline to sanity, they are a lifeline to feeling less isolated." Participants also found that connection to nonbinary people who share similar racial and ethnic identities was beneficial to protect against NIP, as shown in Mayboo's quote, "I feel obviously the most comfortable in my community ... a lot of my friends are also nonbinary within my Latinx community."

### *Interpersonal Validation*

Validation within interpersonal relationships was also important to protect participants from NIP experiences. For instance, participants benefited from having social support systems that celebrated their nonbinary identity. Billie said,

My friends were the first people that I told about being nonbinary, and they were immediately like this is great and the next question somebody asked was, are we changing pronouns? Is there anything that we're doing now that you would like us to stop doing or that would make you feel uncomfortable? And that like meant absolutely everything to me.

In this example, Billie experienced meaningful validation from having their friends eager to support her gender journey. afrekete shared, "My family is very accepting like my parents never had a moment where they didn't accept me. And so I think that that has allowed me to go out in the world ... to feel okay on some deep level." Through having familial support, afrekete was able to develop self-assurance that may have helped protect them from internalizing invalidating messages.

Participants also shared how it was validating to have their gender affirmed by having the correct pronouns or gendered language used by others. For example, Stella said, "In that inner circle where my pronouns and stuff are respected, it does just feel a lot safer." Furthermore, participants named how validating it was when the people in their lives did not expect them to conform to binary gender roles. Aviva said, "I'm in a relationship where gender binary roles, like who does what, doesn't exist, and it's great because I then don't have to feel like I need to learn this feminine thing in order to satisfy whatever thing you want me to do." In this quote, Aviva illustrates how a lack of gendered expectations in their relationship enabled them to more freely be themselves.

### *Internalized Validation*

Participants were able to affirm for themselves that their nonbinary identity was real, valid, and enough. In doing so, participants could also reject binary and nonbinary normativity. Internalized validation helped participants foster self-confidence, self-acceptance, and pride. Jae expressed,

I gotta say the imposter syndrome is waning. Which is a good thing. I feel more confident because I decided at the heart of all of this, I just am who I am at the end of the day, I'm me and it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks.

Additionally, participants were able to challenge others' opinions and expectations of their gender expression as a nonbinary person. For example, Enby shared, "The whole point of being queer was to be unapologetically ourselves and liberated from expectation and permission."

Internalized validation also enabled participants to embrace the belief that there are many ways to be nonbinary and allowed them to feel freer to authentically express themselves. For example, Billie said,

What I've been trying to do is kind of tell myself all this is fluid anyway, and I can feel one way today and feel one way tomorrow, and so, if I decided this is what I want to do today, I don't have to do that tomorrow, and that's okay.

Billie's refusal to put themselves in a binary normative box allowed them to accept and celebrate their gender fluidity.

### *Individual Factors*

A couple of the factors related to the individual were reported to influence experiences of NIP but could not be easily categorized into contributing factors or protective factors. We identified two subthemes that describe additional factors that influence NIP: *identity development and concealment*.

#### *Identity Development*

Many participants reported that their arc of identity development influenced their level of NIP. For example, Jae said,

In the beginning, I was very hesitant to call myself nonbinary out loud at all. Because I didn't have the language for it before and once, I heard the language I didn't really reflect on how it relates to me so much ... it was kind of more gradual of a realization ... so I get that imposter syndrome feeling like I'm old and I worry that [other nonbinary people] are thinking well you just found out now.

There appeared to be a pattern in which participants experienced more NIP earlier on in their identity development, which was also exacerbated if they began identifying as nonbinary at an older age. Some participants, in turn, reported experiencing less NIP after a longer time identifying as nonbinary, like how afrekete mentioned, "I used to [experience impostor syndrome], but then you get over 50 and don't actually give a fuck anymore. It's not like being 20 where you care what everyone thinks and so then I'm just like I want to do it, so I do it." Similarly, Mayboo shared, "I feel a little bit like I'm growing into myself more and I don't necessarily feel imposter-y" showing how, over time, NIP tended to wane. These quotes indicate that the length of time identifying as nonbinary as well as one's own identity development process are often correlated with NIP.

#### *Concealment*

Another complicated factor that influenced NIP was the participants' level of concealment/outness and visibility/invisibility as a nonbinary person. Some participants reported experiencing more NIP when concealing aspects of their identity. R shared, "As a POC, I have to constantly weigh whether or not it's worth it to come out to members of my own ethnic community since many of them are still quite conservative. So, I never get to affirm myself to others in my community and have to be okay with being misgendered." In this quote, R grapples with feeling the need to conceal their nonbinary identity to protect themselves, while also experiencing more NIP due to being misgendered more often. Furthermore, some participants spoke about how not being perceived by others as nonbinary increased their experiences of NIP. For example, Stella shared how they struggled with this.

The sort of straight passing persona, the she/her feels like, it's a different person, it's a character, it's a role that I'm playing. And I don't know it's kind of hard to break out of that sometimes ... it's just I very rarely feel genuine ... And then I have to have that internal conflict with myself, Oh well, am I just trying to be difficult?

Stella speaks to how their NIP was exacerbated by their invisibility as a nonbinary person and concealment of their true gender identity, which made them feel less

genuine. Similarly, Quinn discussed being perceived as a trans man by their co-workers rather than nonbinary. They shared, “How I was perceived in the clothes made me question my nonbinary identity a little,” demonstrating how their invisibility as a nonbinary person contributed to their feelings of NIP.

## DISCUSSION

This study provides evidence that NIP is experienced by nonbinary people and should be studied further. Through our study, we generated a community-based definition of NIP that centers the voices of nonbinary people. NIP appeared to be the internalization of normative narratives about whether nonbinary identities are real and valid and what type of nonbinary person is real and valid. The internalization of these normative narratives led to self-questioning and self-doubt about the validity of one’s membership to a nonbinary identity and nonbinary communities. Nonbinary participants struggled internally to prove to themselves and others the validity of their group membership. Further NIP may also lead nonbinary individuals to question whether they belong in nonbinary communities, which may negatively impact their connection with other nonbinary people and feelings of community connectedness.

Additionally, our study investigated influences on NIP and showed how both binary normativity and nonbinary normativity contributed to NIP. Binary normativity and nonbinary normativity are similar yet distinct constructs from cisnormativity and transnormativity and have been underexplored in research (Matsuno et al. 2024b). Our study shows that at least one impact of these normative belief systems is increased feelings of NIP. It could be argued that NIP reflects the internalization of binary normative and nonbinary normative beliefs and could be a unique form of internalized stigma. Further, it appeared that binary normativity and nonbinary normativity not only directly contributed to NIP but also promoted invalidation and misgendering on an interpersonal level, which, in turn, also contributed to feelings of NIP. Future quantitative research is needed to confirm these relationships and gain a better understanding of the effects of binary and nonbinary normativity on NIP and other outcomes among nonbinary people.

Additionally, our results highlighted the intersectional nature of systems of normativity, as the nonbinary “norm” was defined as having several other dominant identities, such as being white, non-disabled, thin, and transmasculine. Therefore, nonbinary people with other marginalized identities do not fit the “norm” and, therefore, may be more vulnerable to experiencing higher levels of invalidation and subsequent NIP. Similar to research on transnormativity (Johnson, 2016; Sumerau and Mathers, 2019), nonbinary normativity was often perpetuated within LGBTQI+ communities through the inclusion and centering of those who meet the norm while excluding and invalidating those who do not. For example, several BIPOC participants reported experiencing invalidation from their white nonbinary peers or felt that white nonbinary people were the “gatekeepers” of who was “nonbinary enough.” These experiences align with past literature on intersectional microaggressions, which describe the unique negative effects of intra-community microaggressions (e.g., LGBTQI+ BIPOC experiencing racism within LGBTQI+ communities) (Cyrus 2017; Huynh et al. 2024). Intra-community microaggressions can lead to increased identity conflict within LGBTQI+ BIPOC,

in which they feel like their racial identity, sexual identity, and gender identity conflict with each other (Sarno et al. 2015). Therefore, nonbinary normativity may have a negative impact on community connectedness and identity development, especially among nonbinary people who are outside of the normative narrative (e.g., BIPOC, transfeminine, disabled, older, etc.).

Our results support previous research that indicates that invalidation and misgendering are prevalent stressors experienced by nonbinary people on a daily basis (Johnson et al. 2020; Matsuno et al. 2024b). Previous research found that invalidation mediated the association between nonbinary gender identity and poor mental health while controlling for other minority stressors and sociodemographic factors (Johnson et al. 2024), indicating that invalidation has a significant negative impact on mental health for nonbinary people. Additionally, misgendering has also been shown to be associated with psychological distress (Jacobsen et al. 2024; Matsuno et al. 2024a; McLemore 2018). Our study shows that these stressors also enhance NIP. It is possible that invalidation and misgendering harm mental health through NIP; however, quantitative research is needed to test this hypothesis.

Finally, our study highlights the importance of validation as a protective factor at a community, interpersonal, and intrapersonal level. Gender validation may be a similar but distinct construct from gender affirmation or support, and should be studied further for conceptual clarity. We defined validation as not only believing and accepting nonbinary people's identities but also as promoting belief systems that oppose normative narratives about gender and instead validate all types of gender narratives. At a community level, gender validation included having diverse representations of nonbinary people and explicit validation of nonbinary people outside of the normative narrative. Several participants noted that having role models outside of the norm and seeing a diverse array of experiences among nonbinary people provided a validating environment that lessened their feelings of NIP. Several past studies have shown the positive effects of social support on mental health among TNB people (e.g., Budge et al. 2013). However, our study further highlights that having others specifically validate one's nonbinary identity helped combat NIP. Finally, resisting normative messages and instead internalizing validating messages about their gender led to reduced NIP and increased feelings of self-confidence.

## **Limitations**

Although we used purposeful sampling to intentionally obtain a diverse sample in regard to race, assigned sex, and age, our sample was still missing representation from some demographic groups, such as those from rural areas and with lower educational backgrounds. Further, we did not collect demographic information on disability status and size, which may have been important social identities that influenced NIP, as many participants noted that being non-disabled and thin were characteristics of the nonbinary "norm." Half of our sample identified as trans in addition to nonbinary, and a few discussed their feelings of impostor phenomenon in regard to taking on the label of being trans. However, given that previous research has explored nonbinary individuals' feelings of self-doubt in regards to identifying as trans (e.g., Darwin 2020; Garrison 2018), and our research questions were geared towards understanding NIP specifically, we did not analyze these quotes. Finally, our results may be influenced by the

interview questions posed, and therefore, there may be other influences on NIP that are not captured in our results. For example, the interviews included more questions about what factors contributed to NIP and fewer questions about what decreased NIP, and therefore, our themes may not fully represent the full breadth of factors that can protect against NIP.

### **Future Research**

NIP was characterized by feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and lack of belonging, indicating that NIP may be tied to worse mental health; however, more research is needed to confirm how NIP is related to various mental health outcomes. In order to further understand whether NIP is predicted of worse mental health in quantitative research, it would first be important to create a measure of NIP. This measure could capture both dimensions of this construct identified in the current study: (1) the belief that one's nonbinary identity is not real, and (2) the belief that one is not nonbinary enough. Experiences shared by the participants in this study can be used to help develop measure items that are aligned with community experiences. Having a valid and reliable measure of NIP would advance research by identifying the mental health impacts of NIP as well as whether NIP limits resilience factors such as community connectedness or gender identity pride. Further, participants discussed that NIP prevented them from engaging in nonbinary communities or broader LGBTQI+ communities. Therefore, NIP may indirectly negatively impact mental health by decreasing engagement with supportive resources.

Further, future research could identify predictors and moderators of NIP to confirm whether the contributing factors identified in this study are generalizable. Finally, given that invalidation and misgendering have been shown to predict psychological distress, it would be helpful to test whether NIP mediated this relationship. Answering these questions quantitatively can help establish appropriate targets for interventions that aim to decrease health disparities and increase positive mental health outcomes among nonbinary people.

### **Implications**

Work, school, and healthcare settings would benefit from training about nonbinary identities and experiences to create more equitable and less harmful environments for nonbinary individuals. It would be especially important for training to cover key topics such as binary normativity (e.g., cultural systems that prioritize binary genders, such as bathrooms for men and women only), trans and nonbinary normativity (e.g., social messages about the “ideal or normal” way to be trans or nonbinary), interpersonal invalidation (e.g., questioning the validity of nonbinary identities), and misgendering (e.g., using the wrong name or pronouns). Providing this type of education can decrease these stigmatizing experiences that nonbinary people face in almost every environment in their day-to-day lives and, in turn, lessen the health disparities they experience. Further, combating binary normative beliefs about gender can benefit women and men as well by allowing for more freedom to express themselves authentically. Training should also encourage various systems to make structural or systemic changes to combat binary normativity, such as creating gender-inclusive restrooms and using gender-neutral language on forms (e.g., use they instead of he/she). Mental

health providers can explore how normativity is impacting their nonbinary clients and help clients find community validation, as well as support them in rejecting normative beliefs and internalizing more validating beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored the phenomenon of nonbinary impostor phenomenon, which appears to be a unique stressor commonly faced by nonbinary people. We used qualitative interviews to generate a community-based definition of NIP, defined as internalizing the beliefs that 1. Being nonbinary is not real, and 2. One is not nonbinary enough. These beliefs were associated with feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and lack of belonging. NIP stemmed from systems of normativity, invalidation, and misgendering in which nonbinary people have their identities questioned and erased on a daily basis. Experiencing gender validation and messages that validate a wide variety of nonbinary experiences appeared to combat NIP. More research is needed on the psychological impacts of NIP and ways to combat normative systems and reduce NIP.

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## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. To start, can you share your pseudonym and pronouns if comfortable, and answer this icebreaker question: If your gender was a color, what color would it be?
2. Impostor syndrome is an internal experience of “phoniness,” or feeling as though one does not deserve their position or status based on their abilities, accomplishments, and characteristics. In what ways do you think that nonbinary people experience impostor syndrome related to their nonbinary identity?
  - a. Impostor syndrome is often talked about as it relates to work and school, how do you feel about this terminology being used to describe feeling like an impostor as a nonbinary person?
  - b. Have you seen it used among LGBTQ+ people and nonbinary people in particular?
3. In what ways has impostor syndrome influenced the gender identity labels you use?
  - a. How does this vary in different situations or with different people?
4. Do you ever feel like you are “not nonbinary enough”?
  - a. Can you give any examples of situations or times you felt this way?
  - b. How do you feel like your other identities play into these situations?
  - c. Do you ever question whether you are actually nonbinary?
  - d. Can you give any examples of situations or times you felt this way, and why?
5. Are there ever times when you feel pressured to conform to a stereotypical depiction of being nonbinary?
  - a. Can you give examples of times this has happened?
  - b. Can you give examples of what you feel pressured to change?
6. What have cisgender/heterosexual people said or done that add to the pressure to conform to a stereotypical depiction of being nonbinary?
  - a. What have cisgender/heterosexual people said or done that implies you are “not nonbinary enough”?
7. What have trans/nonbinary/cis sexual minority people said or done that add to the pressure to conform to a stereotypical depiction of being nonbinary?
  - a. What have trans/nonbinary/cis sexual minority people said or done that implies you are “not nonbinary enough”?
8. How does it impact you when you get messages about “not being nonbinary enough” from trans, nonbinary, or cisgender sexual minority people? Can you give examples?
  - a. How is the impact different from when you get these messages from cisgender heterosexual people?
9. How well connected do you feel to nonbinary communities? What are some things that make you feel connected or disconnected?
  - a. Where do you find nonbinary communities?
  - b. Who do you find in nonbinary communities?
  - c. Do you feel that there are certain intersecting identities/characteristics that you find most often in nonbinary communities? If so, what identities?
10. Today we’ve discussed imposter syndrome, which includes feelings such as you “don’t really belong,” “aren’t really nonbinary,” or are unwelcome in communities.” After our discussion today, how do you conceptualize/understand “nonbinary imposter syndrome?”

# The Rise and Fall of “Tranny” in Australia

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Language around gender diversity is constantly evolving. Terms that previously were markers of pride are now slurs, while other words coined by the medical profession and used for decades are now considered offensive. Yet, identity is something very personal, and there are many trans people who still self-identify with older terms. They are wary of younger trans people who may police identity, exacerbating a perceived generation gap among trans people. Trans debates over language are less about reclaiming slurs, and more about what happens when previously acceptable words go out of fashion and become offensive. This article explores some of the changing terminology involving trans people in Australia. Drawing on oral history interviews, observations, interactions, media, and archival records, it focuses especially on the word “tranny.” That term is now considered one of the most offensive words someone can call a trans person. In the 1990s, though, the word was a marker of pride, and one which some older trans people continue to use. This article explores the changing position of “tranny” and other words within the trans community. It poses some reflections about how the loss of historical context hinders communication across generations.

**KEYWORDS** language; Australia; history; generations; terminology

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**Tranny:** Once a self-applied term used within trans communities to signal familiarity, comfort, casualness, informality, affection, and insiderness, many younger trans people now consider it a disparaging term that is most often used by cisgender people to ridicule, trivialize, or sexualize transgender people, particularly trans women. There is a strong generational difference of opinion about the use of the word, with older trans people still preferring to use it—albeit no longer in public discourse, and usually out of earshot of censorious young people. (Stryker 2017, 35)

I want to start this article by sharing two stories of encounters I had while conducting research for a recently completed Australian Research Council funded project on Australian transgender history (DP180100322).<sup>1</sup> The first happened early in the project in 2018. I was scheduled to meet with a trans woman in a café near my office to talk about a possible oral history interview. For reasons unknown, I could not access my email at home in the morning. When I arrived at my office and opened Outlook, there was a long string of angry emails overnight. The person had read the participant information letter and had a visceral reaction when she saw that I used the word “transgenderism” in the opening paragraph. She said that this was a word associated with trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs; see Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent 2020). Therefore, I must be a TERF and she did not trust my motives or research. She said she would be at the café until 9:45. If I were not there by then to explain myself, she would leave and cease contact. It was 9:30 when I saw this email.

I ran to the café, where she proceeded to scold me for several minutes. When she finished, I explained that I had no idea that transgenderism was a word associated with TERFs and I apologised for this great error. I also said that I appreciated this learning opportunity because it meant I could change that text and ensure that I never used the word again. She said that as someone who was doing research in this space, I should have known—and she had a point. She directed me to the *GLAAD Media Reference Guide* (GLAAD 2022), which lists transgenderism among the expressions to avoid.

From our discussion, the person could see this was a genuine mistake and our conversation turned positive. I explained that I used transgenderism because it is a noun whereas transgender is an adjective (I now know transness is a more appropriate noun denoting the state of being trans). Honestly, I used the word for grammatical reasons. Furthermore, I did not know it was offensive because a popular scholarly journal was called the *International Journal of Transgenderism*, and nobody else I had interviewed said anything about the word transgenderism. Tracing the etymology of the word transgender, archives scholars K.J. Rawson and Cristan Williams (2014) note that trans pioneer Virginia Prince used “transgenderist” in 1978. In the early 1990s Prince even sought credit for coining “transgenderism” and related terms. Australian activists and other trans people used the word in the 1990s. Later in my research I came across a document from a trans group in Aotearoa New Zealand which used the word as early as 1978 (Hedesthia 1978).

Later, I asked a few of my trans informants who had been longstanding activists what they knew about the word transgenderism. Most did not find the word offensive, but one directed me to Sheila Jeffreys’ (2014) anti-trans book *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*. That book is what reshaped the meaning of the word transgenderism from simply a noun which referred to the state of being transgender, to defining transgenderism as an ideology and political movement (supposedly) invented by men to deny sex difference and which is harmful to women. In the wake of Jeffreys’ book, transgenderism rapidly changed from a word which affirmed gender diversity to one that denies the very existence of trans people. Incidentally, in 2020 the aforementioned journal changed its name to the *International Journal of Transgender Health*.

1 Readers are advised that this article includes language about trans and gender diverse people that is now generally considered outdated and offensive.

My other story is more recent. In April 2023 I was working with the Gender Centre and Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) in Sydney to run a focus group with trans elders to discuss their historical experiences of hate crimes. The Gender Centre is Australia's longest running trans support and advocacy group, first founded in 1983. SWOP, founded in 1990 as the successor to the Australian Prostitutes Collective, is the main sex workers union in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state (Riseman 2023b, 92–103). I conducted this work to prepare a report and submission (Riseman 2023a) to the NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into LGBTIQ Hate Crimes. The NSW government set up this inquiry in April 2022 to investigate the perpetration of, and police responses to, hate crimes against LGBTIQ+ people between 1970 and 2010. The commission had received numerous submissions by cisgender gay men and lesbians, but staff were having difficulty reaching trans communities. The Gender Centre, SWOP, and I brought together community elders as part of a community engagement project to fill this substantial gap about historical trans experiences of hate crimes.

Early in the focus group, one participant used the word “trannies” to describe herself and the other trans sex workers who worked in the 1980s/1990s around Premier Lane and William Street in Sydney. She then stopped herself, realising she had used a word that is now considered a slur. Nobody said anything, and very quickly the other participants were all using “tranny” to describe themselves and others. For this community of older trans women, the word tranny was not only unproblematic—it was how they identified. Still, the hesitancy the first person showed was an indicator that they were worried about negative reactions. They had to ensure that they were in a safe space to use the word.

Going through the history of trans people in Australia, the word tranny appears a lot, especially in the 1990s. Moreover, several of the people I interviewed used the word to describe themselves or other trans people. This included Australia's most prominent trans activist, Roberta Perkins (see Riseman 2023b, 97–102), whom I interviewed a few months before her untimely death. In this article I go through that history in more detail, tracing the rise of the word tranny as a source of pride in 1990s Australia and then trying to pinpoint when and why it turned into a slur. I also make some broader observations about the effects of changing language on the trans community. Although this article focuses on Australia, much of the analysis will have resonance in other Western, English-speaking countries.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

The evolution of language around gender diversity has been a rapid process, especially in the new millennium. New understandings of gender have always given rise to fresh terms and labels. One intriguing distinction about the debate over tranny is that, unlike more prominent fights over terms like “queer,” this is not a historically offensive word being reclaimed (Jones 2023). Rather, it is a word that previously community members used with pride, but now it is considered a slur. Moreover, the move to depathologise transness has led activists to shun other older terms associated with medical models, such as “transsexual” and “transvestite.”

Trans writers and scholars in transgender studies have written about the power of language and labels. For many trans people, labels were important for their identities. They gave a sense of connection and knowing that there were others out there “like them” (Riseman 2021a). The literature on the relationships between trans language, identity, and labels focuses primarily on two related issues. The first is about language as power to define what it meant to be trans and what came with that power. Philosopher Michel Foucault (1990) uses the term biopower to describe the way that labels, definitions, and the discourses that surround them can contain people within boundaries of who does, and who does not, fit the identity category. Until the 1990s, it was primarily doctors—especially psychiatrists—who wielded the power to define transness and the “criteria” someone needed to be trans.

David Valentine (2007) explores the ethnography of the term “transgender” and how it emerged in the 1990s. Transgender was a malleable identity which challenged medical power (and language), while also seeking to unite various groups of gender nonconforming people. Transgender as a label became entwined with activism around recognition, rights, and liberation for those who identified and lived in a gender different from their sex assigned at birth. This links to the second relevant line of scholarly research in transgender studies: exclusion in language. Building on Foucault’s points about biopower: by defining, we inherently exclude. Even as activists intended for transgender to be an umbrella term, it did not necessarily resonate with people of colour or those living on the margins like sex workers (Valentine 2007). More recent scholars have extended this critique, showing the ways that transgender reproduces ideas of whiteness, and how white constructions of transgender or transness do not translate to, and therefore may disempower, other genders or identities in the Global South (Dutta and Roy 2014; Jarrín 2016).

The historical evolution and debates over tranny are different from these other examples. Notwithstanding the aforementioned shortcomings, the evolution of language has, for the most part, been about *trying* to be more inclusive. There is less research on how the (supposedly) more inclusive terms have come at the expense or rejection of older terms and those who identify with them. Indeed, Valentine (2007, 103) observed that “the imagined community is an imagining of one group, where other putative members might *not* imagine themselves as belonging to such a community, or might not even know that such a community exists.”

Philosopher Katherine Jenkins uses the expression “ontic injustice” to describe this phenomenon when:

social kinds [categories/labels] can be such that individuals who are socially constructed as members of those kinds can be wronged by the very fact of being socially constructed in that way. I term this form of wrong “ontic injustice”: ontic because the wrong operates through social ontology, and injustice because the wrong is a consequence of our collective social arrangements. (Jenkins 2023, 15)

As this article will show, the evolution and debates over the word tranny represent multiple forms of ontic injustice. For those who find the word offensive, to be labelled or grouped with tranny is ontic injustice. For those who identify with the word, being *denied* the right to use it represents ontic injustice. What fundamentally lies beneath people’s clinging to various labels is a fear of erasure.

The contemporary debate over tranny and trans language and identities more broadly exposes a generation gap—or often a *perceived* generation gap. Understanding the different meanings attached to identity labels and how and why they have changed over time can help to bridge that generation gap and affirm a model of what Surya Monro and Janneke Van Der Ros call gender pluralism: creating space for new identity categories while not erasing old labels, and celebrating a broad spectrum of genders that supports all trans people’s identities (Monro 2005, 86–88; Monro and Van Der Ros 2018, 72).

Although conceptually this article contributes to transgender studies, methodologically this is a history article. The main sources are a mix of oral histories conducted with 104 trans Australians between 2017 and 2022, media reports from both the mainstream and LGBTQI+ press, personal archives kept by trans interview participants, and other government and archival sources. The oral histories were with a mix of trans activists, past and present, and “ordinary” trans folk. I recruited interview participants through a variety of means. I invited representatives from trans organisations in every state and territory onto a project advisory group. They generously suggested people to interview and sometimes facilitated introductions. Snowballing proved effective for the rest of the interviews, as so many participants connected me to other trans people, especially fellow activists. I also worked with the support of the administrator of the Facebook group Sistergirls & Brotherboys + Gender Diverse Mob to recruit Black, Indigenous, and people of colour. All interview participants had the option to be identified or given a pseudonym; those with a pseudonym are in quotation marks. Interview participants also had the choice of whether their interviews would be deposited in a designated archive. I am pleased that all participants agreed to this. Copies of the interviews and transcripts are accessible at the Australian Queer Archives (AQuA) in Melbourne.

Most of the press coverage comes from material kept in personal archives, mainstream newspaper databases, and from the holdings of AQuA. I have written elsewhere about the value of personal archives as sources for trans history (Riseman 2022c). Some of the sources from personal archives include scrapbooks with newspaper clippings, copies of the Gender Centre’s quarterly magazine *Polaré* from 1994 to 2000, and select issues continuing until 2005. I scanned *Polaré* issues and other scrapbook clippings with text recognition capability and searched for the terms “tranny,” “trany,” and “trannie” (as well as plural forms). AQuA contains comprehensive catalogues of the Australian LGBTQI+ press since the 1970s. They have complete collections of more prominent weekly publications from the 1980s to the 2010s like the *Sydney Star Observer*, *Brother-Sister*, *Lesbians on the Loose (LOTL)*, and *Capital Q*. These weekly publications and others are all searchable online through the Archives of Sexuality and Gender database. I conducted keyword searches for terms like “tranny,” “trany,” and “trannie” (as well as plural forms). I also searched the Archives of Sexuality and Gender’s international LGBTQI+ media for those keywords. Finally, I used newspaper database Factiva to search mainstream Australian newspapers as far back as 1988. As explained in the next section, I did not find any references to “tranny” in the mainstream press.

## “TRANNNY” AS A MARKER OF PRIDE (1970S–1990S)

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the mainstream Australian press, women’s interest magazines like *Cleo* and *Woman’s Day*, and tabloid publications like *Australasian Post* regularly featured stories about trans people. Often, they contained headlines designed to shock and mock, with the expression “sex swap” a common moniker (King 1993, 101–09; Riseman 2021a). Absent in all of these articles is the word tranny; nor does the word appear in the gay and lesbian press in Australia or internationally for much of this period. There is one notable exception: a 1977 article in *The Bulletin* political magazine noted that the Melbourne chapter of Gay Liberation had voted American tennis player Renée Richards as “Tranny of the Year” (Saw 1977, 22).

This early reference gives clout to a hypothesis: the word tranny may have emerged in Australia. Australians have a linguistic propensity for abbreviating words with a -y/-ie or -o on the end (Moore 2014, 90–91). For example, Australians call a tradesperson a tradie and shorten breakfast to brekkie. The Oxford English Dictionary’s (2024) earliest recorded use of tranny is from 1979—two years after Melbourne Gay Liberation. The first references to tranny in Australia’s gay and lesbian press are from 1987 and 1988 in the classifieds. It appears first in an advertisement for an escort service called “Transsexuals Sydney” (*Campaign Australia* 1987, 70), then in some of the personal ads (*Outrage* 1988, 33). Globally, it would take time before tranny became more common.

The 1990s marked a global change in language about trans people. Activists pushed to depathologise transness and to adopt more inclusive, social constructivist understandings of gender. Sandy Stone’s essay “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (1991) became a global manifesto against medicalisation (Plemons and Straayer 2018, 164). Leslie Feinberg’s *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (1992) inspired activists to use transgender as an umbrella term for anyone who identified with a gender other than their sex assigned at birth. Indeed, activists in Brisbane, Sydney, and then Melbourne began using “transgender” rather than “transsexual” or “transvestite” in their organisation names as early as 1992 (Riseman 2023, 129–30). Accompanying this language shift was the rise of tranny among trans activists. One early example is an August 1991 article published in Toronto’s *Quota Magazine* titled “The Experiences of a Lesbian Transsexual.” The author expressed distaste for clinical terms like transsexual, gender dysphoria, and gender reassignment. Instead, they asserted: “How about ‘transie’ or ‘trannie’? Has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” (Thompson 1991, 6). This Canadian commentary marked a rare appearance of the word in the international LGBTQI+ press.

Only in Australia did activists and the LGBTQI+ press commonly use tranny in the early 1990s. For instance, over a six-month period from 1993 to 1994, the Sydney-based activist group Transgender Liberation Coalition ran the Tranny Anti-Violence Project.<sup>2</sup> This group recorded and documented experiences of hate crimes perpetrated against trans people.<sup>3</sup> Transgender Liberation Coalition activists Aidy Griffin and Norrie regularly wrote columns in the LGBTQI+ publications *Capital Q* and *Sydney Star Observer*

2 “DRAFT Tranny Anti-Violence Pilot Project Report,” unpublished manuscript, 1994, courtesy of Shan Short.

3 Shan Short, interview with author, Zoom, April 30, 2021.

which used tranny in the headlines and text. In a 1993 article headlined “Tranny Pride,” Norrie wrote: “There are many things that make us transys special because we are transys, because we are who we are, not people of fixed and unchanged single gender... And taking a bit of pride in ourselves as transys sure beats the old sad low self esteem—‘Oh God I hope they don’t find out’—shame system” (Welby 1993, 22). Tranny also commonly appeared in the Gender Centre quarterly magazine *Polare* throughout the 1990s. The magazine featured regular advertisements like “Tranny Pride is... Community... let’s talk about it” and “Tranny Pride is... Growing... let’s talk about it” (*Polare* 1995a, 5; 1995b, 5). An article called “You’re a Tranny and you’re Beautiful!” was just one example of community members using the term to express empowerment (Val 1995, 16–17).

Norrie took the expression to new heights in 1995 when they organised a Tranny Pride float in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. To raise funds for the project, in December 1994 Norrie and longstanding Māori trans public figure Carmen Rupe (Rupe and Paul 1988) organised the first Tranny Pride Ball at Les Girls Nightclub. They marketed this in the LGBTQI+ press as “T.L.C. [Transgender Liberation Coalition], the Gender Centre, Carmen, Norrie-May Welby and a bunch of other transys and friends present the 1994 Tranny Pride Ball” (*Sydney Star Observer* 1994).<sup>4</sup> The Mardi Gras float was a glamorous globe in silver foil to look like a mirror ball, called “Tranny Planet.” Transgender Liberation Coalition activist Jesse (AKA Jill) Hooley said of the float: “It confirms that Sydney transys are leading the world in asserting their rights, in resisting gender bigotry and prejudice, and offering new solutions to the restrictive gender regime our society operates” (Griffin 1995, 7; *Polare* 1995a, 22).

Jesse was positioning tranny pride amidst a brewing battle that was going on within Sydney’s trans community over what it meant to be trans. Activists affiliated with the Transgender Liberation Coalition were challenging the medical model of transsexualism which ascribed to binary readings of gender. Under this model, doctors expected “true transsexuals” to go on gender affirming hormones, have gender affirmation surgery, and disappear quietly into society. Transgender Liberation Coalition activists adopted queer theory and social constructivist ideas of gender as espoused by Judith Butler (2007), arguing that gender was not fixed. They (re)conceptualised transgender as an umbrella which encompassed anyone expressing gender different from their sex assigned at birth, regardless of medical or surgical interventions. “Tranny” became a word intricately tied with their push to challenge dominant constructs of gender as embodied and binary. They used tranny as a term of empowerment.

In 1995–1996, the Transgender Liberation Coalition clashed with rival organisation the Transsexual Action Group over whether anti-discrimination and birth certificate reforms in NSW should be restricted only to those who had gender affirmation surgery. On anti-discrimination, the Transgender Liberation Coalition won and NSW law protected any trans person regardless of medical and surgical interventions; on birth certificates, the Transsexual Action Group got their way and only those who had gender affirmation surgery could change the sex marker on their birth certificates (Riseman 2022b, 326–33; 2023b, 116–19).

Later in 1996, the Transgender Liberation Coalition clashed with the Gender Centre management committee in a period known colloquially as the “Tranny Wars.”

4 Norrie, interview with author, Sydney, Australia, September 10, 2019.

Transgender Liberation Coalition activists wanted the Gender Centre to shift away from promoting the medical model of transsexualism and to institute an affirmative action policy to hire trans employees. The fights between the activists and management committee played out in *Polare*, the LGBTQI+ press, LGBTQI+ venues, and letters to politicians. Eventually the fight came to a head at a dramatic annual general meeting in September 1996. The debate was so heated that convenors ended the meeting early. They then came to a peace deal with the Transgender Liberation Coalition members, agreeing on a set of voting rules for the new management committee under the condition that Norrie did not run. At the reconvened annual general meeting, Transgender Liberation Coalition candidates won two seats, an independent aligned with them won one, and old management committee-aligned members won three seats. The final position was a tie, so the winner had to be drawn out of a hat. The final seat went to Nadine Stransen, a Transgender Liberation Coalition member. Their group essentially won the Tranny Wars. From 1997, under the leadership of Elizabeth Riley, peace came to the Gender Centre and the intra-community politics settled down (Riseman 2022a, 40–49; 2023b, 209–14).

The word tranny continued to be mainstream, regularly appearing in headlines in the LGBTQI+ press through the end of the decade. Moreover, the Gender Centre continued to run the Tranny Pride Ball as an annual event through at least 2005 (*Polare* 2006, 9). Tranny was more widespread than just Sydney and the Gender Centre. Melbourne-based activist Anna Langley in 1995 prepared “The Good Tranny Guide”—thirteen pages of trans-friendly support groups, counsellors, shops, health practitioners, cafes, speech pathologists, and beauticians from across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (Langley 1995).<sup>5</sup> In 2001, Adrian Barnes set up an online discussion forum for trans Australians and called it Trannyradio. In 2011, by which time tranny as a slur had taken root, Adrian changed its name to TgR (Barnes 2022, 66–71).<sup>6</sup> As late as 2006 the Canberra-based trans organisation A Gender Agenda had a visual display at SpringOUT Festival called “Tranny Pride.”<sup>7</sup> Australian LGBTQI+ media commonly used tranny in headlines and news reports.

The mainstream press tended to avoid the word except when quoting from trans informants. This likely reflects the fact that the word tranny was still slang. The mainstream media stuck to the more formal transgender or transsexual. Internationally, tranny appeared with much less frequency than in Australia. It was more in vogue by the late 1990s, with examples like the Thursday night party Tranny Chaser in a New York bar (Valentine 2007, 140), San Francisco-based drag and cabaret party Trannyshack started in 1996, and Tranny Fest—the world’s first transgender film festival—founded in 1997 (Heklina 2015, 142–43; San Francisco Transgender Film Festival 2023).

### **THE DECLINE OF “TRANNNY” (2000S–2010S)**

The decline of tranny in the Australian LGBTQI+ press began in the early to mid-2000s. One of the last times the word featured in the news was in 2003 when the organisers of

5 Anna Langley, interview with author, Cambridge, Great Britain, March 17, 2019.

6 Adrian Barnes, interview with author, Sydney, Australia, December 16, 2021.

7 Peter Hyndal, *A Gender Agenda’s “Tranny Pride” Display at SpringOUT Festival, 2006*, photograph.

a festival called Lesfest attempted to bar trans women from attending the women-only event. This sparked an anti-discrimination case in Victoria—which the trans women eventually won—as well as a series of letters to the editor in LGBTQI+ publications (Riseman 2021b, 34; 2023b, 219–10). It is noticeable that most of the letter-writers were cis women. They were using tranny not in a pejorative sense per se, but not in an affirming manner either (le Plastrier 2003, 4; *Lesbians on the Loose* 2003, 6). For the rest of the 2000s, some columnists casually used tranny in their writings, though not as frequently as in the 1990s. The word rarely appeared in news items or headlines. Moreover, these were cis writers.

Two cases from 2010 and 2012 mark a clear denotation of tranny no longer as a source of pride, but rather as a slur. In late 2009, DJs at Brisbane’s NOVA radio station broadcast several jokes about trans people. One gag was a long story told by a Brisbane Broncos rugby league player who was a guest. He described meeting two “trannies” in a bar in the United States and how he supposedly “saved” a guy from going home with them. In early 2010, *Queensland Pride* revealed that the Australian Transgender Support Association of Queensland—Brisbane’s main trans advocacy and support organisation—lodged a complaint with the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commission. Another trans woman also made a complaint to the regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority. At first the DJs claimed that that the trans community did not have a sense of humour, but eventually they apologised (Hackney 2010a, 3; 2010b, 4). The reports were ambiguous about whether the term tranny was itself part of the complaints, but it was clear that these cis DJs were using the term pejoratively.

The other example is from 2012 when gay cabaret star Trevor Ashley planned to launch a new show that he called “trAnnie”—a satire of the musical *Annie*. Members of the trans community complained in the LGBTQI+ media that the use of the word tranny was transphobic (Sutton 2013, 12; 2012, 10). One letter to the editor published in *Queensland Pride* stated:

As the president of a non profit trans group, I am outraged at another case of the drag crowd (gay men) thinking it’s funny to make a joke about my life. “Tranny” a light hearted word? Or is [it] the N word of the T community and needs to be expunged from the lexicon of terminology. What if the transsexuals started calling drag reviews “faggot fest”, what’s the big deal? They call themselves faggot all the time so why can’t we? See, it doesn’t matter whether or not YOU think it’s offensive, it’s about the offended party’s reasons. (Carol 2012, 6)

Another letter published in the same issue reinforced an important point about discrimination: it was not a matter of whether the person who used the word *intended* to discriminate, but rather whether a reasonable person would consider the incident to cause offence.

This is where the use of the word tranny gets complicated because many trans people did and still do use the term. This debate erupted internationally in 2014 after popular American drag queen RuPaul defended the word in a podcast. RuPaul claimed that it was a minority of trans people who found tranny offensive:

No, it is not the transsexual community. These are fringe people who are looking for story lines to strengthen their identity as victims. That is what we’re dealing with. It’s not the trans community, because most

people who are trans have been through hell and high water and they know—they've looked behind the curtain at Oz and went, "Oh, this is all a f\*\*king joke." (Nicholls 2014)

A few trans people echoed RuPaul, such as American author and artist Kate Bornstein. She wrote in her blog:

I understand "tranny" to be a radical, sex-positive gender identity. Tranny is to trans person as fag is to gay man and dyke is to lesbian. More to the point of agreeing or disagreeing with tranny as a gender identity for oneself: I've been saying since I wrote the book, *Gender Outlaw* 20 years ago, that the only person who can name our gender identities is ourselves. (Bornstein 2014)

Bornstein's comment aligns with Jenkins' concept of ontic injustice: she wished to define her own social kind rather than be assigned (or denied) one.

Notwithstanding such defences of the word tranny, it was not just fringe or conservative people who found the word offensive. Divisions within the Australian trans community over tranny briefly appeared in the alternative media in 2014. Trans activist Indiana Kelly Edwards launched a petition calling for the popular event "Tranny Bingo" to change its name. Norrie came out in defence of the word tranny, arguing:

I think it's a wonderfully inclusive word, because it's not clear whether it's short for transvestite or transsexual or transgender. I know these are very different kinds of people but when you try to draw the line between them, that causes problems. Many people move from one to the other and I like the idea of not drawing the lines and allowing there to be that space for anyone that transgresses sex or gender. (Gregoire 2014)

Edwards retorted that there was a direct link between the word tranny and violence. She explained: "When people use words like *tranny*, it's not in an endearing way. It's usually a precursor to violence, vilification or discrimination" (Gregoire 2014). Long-standing trans advocate, author, and Gender Centre employee Katherine Cummings expressed a more nuanced position that settled primarily around self-identification. She noted that although she did not like the word herself, "Norrie is entitled to use the term proudly, having had the energy and commitment to take on the establishment and achieve a revision of the law" (Gregoire 2014).

The nail in the coffin of the word tranny being used in Australian popular discourse came in 2017. Trans advocate Katherine Wolfgramme hired lawyers who sent letters to sixteen pubs in NSW and the Australian Capital Territory which were still hosting Tranny Bingo or other events with tranny in the title. Katherine threatened to lodge an anti-discrimination claim in the Australian Human Rights Commission if they did not cease using the offensive term. The organisers of Tranny Bingo relented and agreed to change the name, though they also claimed they were already in the process of doing so and wished there had not been the threat of litigation. Katherine credits this action as having ripple effects. Discussions in the LGBTQI+ press and social media highlighted the issue across the country. Subsequently, organisers of tranny bingo in other states and territories, too, changed the name (Jones 2017).<sup>8</sup>

8 Katherine Wolfgramme, interview with author, Zoom, June 2, 2022.

## GENERATION GAPS AND “TRANNNY”

The events of recent years reflect a growing consensus that tranny is too often a pejorative slur. British writer Roz Kaveney explained:

For a while, it seemed as if some younger trans men were going to successfully reclaim “tranny”, at least as a “smile when you say that” epithet, or a “we can say that about ourselves; you can’t” in-group word like “queer.” It didn’t take, though, partly because it had never stopped being used by would-be hip lad journalists to abuse not only actual trans people, but a list of “weird” people seen as non-gender-conforming. (Kaveney 2010)

It is interesting that Kaveney framed tranny as if it were always a slur, making this a debate about whether it should be reclaimed. This interpretation overlooked the history of tranny as already existing within the community as a sign of empowerment. Kaveney’s reading of the word also represented a new dominant narrative about the debate: to reclaim or not to reclaim, with the implication that there was a generational difference over the word.

Kaveney’s assessment about generation gaps is apt. In the case of tranny—not to mention other terms like “transsexual” and “transvestite”—younger people tend to reject these words while *some* older people continue to use them. Oral histories suggest that this has a lot to do with older trans people’s living experiences struggling with their gender identity, the relief of finding a word that explained their experiences, and the sense of connection to words which described others like them. Based on oral history interviews, age is the primary axis of division over the word tranny. In Australia, older white, Blak, Indigenous, and people of colour all used the word. Indeed, the person in the focus group I described in the introduction who used the word is a Sistergirl. Most of the other attendees were also Blak, Indigenous, or people of colour. People from middle- and working-class backgrounds, including professionals and former sex workers, used the word. In Australia, the word transcended the politics of respectability versus liberation. The only noticeable group who did not use the word in oral histories were trans men. It is not clear if this represented them consciously rejecting tranny as a slur, associating the word with trans women, or simply reflected their use of contemporary language.

The generation gap is not just about the words people use for themselves. It is also about how others react when older trans people use the outdated terms and people’s sense of safety (or lack thereof) within the trans community. “Rainbow policing,” as my friend Andrew calls it, is an expression that refers to how people within the LGBTQI+ community become the arbiters of what language is and is not allowed and challenge others’ terminology in public or semi-public forums. Rainbow policing represents a form of ontic injustice by denying people’s right to particular social kinds. Valentine (2007, 229) also uses the expression “representational violence” to describe how the application (or, in this case, denial) of labels can force people’s lives and identities into social categories/kinds with which they do not identify.

There is, of course, nuance that needs to be considered here. LGBTQI+ people can be just as guilty of using offensive language about others in the community and this should be called out. Moreover, in public forums it is appropriate to promote best practice language. Rainbow policing is different, though. It is primarily about attack-

ing people's self-identities, disregarding their living experiences, or ignoring the importance of language in context. As a form of ontic oppression (Jenkins 2023), one effect of rainbow policing is to silence and disempower. American trans porn star Buck Angel, who toured Australia in 2014, spoke about the tranny debate in an interview published in *Queensland Pride*. His description of the debate aligns with the notion of rainbow policing:

There's all this stuff about certain words you can and can't use in the trans community, like "trannie" and I think that's unfair because language is changing all the time and why don't you just empower yourself with those words instead, just like we did with the word queer. The problem is when you decide certain words have to be taken away then the people who don't want you to be empowered are empowered. (Angel 2014: 10)

Several older trans interview participants expressed how rainbow policing and ontic injustice have made them turn away from the trans or LGBTQI+ communities because they feel ostracised for expressing themselves. "Susan," for instance, still identifies as a transsexual. She sees the trans community as diverse, and while she has no problem with that, she also thinks there needs to be greater acceptance of difference within that community. She describes witnessing harassment and bullying from younger trans activists who reject her living experience:

Binary trans people, trans women, have different aspirations, different needs to gender diverse and nonbinary people, and it feels like we should be okay to say that. But if you say that, what's the word online, what do they call us? ... Truscum. Or trans-medicalists, they call us. Trans-medicalists... It's like the hate online for medically, surgically transitioned trans women. This perspective of "The only reason you had that done was because society said you needed to have the surgery to be female, so you don't have to now." It's like no, no, no, we still want it. We'll always want it. It's our need. It was suicidal. We need this. They go no, it's okay, we're all the same. Well, no, we're not all the same. The same with cross-dressers. It's like, I know I cross-dressed for so many years, because I had to, but there's a section of the trans community that just wants to cross-dress. For some of them, it is about going out to clubs and sex and fetish. And it's kind of like, well, that's okay, but that's not us. That's not me. That's not my end of the community. So, there's this feeling of being silenced.<sup>9</sup>

Older trans people's complaints about changing language are not just about specific words or expressions. Several express how hard it is to speak just to one part of the trans community without being attacked for not being inclusive. For instance, Andrew Eklund founded FTM Shed in 2013 to support trans men in the state of Victoria. Around 2016, the leadership of the group deliberated whether to open the group to nonbinary people. Andrew supported the move and the change of name to The Shed. Still, he laments a sense of loss over how this has changed the dynamics of the group because of rainbow policing:

9 "Susan," interview with author, Regional Victoria, Australia, January 19, 2022.

There is a difference between trans men, trans masculine, and gender diverse. And when you try and include gender diversity into even just the Facebook group, you lose something for the trans men. And it's happened. It is less masculine. We aren't allowed to say on a post, "Hi guys, hi mates!" I can't call out to other trans men who are male. I have lost something. And does that matter? Well, it's the evolution of the group, and you can't hold that back. I don't believe you should. The population's changed. But it makes me feel old, and it makes me feel isolated again.<sup>10</sup>

Debates over language are only one example of a generation gap where older trans people often feel that young people do not understand trans people's historical challenges and experiences. Jonathan Paré, one of Victoria's first trans men activists, now avoids being involved in the trans community because he feels so disconnected from the key topics of discussion:

There's this ongoing experience of, "You're not like us, you're not like us, you're not like us." And then to internalise that, I walk away going, "I don't relate, I don't relate, I don't relate. I'm not talking about binders, I'm not talking about top surgery and I really don't want to talk about phalloplasty. You've asked me my opinion. You've ignored my opinion. You don't want to hear my opinion. Good luck to you. Do whatever you want to do." And, at the end of the day, I've learnt the hard way when someone says, "What do you think?" my response now is, "It doesn't matter what I think because you'll do whatever you want to do and your perspective will be whatever it is, and I don't want to be punished because I actually share my opinion with you."<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, "Bronwyn" expresses:

I do feel that there is this representation of trans around at the moment which puzzles me. Because I wonder if it's gotten tangled up in radical politics based around the idea of individual freedoms. I was able to choose my own life and have my individual freedom back in the 90s. And I'm puzzled to find that there's a younger subset of people saying they're trans around who are sort of putting it across that it's now so difficult and the world's so against them. I actually find it, myself feeling a bit puzzled about it because I can't equate it to the experience I had back then. And that's, having said that, yes, there was a freak show status attached to the subject years ago, but I see how society has changed. How we now have equal marriage, [and] someone with my background has been able to work in private schools. And I don't, I find there's a disconnect between what I'm hearing coming out of the young, radical trans movement and what my own general life experience, and the experience of a number of other people I've known, and still know, have had as well. I don't quite see where they're coming from, and I wonder if they're not creating some of their problems themselves by painting themselves into such a radical corner.<sup>12</sup>

10 Andrew Eklund, interview with author, Zoom, February 7, 2022.

11 Jonathan Paré, interview with author, Brisbane, Australia, December 10, 2018.

12 "Bronwyn," interview with author, Melbourne, Australia, April 6, 2018.

Whereas Susan, Jonathan, Andrew and Bronwyn responded to intergenerational differences by turning away from community, Katherine Wolfgramme chose to confront those differences head-on. She was an early member of the social group Trans Pride Australia, originally founded in 2015 as Sydney Trans Pride (Riseman 2023b, 249–50; 2022a, 55–56). Katherine recalls that one of the early organisers contacted her because many nonbinary people were joining the online Facebook group and being aggressive and demeaning to trans women members. Katherine became a group administrator and, as she recalls:

I asked, “I’m an old trans woman and I don’t understand what nonbinary means. Can someone please explain to me?” And then they came at me. “Go educate yourself, you uneducated bitch, you dog, you foul dog, how dare you ask me? How dare you question my existence?” And you know, probably like 200 of them came at me. It was really quite full-on. So I blocked them all, one by one.<sup>13</sup>

Over time, as Katherine has learned more about nonbinary people, she has come to see them as part of the gender diverse community but as different to other trans people. As she explains it:

Once I thought about why are they [nonbinary people] feeling misrepresented, [it] is because a nonbinary person isn’t talking. It’s because a binary person is talking. So, they really do need their own voice. They need their own voices and they need their own letter on the acronym. They need sovereignty because the whole idea of smashing gender binaries is completely the antithesis of a binary transgender person who risk their life and protects the binary that they are bound to.<sup>14</sup>

Social media leaves little room for the sort of nuance that Katherine discussed in her oral history interview. As another example, in 2018 Katherine became the subject of an online storm when she posted in a private Facebook group associated with the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras organisation. As context, a group that calls itself Pride in Protest had been (and still is) agitating for Mardi Gras to return to its radical protest roots. Their most prominent demands are for the elimination of corporations from the parade and banning the participation of police (Jupp 2025). In the build-up to the Mardi Gras annual general meeting, Pride in Protest were agitating for their candidates to win a majority of seats on the board. Katherine posted in a closed Facebook group:

Many PIP [Pride in Protest] have become non-binary and are trying very hard to take over the trans community to use as a political platform, they have no idea the damage their Queer Theory ideas are causing us and if any transgender person defends themselves they are accused of transphobia and are subject to mass hysteria from this group. (Reeders 2020)

When someone leaked the comment, many LGBTQI+ activists interpreted Katherine’s use of the word “become” as a denial of nonbinary existence—in essence another ontic injustice. This was not what Katherine said, though. She is adamant in her

13 Wolfgramme, interview.

14 Wolfgramme, interview.

affirmation of nonbinary people's existence. She was pointing to a particular cohort whom, she argues, "were pretending to be nonbinary so that they could get their hands on the trans things, the concerns from the government about trans people and you know."<sup>15</sup> Essentially, Katherine saw a particular group of people who asserted that they were nonbinary and therefore spoke for the entire trans community, when there were quite diverse identities, perspectives, and opinions within the community. Katherine faced pressure to resign from numerous boards, including a role as an associate board member of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. She says that the younger activists "cancelled" her.<sup>16</sup>

These examples are not specifically about the tranny debate. Rather, they highlight the broader generation-divide context in which this debate operates. One fear that Susan, Jonathan, Andrew and other interview participants expressed was of being erased. Moreover, they feared that the proliferation of new gender identities and changing language also meant that their own identities were being erased. Daniel Reeders' blog essay about the controversy over Katherine Wolgramme also acknowledges this:

Older trans folk grew up in a different time and have had different experiences, through which they have developed their own distinctive culture and politics. They fear losing that distinctiveness as younger people join the queer community and the trans movement with different understandings, experiences and identities... I don't agree that non-binary people are "taking over," but I can certainly understand where that concern is coming from. (Reeders 2020)

Fear of erasure need not be the case, though. Surya Monro's concept of gender pluralism is a useful lens that can bridge the generation gap, or *perceived* generation gap. Monro describes gender pluralism as "conceptualising gender as 'fields' or 'groupings' of—in some cases overlapping—masculinities, femininities, and gender diverse identities" (Monro 2005, 38). Importantly, Monro notes that gender pluralism aims to "create[e] space for the addition of new categories and identities *to those that are already established*, so that a spectrum (or universe) of genders becomes possible" (Monro 2005, 86; emphasis added). The key point about gender pluralism is to add categories without there being any need to take away from what already exists. As this article has shown, it is this final point about not deleting existing categories that needs more sensitivity within the trans and LGBTQI+ communities. A gender pluralism approach thus offers a space to bridge the generation gap through more dialogue, with different generations of trans people learning from each other's living experiences and finding ways to affirm each other in all their diversity.

## CONCLUSION

As this article has shown, the word tranny has a long history within Australia's trans community. It originated as an umbrella term and source of pride. In the 1990s it was commonplace in the LGBTQI+ media and popular among activists. At the same time,

15 Wolfgramme, interview.

16 Wolfgramme, interview.

there were cis people who deployed tranny as a slur to attack trans people and perpetrate violence. In the mid-to-late 2000s, in part influenced by overseas rejection of the term, the associations of tranny with violence dominated and the term went out of vogue. This process was organic like all language change. At the same time, it has meant disruption and ontic injustice for people who have attached significant personal meanings to the word as part of their identities. Vocal debates have played out over the appropriateness of tranny; these arguments have underpinned other generational divides, or perceived divides, within trans communities. One way to navigate these debates in a healthy way is to adopt a gender pluralism approach: making room for new and multiple categories of gender while not taking away from existing labels and terminology.

The gender pluralism approach also raises bigger questions for the tranny debate. Can the word tranny be part of a broader gender pluralist lexicon of accepted terms under the trans umbrella? Can trans people reclaim a word that was originally a marker of pride, then became a slur? Valentine's ethnography of transgender highlighted the complexities when activists adopted that label in the 1990s. Valentine was particularly cognisant of the relationship between self, group, community, outsiders, and others. His research highlighted:

the question of how all of us are responsible for—and subject to—the limits and possibilities of self-making in a broader and stratified political-economic context. The goal is to reveal how the categories we live by—must live by—have histories, politics, and economies and produce effects that can be as debilitating for some as they can be liberating for others. The goal is to question how, why, when, and with what effects self-making is other-making. (Valentine 2007, 246)

Valentine's analysis of the emergence of new labels is just as applicable to the rejection of old terms like tranny. Jenkins, too, cautiously warns that activism and liberation politics designed to challenge oppression may conflict with people who identify strongly with particular social kinds/labels: "Should countering oppression be conceived of as involving a project of dismantling or abolishing race and gender kinds? If so, how can this be reconciled with people's experiences of identification with those kinds? And how should we approach the question of categorising people with regard to these kinds?" (Jenkins 2023, 15–16).

The framings of rainbow policing, gender pluralism, and ontic injustice do not necessarily resolve the tranny debate, but they provide conceptual lenses to apply the history to the present. Indeed, a gender pluralism approach and greater conversations about identity and the meanings people attach to their own labels can also expose how, as Jenkins writes:

it may turn out that there is no genuine disagreement after all...each kind might be most useful for the relevant set of purposes, and each purpose might be a genuinely valuable one, meaning that there is no real conflict—merely a need to be careful with language to avoid misunderstandings. (Jenkins 2023, 171–72)

It is fitting to close with some reflections from Katherine Wolfgramme about her 2017 lawsuit over Tranny Bingo. Katherine explains that she personally does not find the word tranny offensive, but she knows that many other people in the trans

community do. She has problems with cis people using the word but has no qualms with trans people who use tranny. As she puts it: “So what I did in actual fact was I took a word that was misappropriated. I took it back and I gave it back to the transgender community. Now, what they do with that word is completely up to them.”<sup>17</sup>

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