

Starting a Conversation: The Effort, Effect and Affect of Trans Poetics

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Introduction –

In the introduction to *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, editor TC Tolbert states that the cultural work of this anthology is, in part, “an attempt to expand the range of what is possible for trans and genderqueer poets and to acknowledge that there is no such thing as monolithic trans and genderqueer poetry” (10). Tolbert further notes that there are two dangers to producing an anthology that will, undoubtedly, shift literary culture: they are exclusion and isolation or confinement (11). Tolbert and fellow editor Trace Peterson are both aware, then, that as a burgeoning field of study and literary culture, transgender poetry and poetics simply cannot be defined, lest they perpetuate exclusion (a state with which trans writers are most familiar) and isolation (Tolbert here cites a “biographical frame [that] puts more emphasis on the author ... than the actual poems” - but the editors are also rightly concerned that only other trans people will be interested in trans poetics, meaning cisgender readers will overlook these works [11]).

What happens is, more often than not, transgender editors, poets, and writers in general do not get to decide the cultural work of their writing; instead they rely on systems that prioritize cisgender authors and perspectives. Trans writers are often relegated to being filtered through what cisgender editors and prospective audiences want to see, and expect. I want to ask, then, what cultural work does trans poetics do when enacted by trans writers *themselves*? Before my work on this project began, Lizzy Kaval, who wrote her master’s thesis for the City University of New York on trans poetics, attempted to answer a similar question. Using *Troubling the Line* as a basis for her paper, she “explores how trans poetics is being used as a methodology or political technique for challenging and transcending dominant notions of gender, the body, language,

identity, and their spatial and temporal underpinnings” (4). While her focus was on the political, cultural *and* aesthetic impact of this anthology due in part to its form as an anthology, I seek to broaden the discussion by referring to work by poets outside of this curated anthology. Though similarities may arise, many of the poets and writers I will later reference played a part in the creation of said anthology, whether through editorial roles or by agreeing to contribute their written work to its contents.

Of course, the political importance of the anthology and the poems therein cannot go unmentioned, as it is often expressed in trans poetry, in reference to unfairly politicized trans bodies. Poet and professor Joy Ladin speaks to this politicization, stating that poetry by trans writers is an exercise in “becoming” (Kähkönen 64). Becoming¹, again, necessitates an action — in the case of poets, writing is one of these actions. Publishing is also an action, and the process of writing, publishing, and having their work read forms not only the author’s own becoming, but the becoming of other trans people who come into contact with the work.² It is important that the writing of trans people is published or otherwise widely shared and disseminated at all if this personal and political act of becoming is to continue. Arguably, the more work that is present and made public, the more the language used by and for trans people can be changed, shaped, and shared.

Regarding change, shaping, and sharing, this project, in part, attempts to rectify the lack of care and consideration taken by Christopher Soto, Don Share, and other individuals involved in the cancellation of a planned “special issue”³ of *Poetry* magazine that was set to exclusively feature poetry by trans-identified authors. I am confident that this issue would have contributed positively to the impact and shaping of a poetic language as created and modelled by transgender writers. It would have, ultimately, helped to ‘push’ trans poetics forward in the broader literary

sphere. As the oldest and most widely disseminated poetry-focused magazine in North America, *Poetry*'s influence is inarguable. However, again, this issue never appeared in the public eye; it was cancelled during its open submission period. In 2017, guest editor Soto wrote the following dismissive tweet:

Themes in TGNC literature (from reading thousands of TGNC poems) - Bodies - Burials
- Names - Families - Animality / Alien / Non-human existence - Somber tones / narrative
poems When TGNC poems break these patterns is usually when my attention is caught
(@loma_poetry).

Soto, a trans author themselves, has been involved in several other projects featuring queer and trans poets, namely the anthology *Neplanta: An Anthology Dedicated to Queer Poets of Colour* (2014). It was surprising, then, to see their dismissal here, in yet another editorial position seeking to highlight trans writers. This tweet sparked a backlash that led to the quiet cancellation of the issue.⁴ Instead of dwelling on said cancellation, I want to acknowledge, again, that my frustration with this dismissal of trans poetry and poetics led, in part, to my work here. I will begin, then, by briefly addressing Soto's list of supposedly overused "patterns." This tweet named the above patterns, or forms, themes, images, and poetic subjects, as common among an alleged number of poems totaling more than one thousand. Most, if not all, of the poems I personally examine contain one or more of the aspects of poetics Soto listed in their tweet. This, of course, proves them right in claiming much of trans poetry includes these common elements – but this is not surprising. It is a simple enough observation to make, given the wealth and breadth of poetry that Soto had access to during the submission period. What is surprising, however, is that, again, the frequency of these poetic aspects was not considered relevant or important. Why are trans poets including these elements? What importance do they hold for each individual

writer, and trans poetry and poetics as a whole? Why would studying them through a trans poetic lens be important not only for transgender literary studies, or 2SLGBTQ+ literary studies, but for the entire enterprise of literary studies as a whole?

I posit that a study of trans poetics requires a closer look at the elements therein, pertaining to image, metaphor, form, tone, style, and overall theme, building on broad definitions recently introduced and currently in development by Ladin since 2011, and Peterson, beginning in 2013 and 2014).⁵ I seek to find ways in which distinct elements or subgenres of trans poetry can be located, explored, and potentially (un)defined, and how — if in any way — these subgenres of trans poetry might be related to the overall aim of trans poetics, which will be examined in this introduction to trans poetic theory. Again, my research aims to elucidate many of the current aesthetic and emotionally affective aspects of trans poetry, and what these elements are doing to develop or potentially develop a distinct and recognizable trans poetic whose content is read, taught, analyzed, and further celebrated for its contributions to poetry and literary studies as a whole.

However, I aim to resist the urge — or, arguably, need — to define a trans poetic. Trans poetics are, ultimately, poetics written by and for other trans people primarily, but a broader understanding can and will always be made. As trans people continue to make more room and utilize more language for themselves, trans poetics will, subsequently, expand and develop, change and transform. I cannot, then, task myself with the insurmountable effort of defining trans poetics — but I can illuminate many aesthetic and theoretical aspects of trans poetry through careful close reading and analyses. I ultimately want to make a space for further work to be done in this field of study, and to solidify an academic language, as well as potential methodological approaches, to trans poetics. Again, as a trans poet myself, I am concerned

primarily with the continuance of trans poetics. I do not want them to be absorbed or avoided by queer literary studies; I want them to remain in conversation with all poetics but stand alone in their relation to a specific field of transgender literary studies.⁶

Transgender poets are doing this work because no one else will, or can, do it. The ‘work’ I am referring to is often the work of self-preservation through self-expression. The focus of transgender writing — in particular, trans poetry and poetics — is, in my eyes, and drawn from my own experience as a trans writer, a work of personal continuance. Much trans poetry and poetics focus on lived experiences, personal anecdotes, and self-reflection. Much more work to understand a personal past, grapple with the continual present, and imagine a future wherein the trans writer’s existence reaches some desired state of being-as-the-self and being-in-the-world. It is work that aims to, often quite literally, fill in the blanks. In “I Am Not Not Me: Unmaking and Remaking the Language of the Self,” Ladin states that “[the] problem of gender identity goes way beyond a lack of nouns. The blank in language where words for our gender identities should be reflect deeper blanks in culture[.]” These “blanks,” Ladin continues, make it difficult to “locate” the self – and she claims that “[w]hen it comes to this aspect of transgender experience, poetry, not fiction, is the natural medium” (“Unmaking and Remaking”). And, I argue, the most important part of this incredibly necessary observation is the following observation, in which she addresses language’s role in trans poetics:

Poetry translates existential experience— including experience for which we have no words – into linguistic form, sound and texture. That makes it a perfect mode for expressing, however indirectly, the unstable, contradictory, inexpressible or profoundly uncomfortable gender identities—as long as we have a definition of Trans Lit that finds

trans content not just in demographics and subject matter but in syntax, word choice, and other qualities of language. But how can poetic language reflect the trans experience when the content of the poem doesn't? ("Unmaking and Remaking")

This is work about the self – it is neither selfish nor selfless. Rather, the work of trans writers in both creating and preserving the self is essentially tied, in part, to their poetics. Poet Carl Phillips addresses the politics of simply *being* in his essay "The Politics of Mere Being":

That is one way, then, to queer language – deliberately, and for the purpose of tailoring it to one's own purposes. The other is less intentional, and is the one I myself more relate to. I make sentences not to argue for outsidersness, but as the only space in which my outsidersness makes sense to me. From the start, I've thought of writing as a near-physical wrestling with all-but-unpindownable concerns.

Drawing from Ladin's observation about a trans poetic that needs to recognize both content and structure as trans, alongside Phillip's idea of intentional vs. unintentional "queering" of language, trans poetics, I argue, grapples with language in all of these ways. In many cases, language is "transed" rather than queered, deliberately and with intent, as is the case of poet Jos Charles, who "explains her work as an effort to break free of the constraints of existing words, much as transgender people try to break free of the narrow definition of gender" (Gallagher, "Jos Charles"). In many cases, however, trans poets write in order to understand aspects of themselves — their identity, their lived experiences, their desires, needs, and aspirations or ambitions.⁷ This is "near-physical wrestling with all-but-unpindownable concerns" that Phillips mentions. These aspects of the self, and one's life, are incredibly difficult to put into words – but these are difficulties that trans writers are faced with daily and are intimately familiar with. Poetry's fluidity and flexibility means it remains an aesthetic space wherein trans authors can not

only wrestle, but embrace – or at the very least, begin to touch upon – these concerns that have hereunto been nearly impossible to discuss due to a language in literature designed to serve cisgender writers. It comes as no surprise, then, that my difficulty in accessing scholarly writing by trans people on poetry by trans people was immense. I address this in order to be transparent in my methodology: I use, as infrequently as possible, the work of cisgender scholars when examining trans poetics. Instead, I utilize the available scholarly articles, reviews, interviews, statements, and other ephemera of trans-identified professional academics, students, poets, and their ilk, the general public, in order to garner a more accurate and more appropriate representation of trans poetics than I ever could from the works of cisgender literary and/or queer theorists who have been canonized in Western academic institutions such as the one I myself remain within.

Succinctly put, there is a lack of vocabulary available in the English language⁸ that adequately and/or accurately describes the trans experience. Trans poetics, then, are effectively always working against and around conventional binary descriptors of bodies, genders, sexes, and related experiences in order to aesthetically to both enact and represent their identities in poetics largely built to support the identities of cisgender writers. Ladin writes

This problem—the lack of words, signs, and conventions to express relationships to gender that are more complex than male or female—is the defining problem of trans poetics. In the narrowest sense, trans poetics refers to the linguistic strategies used to express, represent, or otherwise make trans identity visible and meaningful in poetry; in the broadest sense, trans poetics refers to all poetic efforts to represent any forms of self or identity for which there are no conventional means of expression (638-9).

The idea of expressing the self is Ladin's main point. She approaches trans poetics "as a set of questions dealing with the dynamic relations between experiences of embodiment, creation, writing, and conceptualization" ("Experience, Embodiment and Poetics" 64) — not just of the poetry, but of the trans-identified author of said poetry. Trans poetics are part of a practice in "becoming" that Ladin states is most easily recognizable in first-person poems, poems that "cannot help but highlight the provisional, evolving nature of the self, the way our selves, even the most normative selves, change a little every time we look or speak of them" (65). This "becoming," however, can and often does go beyond the individual self-exploratory art of the personal lyric poem. Ladin continues, claiming "since human identity is a process of signification ... trans poetics can be a process of not only making poetry, but of making trans identities and experiences intelligible and thus viable in the world beyond the margins" (65). This is all to say that by expressing the trans-self through poetry, these trans authors alter modes of "becoming" through signification, allowing for new modes of "being" to emerge. But the self can be expressed in a myriad of ways. However, what trans-identified poets repeatedly utilize may link my study to an aesthetic examination: what reoccurring images, metaphors, myths, lyrics, and language am I encountering? How many mentions of mirrors, burials, distinct animals, families, or photographs might I see (to name only a handful out of several endless elements one can add to the content of their poem)? Will it be four out of ten? Seven? All ten? My aesthetic analysis seeks these similarities, the truth of those similarities, and the poetic function behind them.

I argue in keeping with Ladin that while the enterprise of trans poetics is assuredly and rightly fixated in addressing the language-based "problem" of lacking vocabulary for the self, it is also focused on filling the gaps in *all* forms of expression related to being trans and writing as

a trans poet, expression that goes beyond the self and into ways of seeing and being in the world. In order to extend the ability to express, of course, one must adjust and develop language, and represent an aesthetic in their work that carries the weight of that language's effort. Ladin writes "trans poetics is defined by its ends (the creation of language for modes of self and being for which there is no language) rather than by the poetic means used to achieve those ends" (641), a statement which brings ideas of being into her overall definition of trans poetics – a definition which, for her, remains in-progress. As language explicitly or implicitly reflects the current political climate in which its author lives, the ends here — the creation of language where there is no language available — is an intensely political act. Returning to Carl Phillips, in arguing against a narrow definition of political and political poetry, he states: "to each [their] own urgency. How is it not political, to be simply living one's life meaningfully, thoughtfully, which means variously in keeping with, in counterpoint to, and in resistance to life's many parts? To insist on being who we are is a political act" ("Politics of Mere Being"). From this we can glean, again, that the poetry of trans people, loosely speaking, is inevitably labelled as political despite the authors intention due to what it is doing: insisting upon a creation of a language and an identity aided by that language that has hereunto been denied by the cisgender majority who hold political power in North America. Continuing in this vein of thought, I turn to Ladin once more. Essential to the aim of trans poetics, Ladin states, is the following:

Trans poetics is concerned not just with liberating us from procrustean conventions of identity that require us to deform ourselves to fit them. Deconstructing those conventions is a necessary but preliminary step toward the greater trans-poetic project of developing new ways to imagine and express identity— ways that enable us to be true to ourselves and still relate ourselves to others (646).

This “greater trans-poetic project” implies a universal benefit from developing new ways to express and understand our own identities. Everyone, regardless of gender identity or lack thereof, would find their truths and be able to express them aesthetically, and perhaps politically, as no poetry is free of politics⁹, without alienation or marginalization. Ladin believes trans poetics has the ability to drastically alter the ways in which the English language is currently used for the betterment of personal identity and identification.

I believe in this possibility. Trans poets and their trans poetics are working towards securing language not only for their current selves, but their future selves as well. By working against conventional and binary modes of self-expression created by and for cisgender people, trans poets, in writing, upset cultural, social, and political notions of trans people by “transing” language – that is, prioritizing trans experiences in spaces where the language would otherwise, and “normally,” focus on cisgender experiences. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore describe “transing” as a practice “that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces ... which can function as disciplinary tool when the stigma associated with the lack or loss of gender status threatens social unintelligibility, coercive normalization, or even bodily extermination” (13). Though speaking to a sociopolitical practice, this strategy can easily apply to literary and otherwise aesthetic practices that nonetheless do have complex ties to sociopolitical spheres. “Transing” poetics challenges dominant poetics that prioritize cisgender bodies, and by extension, cisgender experiences, by bringing to poetic language underrepresented or unforeseen enactment of trans livelihood.

It is important to note that trans poetics and “transing” can go beyond strictly writing; in her essay “Transing Disability Poetics at the Confluence,” Petra Kuppers explores how she finds “transing” of language in expressions of disability cultures, indigeneity, and transgender

experiences that are not strictly relegated to the written word, as in text on a page such as this (605-6, 612). The poetics of these sociopolitical identifiers inform the work of poets like Eli Clare and Margaret Noodin, who Kupperts quotes in discussion with her own personal experiences the works of theorists Judith Butler, Sandy Stone, James Thomas Stevens, and Caroline Sinavaiana, among others. She concludes that the act and art of “transing” language is

playing in the uncertainty of withheld intelligibility. None of us make sense to dominant logics ... [Such as] the trans man, the woman who can't make herself heard on the phone, the fat chair user, the indigenous person who asserts difference and connection beyond cultural stereotypes (612).

For those who do not “make sense to dominant logics” of, for example, cisgender and heterosexual existence and poetic language, the “transing” of poetic expression, wherever it may be found, allows for connection among those who might otherwise be disconnected due to oppressive power structures that seek to marginalize and further separate those marginalized into disparate groups. The “transing” of language, then, argues Kupperts, can allow marginalized peoples to live “in a multilingual, multibodied, multisounding world, and honor the material spaces that support [their] lives” (612). Trans poetics offers an opportunity for the culture surrounding language to shift, allowing expression to enter poetics that works for those who are not white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and so on.¹⁰

This aim, though quickly gaining traction as trans writers seek to expand their work and amplify their voices, is still, unfortunately, developing in the shadow of the work of cisgender queer writers, academics, publishers, and other professionals with the systemic power to disseminate written language. In their article “The Promise of Trans Critique,” Benavente and

Gill-Peterson address ongoing issues regarding transgender studies as it exists in the shadow of queer studies. This issue was earlier examined in Susan Stryker's 2004 article "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin." In a response some fifteen years later, Benavente and Gill-Peterson rightly state that "transgender studies is negotiating a complex and precarious moment of partial institutionalization ... while still being overwhelmingly made up of underemployed, marginalized scholars and trans practitioners who face systematic barriers to entering higher education and the academy" (23-4).¹¹ The issues of occupational and thus financial precarity, lack of workplace and community support, and intersections of marginalization that further bar trans people of colour, especially Black and Indigenous trans feminine persons, from entering an academic institution, affect the theoretical writing and educational development that trans people would or might be able to produce if they had access to such institutions. Poet jayy dodd notes that "the world of politics is mirrored and embedded in art and most definitely in poetry" and asks "what is the "Poetry Establishment's" responsibility? How do we transcend the conversation from spotlight and special issue activism?" ("Poetics of Resilience" 3) There is no easy answer. It is possible that the poetics of resilience are inherent in every poem written and disseminated by a trans person: by writing a poem and sharing it, this trans poet is thus proving to the literary world that they exist. Since dominant cisgender ideologies operate in Western society, the very act of writing and potentially publishing as a trans person is, indeed, political, as trans bodies are often unfairly politicized as a part of an ongoing history of violence that seeks to erase their existence. While poetry as an institution does not exist, poetry-focused institutions like *Poetry* magazine, that benefit from and were founded with and within dominant cisgender ideologies, have and will continue to fail trans-identified poets due to disparate politics.¹²

I want to also emphasize the connection trans poetry has to ideas of the poetics of necessity that Audre Lorde and Dionne Brand have addressed in their work. Lorde's observation that "poetry is not a luxury" (37) and Brand's claim that "what poetry allows is the removal of parts of speech so that life may make sense to itself" (64) inform my colluding thoughts on how poetry and the development of poetics for trans people is a necessary act. For Lorde and Brand, writing for the Black, lesbian, colonized, and/or diasporic subject, poetry "cuts through" (Brand 69) and "births thought" (Lorde 36). Poetry is necessary in language becoming "tangible action" (37) that aids in the survival of the marginalized individual. Trans poetics is essentially intersectional, as many trans writers are also Black, lesbian, colonized (or formerly colonized and grappling with the aftereffects of violent colonization) and/or diasporic subjects who use poetry to form identity and thought, to, as Lorde emphasizes, "give [them] strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak and to dare (37)." I argue that though the aims of trans poetics, Black poetics, diasporic poetics, and so on cannot be equated, they share similar aims in working toward a poetic language for their subjects to express themselves with and within that has hereunto been barred from them.

Lastly, Oliver Moore writes towards a notion of trans poetics that are "forward-thinking" in their political aims — he states that "a trans poetics must be one that speaks both to and of the trans experience so as to build a community that is capable of enacting change" (48). The change Moore notes is a change in attitude towards trans people through altering language, speaking to contributions by trans writers that aid in the "slow incorporation of specific terms into our common language, terms that may have once been articulated only in a coded, substitutive language" (44). The aims of changing language, which informs and changes perspectives, largely of transphobic or ignorant cisgender people, is in agreement with the aforementioned connection

made between dodd's questioning of spotlights and special issues, and Kupperts' "transing" of language to express a "multibodied" world. In Moore's eyes, any and all poetry by trans people is inherently political not due to the writers' positions as trans; rather, it is because they are actively working to integrating that change whether they are aware of it or not. For Moore — using an example from poet and performer Alok Vaid-Menon, but extending his argument to trans poetics in general — trans poetry is

the attempt to translate violence into language, hatred into poetry, senselessness into meaning. Trans poetics expresses frustration in response to the indifference and apathy expressed toward violence against and amidst trans people; when, for instance, deaths are not honoured by commemorations in speech and writing, trans poetry seeks to repair and to remedy these exclusions (49).

Trans poetry deals with what Moore argues as an "[attempt] to achieve what [Judith] Butler associates with the aims of obituaries and mourning rituals: to provide a record, and acknowledging the importance, of trans lives and experiences" (49). Here, it becomes clear that Moore is interested primarily in what trans poetics can do for others, outside of trans experience — the work he is highlighting speaks to that desire to be cared for, and to find empathy and understanding, from an audience.

To do this, to work with, against, and in the written word, a poet needs a poetic, and a poetic needs a language; the English language, in all its binarist limitation, can and is being reconstructed — not necessarily deconstructed — by trans poets and their poetics. Since this reconstruction is arguably enacted out of necessity, the work being done is urgent and necessary — but, as Phillips reminds us, each individual writer has their own sense of this urgency

(“Politics of Mere Being”) that informs their work — and, subsequently, aids readers, trans and cis alike, as they encounter that work. Rachel Blaus DuPlessis discusses a similar method, often employed by those writing in any kind of urgency, in her approach to the essay form — it is a process of “writing-as-reading” that she believes makes up much of contemporary essay writing, and this she calls “sociopersonal reading,” a reading that “became a vital and earth-shattering act within one’s investigative and imaginative life, quite charged with questions of access, consumption, positioning, pleasure, scrutiny, ingestion, interpretation, agenda setting” (35-36). She notes that “language is the inventor of findings” rather than a tool used simply for the summary of findings (36), and it is this notion that aids here in understanding the aims of this, an essay, its own socio-personal reading of poetry by trans identified people from a trans poet himself. Here, in my own essay, this writing is as keen on inventing as it is on finding, illuminating, or elucidating. But poetry can do much of this work, too. Poetry by trans writers is actively working to aid in the breaking of tradition, whatever that tradition may be understood to be. Here, I use it to refer to the canon of poetry commonly found and uplifted in North American academic institutions, one that highlights the work of white, cisgender men of European descent. The kind of poetry that these poets write has never been the *only* poetry out there; it has only been acknowledged as such in Western academic systems.

Given these concerns, I look now to several trans writers whose work has appeared in the last decade. Their poetry and poetics are working to shape the future of trans poetics. Their use of language and form varies widely, but their work is being written, published, and shared in the last few years, a time of inarguable and unprecedented focus on trans narratives in a larger, public sphere – they are all writing against this backdrop, alongside the backgrounds of their own lives and experiences. This selection, however, is by no means the only trans poetry one should

look to or must reference when studying trans poetics. I found it personally essential to look to them, though their writing stands among the poetry of dozens of others, to see what trans poetry is doing – as many of these poems were written after *Troubling the Line*, after the *Poetry* issue cancellation, and after each other. Likewise, these poems are written by academics, educators, performers, and prolific essayists. Further, many of these poets wrote in direct response to the “special issue” cancellation, and others have clear and easily accessible statements on their own poetic projects. For this myriad of reasons, the poets presented here proved best for my project. I argue that all trans writers, their poetry, and their poetics exist in conversation with each other. By bringing several together here, I can listen in on what they have to say.

The poetics of looking forward while looking back – Cameron Awkward-Rich, Ali Blythe, and kai conradi

In their introduction to the third issue of *Vetch*, Kay Gabriel, Stephen Ira, Rylee Lyman and Liam O’Brien state that the issue emerged from a desire to “confront [the] social demand [of trope-laden gendered narratives as expected of transgender people by cisgender people] and collectively negate it by embracing formal techniques of derivative and secondary composition” (5). They claim their “challenge here is to confront a social and political problem on an aesthetic and cultural level” (5). This broad claim is narrowed and becomes easier to understand and, as they encourage, “grapple with” (7), with the help of the poetry therein. One such poem, penned by Cameron Awkward-Rich, challenges, grapples, and ultimately exacts this confrontation as imagined by the editors, all the while utilizing a trans poetic that strengthens its impact.

In short, Awkward-Rich’s hybrid poem “Everywhere we look, there we are” is part original lyric, part erasure of a transphobic news article from 1903 that outed a presumed trans

man for supposed aberrant behavior to revision a history wherein Awkward-Rich addresses this person with respect and offers an understanding he did not receive in the past (52). He censors the individual's birth name, allowing him a privacy that was stripped from him in the transphobic and racist article. Interspersed with original lyric, presumably from a contemporary trans speaker, Awkward-Rich's poem reformats and revises techniques to recontextualize the historic artefact as an example of a Black trans masculine individual being violently outed and targeted by, we are made to assume, white police officers. Awkward-Rich begins the poem with the full news release, followed by a note in square brackets with a line that reads, "Man woman other / can't tell. Any human specificity obliterated / by pain" (27); he then shares the poem derived from the erased article.¹³ The placement of the words Awkward-Rich draws from the source text echo the placement in the original article, directly reminding readers of said source material. Words are also repeated; for example, "Doc" and "disrobed," as well as "black" and "yesterday." This repetition allows readers to focus on the important images of this poorly treated Black trans person amongst all the blank space on the page. He also highlights how this violence, this transphobic and racist presentation of an innocent person, happened both in history but also only "yesterday," referring to the author's present. Further, he highlights the position of power the doctor took over the figure in the poem by disrobing them both literally and figuratively in denying their identity, an act that was perpetuated further through the writing and publication of the news article describing the violating incident. He ends the poem with another note from the present, writing

[I'm sure you were
like all of us
lovely and terrible
to love. I'm sure
this isn't interesting or good

to know. If only it were
enough—

my face pressed

against the pane

of history
or whatever.] (37)

Awkward-Rich's relation to the narrator becomes clearest here — he laments that this poem is clearly not enough: “[his] face pressed / against the pane / of history” indicates his position as someone looking back, as if through a window, unable to reach this person attacked by the article, only able to observe and bring the injustice they faced into the present through poetic. But it is, of course, not enough — the narrator has, and will never have, the power to help this trans individual — and nor will anyone else. The stakes, he reminds readers, have always been high. The violence they faced is reflected in Awkward-Rich's present, with poems, he claims, “that help [him] live with, and in, this incoherence” (qtd. in Soto “We’ve Always”). The incoherence he speaks of is in “participating in [a] 21st-century Pride [that] means inhabiting two temporalities at once: a violent one in which the past is ongoing and a celebratory one in which the past is gone” (“We’ve Always”). This incoherence involves the police, police that target Black trans bodies at a higher rate than others, police that are more often than not made welcome at an event that started as a riot against police violence. Awkward-Rich describes, then, not only his personal struggles as a Black trans man, but brings poetics to a broader political issue involving all Black trans people and the ongoing violence they face.

Conversely, but not without their similarities, Ali Blythe and kai conradi are two white trans masculine poets whose poems address similar concerns in regards to being recognized as

who they are rather than who they are presumed to be, but through a more directly personal lens.

In “son/daughter,” conradi begins with scenes from a dream in which

[his] dad fell
 from the top of a steep white mountain
 down into a blue crevasse
 like the space between two waves
 where the light shines through just enough
 to tell you
 you will miss this life dearly. (*Poetry*, “son/daughter”).

The poem introduces a dream wherein the narrator revisits the death of his father only to have him return not once, but twice, in two separate dreams that speak to the grief and subconscious emotional struggle the narrator is facing due to this loss. However, the narrator turns the narrative in the last two stanzas, likening the moment his father said, “you will always be my daughter” to a prior images of falling, angels, a notion of separation expressed by the father: “I can’t come back to earth now not ever.” The narrator asks “will I be allowed to come back to earth / and be your son?,” ending the poem in a state of questioning.

conradi’s narrator, who will presumably never receive an answer from his deceased father, is left in this limbo. The implication that his father died before he recognized his “daughter” as his son suggests a disjointed and potentially unsatisfactory relationship between the narrator and his father. This is carried through the poem’s very structure. The line breaks, large spaces in individual lines, and indentation add to the themes of uncertainty, apprehension, and attempt at connection that are established from the start. As the scenes in this poem occur in the narrator’s dream, the prosodic structure also contributes greatly to the oft-disjointed and non-

linear nature of dreams. The narrator's lucid question at the end can be imagined as one asked upon waking. As Conrad's narrator contemplates his own death and potential return or reincarnation, the reader is asked not to answer it, but to sit in uncertainty with him, an uncertainty that many trans people face in familial relationships where — usually a parent — cannot see their child as the “daughter” or “son” they were before they recognized and embraced their transness.

Though more ‘traditionally’ structured, Ali Blythe's poem “Self-Compassion” reinforces such sentiments. The poem grapples with the narrator's desire to care for himself as well as for others, and a key image in the seventh stanza addresses the struggle: “I slit open / an intriguing envelope / from Sunset Peach, // the hotel where my mother / asked me if she should / call me her son” (26). The figure of the speaker's mother, who remains uncertain but nonetheless emotionally connected to her son, is not unlike Conrad's narrator's deceased father. She, too, is central to the poem. It could not exist, or elucidate on its topic — that of compassion — without her and the difficulties she poses for the speaker. The poem begins with a question: “Is it never again 1976 / when I was really getting somewhere / with language?” The narrator, presumably speaking from the present, reflects to a time prior when he was able to “[get] somewhere” with language, when he was able to express himself in a way that seems impossible now. This ‘before’ can only appear as speculation — was this the narrator's birth year? The year he came out as transgender, or perhaps the year before, or the year after? Regardless, the importance of the ‘before’ is in how the narrator, now knowing himself as a trans person, is faced with the difficulty of a lack of language. This lack speaks to a vocabulary he might use for his experiences, both past and present. He knows something in the language he uses or attempts to use is missing — but there is, paradoxically, no language to describe that lack accurately. His

mother, too, struggles with language, requesting permission to use new descriptors for her son, unsure of both her views and of his desires. The lack of communication implied here is preceded by the aforementioned lack of language they may share to express understanding of trans experiences. This leaves the two figures in this poem at quiet odds with each other while remaining, quite clearly, in the care of one another. The path they walk now is one interrupted by a lack of language, and interruption that the speaker recognizes. However, he presents himself, his mother is still unsure of how to speak of him among others. Though the mother's issue with language may be a social one, the speaker's struggle mirrors Blythe's; a struggle that is social, political, and related to his poetic work. This multi-layered lack of language, again, an absence of a vocabulary necessary to explain trans experience and to aid in another's understanding of said experience. This "blank," as Ladin may name it, disrupts not only his speaker's life, but Blythe's own life as a poet.

Images of recognition are common, of course, in trans poetics, where the writing imagines how the speakers in these poems, or perhaps the authors themselves, are seen or might be seen through the eyes of a cisgender person. This viewing of the self outside of the self is complex and complicated. Though there does not yet exist an accurate enough language to describe such an experience, this empathetic and distanced view of oneself through both one's own eyes and the hazarded guess at another's perspective, these three poets do such an attempt great justice. Recognition of the self perpetuates these poems. Awkward-Rich turns to historical trans bodies, while Blythe and Conrad remain in the present while reaching into their personal pasts, posing contemporary questions about how their family — namely, their parents — view them. Awkward-Rich reminds readers, however, that these difficulties are not just familial, but social and cultural, and overlap with other aspects of marginalization like race. Transgender

livelihoods and overall existence is challenged at every turn, and by reflecting this in the poetry they produce, these writers draw attention to the difficulty that one of many major issues – this lack of language – ultimately causes.

These poets, like many trans writers, return frequently to these ideas – and this, whether purposeful or entirely unconscious, is important to note. The essays in Rachel Blaus DuPlessis' *Blue Studios* “reflect what the Objectivist poets termed attention, where understanding is achieved not through sudden revelation but instead gathers through the processes of occupying an idea and returning to it in order to comprehend its possibilities” (Vickery, 478). This idea of constant return, of a process of “occupying an idea,” is essential in understanding the aims of transgender poetics, as reflected in *Troubling the Line*, which made an effort to return to a way of presenting work by trans people that highlights rather than diminishes their identities, and their presentation of their experiences through poetry. Many, of course, addressed their turn to poetic language in order to accurately express such experiences as relating to their transness. By returning to ideas regarding a lack of language for trans forms of expression, but seeking out new ways of examining the self, the body, the existence of the trans poet, the work of the poetry becomes a work of language development, which extends to a cultural development. Again, language is not immune to any author's bias and lack of care and consideration: for example, DuPlessis's examination of poetry and how poetics are heavily gendered, though it remains valid in her aim to expand the study with a feminist exemplar. It comes as no surprise that she completely fails to think of the transgender subject. However, much of her work can be applied to my exploration of trans writers and their social, cultural, political and personal aesthetic aims. For example, she writes:

Without attention to the interdependent helix of a text's social and aesthetic aspects, a poetic text has to be viewed reductively as a bizarre choice of message-delivery system for ideas and themes— a choice inexplicably quirky and rather less effective than writing polemic or sending an email (122).

Of course, this is not a bizarre choice. It only seems so if social or aesthetic aspects are favoured over the other. Here, I want to highlight how the two cannot work without one another in the works of the following poets. The sociopolitical aims of the poem, whether personal or general, work in tandem with the aesthetic elements therein to build on their delivery and to enact effective emotional and intellectual responses in their readers. Essentially, an overwhelming majority of poems by trans writers open the possibility of accomplishing three sociocultural aims whether this was their intention or not. These aims, though by no means definitive, are what I view as follows: broadening the perspective of the reader through lyric that requires the asking of questions, the capacity for empathy, the ability to think on the complexity of human experience, and the willingness to enjoy the aesthetic experience offered up by the poetic of the piece. These elements combined would make for, I argue, an ideal reading not just of poetry by trans people, but poetry by anyone. However, for trans people in particular, there is a distinct lack of care and thought put toward them and their livelihoods. Cisgender readers, then, may be pushed toward caring, and toward considering; whereas transgender readers find a sense of solace, of relatability, and language that aids in expanding their understanding of themselves and their experiences. Poetry can, in many cases, aid in the changing of thought and subsequent understanding of the world outside an individual reader. This may occur in the form of a revelatory moment, or, perhaps more commonly, a slow expansion of learning and further understanding.

The poetics of experiencing ongoing trans existence – Joshua Jennifer Espinoza, Juliana Huxtable, Jasper Avery, and Joy Ladin

In Awkward-Rich and conradi's poems, we see a connection through authoritative figures who are having difficulty or otherwise outright and violently refusing to recognize the trans narrators as the gender they are, rather than the gender they were assigned at birth. Taking on a fragmented narrative form, these two poems, unlike Blythe's, reflect in their very form the feeling of uncertainty, of apprehension, and of the attempt to piece together an experience that was difficult. However, it is now necessary to share as much of the experience as possible. This act of sharing, this elucidation of experience, might reach a reader who may either become aware of what trans people face, or resonate with the experience, as they are trans themselves.¹⁴

In keeping with the theme of trans writers reflecting on difficult experiences, I turn to "Birthday Suits" by Joshua Jennifer Espinoza. "Birthday Suits" is a narrative poem that details the narrator's experience with her father before beginning her transition, a father who "decided to take / another stab at making / a man out of me." The majority of this poem is written in short, choppy lines that build up each recollected scene of the narrator's experience trying on and buying these undeniably masculine suits. However, when the narrator expresses a truth about herself, as she does in the second stanza, the lines are indented, further fragmented, and the language turns from matter-of-fact in tone to more noticeably fluid, dream-like, 'poetic' language. The narrator states that, despite the version of her father viewed as his truth, she "did not forget / what [she] was /beneath the cover of the flesh[.]" She describes her image of herself at the time as

five million faggy mountains
 slicing through fields full
 of dreamed-up tongues and
 unnamable bluish grasses
 each blade the length
 of a universe
 stretching inward toward
 a singular point
 of
 life-sustaining unlogic— (“Birthday Suits”)

The last line, cut off, leads back into a scene wherein the narrator is trying on suits in a clothing store to appease her father. The poem, retrospective in nature, ends with an anecdote about what happened to those suits: she tossed them in the trunk of her car, “and the day [she] sold that car off / those suits were still in there” (“Birthday Suits”). Espinoza’s poem sets readers in both her narrator’s present and her past, where her present self is aware of what her past self, before her acceptance of her transness, upsetting the temporality of the poem by interrupting it with these fragmented, beautifully worded lines. While the scenes in which she must try on suits are stiff and straightforward, the moments in which she can express herself in full feel loose and emotive, able to quite literally break free of the structure of the poem itself.

In contrast, Ladin’s poem “Comfort Animal” has speaker in conversation with herself, or what can potentially be read as her inner voice. There are no fathers or other figures present, though, as the speaker intellectualizes, she begins to converse with her own body as if she is a separate entity. A careful scene unfolds, one wherein Ladin’s speaker is addressing her body.

The speaker claims

It’s better to be animal than vegetable
 but best of all is to be spirit
 flying first or maybe business class

with your emotional support animal, your body,
 curled in your lap, soaring with you
 above the sense of loss you've mistaken

for the closest to God you can get. ("Comfort Animal")

The image of a "spirit" who views the body as an "emotional support animal" is powerful in its separation of body and mind — Ladin's speaker is a part of the *shekhinah*, a Hebrew word that means "dwelling" or presence of the divine, and represents the feminine aspects of God in Judaism. The spiritual part of the speaker — the divine — is addressing the mortal part, the animal, the body that the speaker says "When you suffer, I suffer. / Comfort me / by being comforted." The speaker's body and this spiritual presence are intrinsically linked, human and non-human at once, pain and pleasure felt by both, linked by images of anxious pets, emotional support animals, and travelling — all used as metaphors for a journey through one's relationship to their entirely human body.

Ladin has touched on how, for her, "trans poetics as ways of addressing a problem that is built into being human. ... [T]hat's why trans poetics are important—because articulating trans identities is to articulate being human (Pious, "Joy Ladin: On Trans Poetics"). Ladin's speaker is not truly a "comfort animal," as established in the poem, but this envisioning addresses her inability to articulate an identity — the language simply does not exist. What language remains is that of love, extended into acts of comfort that are necessarily physical, without written or spoken word. As animals speak in gesture and through body, I argue that Ladin might be figuring a world wherein the body does not need language to be comforted. It can be understood and self-soothed through internal validation, unmarred by external influences. However, Ladin notes the unavoidable paradox of trans existence, of all human existence: one must also be *seen* to exist at all. "I know the crucial cultural work [that] public portrayals of trans identity do," she notes.

“Without them, I, and many isolated trans people, might never have learned of gender transition, or seen trans identity portrayed as anything other than disgusting or ridiculous” (641, “Split the Seeds”). Poems can and do offer just that – they offer a way of seeing trans identities as valid, real, and, in many cases, positively lived and experienced.

Many individual poems and continued poetic practices aim to make the facts of their existences known. Poet and performer Juliana Huxtable’s poem “THERE ARE CERTAIN FACTS THAT CANNOT BE DISPUTED” seeks to affirm the speaker’s presence by asserting the fact that she can be seen in this world, as she remains a “fact” of existence. She writes,

THERE I AM!
 LOST SOMEWHERE IN 1/4 MM. SKIN BOILING. I LOOK DOWN. PORES,
 FOLLICLES,
 AND THEIR NEGATIVE SPACES TURN INTO STROKES. ARE BREAKING
 APART-LUMINOUS, LOFTY, POSSESSIVE
 STROKES THAT BREAK THE BOUNDARIES REGULATED BY OPTOMETRY
 (“And I Roll”)

Huxtable’s poetry reflects Ladin’s notion of a “problem that is built into being human” by directly stating that the fact of her existence cannot be disputed. Even if she remains undefinable by English language standards, Huxtable exists — and can be seen, whether by the eye or by the camera lens. But her existence also breaks boundaries — “boundaries regulated by optometry.” Huxtable is aware of her presence as both a bounded and unbounded figure, someone entirely human who is not often viewed as such. Her confident “THERE I AM!,” repeated throughout the poem, emphasizes that not only is she there to be seen by others — but

she sees herself. She is viewing herself from the outside, affirming her own existence, regardless of who else knows she is extant or not. She does not need the camera, the gaze of the other, or this poem to exist — she sees herself, and for as long as the moment of this poem lasts, perhaps, that is enough.

Continuing with notions of boundaries, world-building, and of being seen, in her debut collection, *Number One Earth*, Jasper Avery’s poetics are attuned to her love of the Earth and of her various relationships with those that inhabit it. Her work reads as a series of portraits of earths that do not exist, but exist as portraits of her narrator’s personal “earths” and their relations to trauma, healing, and understanding the relations between personal recovery and journeys toward new forms of understanding the self and others. The first poem in the collection begins with

this is my last day on this earth
but don’t worry
i will be back on monday
i go to my other earth on the weekends
my earths have split up
for a long time
since i was little
too little (11)

By introducing us to a narrator who is departing not the planet Earth, but “this earth,” her own personal world, Avery sets the tone of the poem — and collection — to follow. Recognizing how the past informs the present and future, Avery skillfully weaves a tapestry that resembles a map of the known galaxy, wherein her narrator travels from one earth to another, all numbered, but her “#1 earth” is the “earth of [her] childhood” where her “dead trans childhood” remains kept in “fourteen jars of apricot jam / that are to [her] / the entire physical universe” (29). The poems that follow are image poems that depict the earths inside those jars, poems that focus on

memories and how the narrator is relating to those memories from their place in the present.

Again, the first poem in the collection helps to set up this project. It continues with Avery's narrator explaining that

i keep memory
of my other earth with me
at all times
it helps me
like a small piece of bark in my pocket
to keep me the soil
keep me the image of soil
of turning over a clod of soil
with my kindest shovel (12)

Wanting to remain grounded, the narrator imagines soil, of turning that soil over with the “kindest shovel” she can find. The idea of treating her Earth with kindness, and enacting tenderness through the digging that must still be done, is an extended metaphor for healing, for personal repair and rebuilding after trauma has occurred. The “other earth” that the narrator mentions is now a memory; it cannot be returned to, but it can aid in the healing process by serving as a reminder of what the narrator's world was like *before* said trauma. At the end of the book, Avery notes that “this book is a spell / the spell is the size of a meadow / everyone is allowed in this meadow / this can be a place to heal” (94). By presenting this collection of related poems as a spell, Avery is proclaiming its action, and the act it completes: one of aiding in healing. Written explicitly for “everyone who is, was, or will be young” (95), Avery keeps the focus of her poetry's work on healing, and the aid of healing. The implication is that, by working through her own process of healing by writing this spell, she can contribute to the healing of others — particularly those who are queer and/or trans — when they read and subsequently enter the meadow, or large, all-encompassing space, that Avery is envisioning.¹⁵

As an extended metaphor for belonging, this purposeful dissuasion of alienation is Avery's deliberate effort in asserting her narrator's presence on this Earth and all others in their potentiality. Her images are clear and straightforward in turns, but many poems within contain images that make up extended metaphors or similes, images that are markedly dream-like or unfamiliar to the reader, and may read as unintelligible as they are so intensely personal. This intelligibility or "a struggle with intelligibility" are, argues Trace Peterson, a central part of trans poetics — this intelligibility of the self, of expressing that self, of readership, of speaking to that readership, and a distinct lack of literary history for trans writers are all key aspects of such poetics (523). Though I argue that Avery is not struggling with intelligibility, there is a sense of reconciling with uncertainty, alienation, and fear for the future of the self in these reflective poems.

Boundaries of the self, whether they are created or broken down, help trans writers express their experiences. The metaphorical movement in and out of the body and in and out of the world is a key part of Avery's poetry just as it is an underlying notion in the work of many others. On that note, I return now to the elements of trans poetry put forward by Christopher Soto. Soto's argument addressing alienation as a recurring theme in trans poetry is unsurprising. Alienated by cissexist and heteronormative society, and often compared to animals or monsters, trans people are concerned with ideas of belonging and the human, and how to belong (and thus not be alienated), a state which can be achieved only when one is viewed and accepted as human rather than animal. Ladin states something similar, using an example from, surprisingly, Emily Dickinson to cite a major function trans poetics: "this is trans poetics 101: defining identity in negative terms, by demonstrating one's disidentification with conventional identifiers ("Split It

Open” 644). It is common to see images, themes, and expressions of trans people and trans bodies that are coded as negative, undesirable, and oppressive, but trans poets more often than not flip these codes around and, as Ladin states, show how strongly they “disidentify” with them. Others, of course, choose to identify with them, like Susan Stryker, whose identification with Mary Shelley’s famous monster is expressed in her essay “My Words to Victor Frankenstein”:

Like [Frankenstein’s] monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (238)

Regardless of how the trans writer identifies with negative terminology and imagery, it helps to create a personal story, or mythology, that pushes the trans body into a place of simultaneous memory and preservation, something that can survive in both a literary future and a future, physical space in the world.

The poetics on the making of myth and the making of myself – jayy dodd and Trish Salah

jayy dodd’s second collection, *The Black Condition ft. Narcissus*, features poems that focus around a central figure who is likened, again and again, to the Greek mythological figure of Narcissus. In “narcissus #17”, dodd writes

i just imagined myself in agreement / now in the mirror, whispering *you’re alive* /
speaking to my reflection as if it would know better than i about the unreal /
you think i don’t see you / nothing about this is supposed to make sense / [...]
even my reflection knows this mouth is a false prophet / disillusioned to believe

my lips holy / what humour / what arrogance / i keep the water beside me to see myself
in it (11)

The connections to the Narcissus myth are clear in the mentions of reflections, of water, and of viewing oneself, of conversing, or attempting to converse, with the mirrored image. But dodd's speaker is also removed from the myth in that this is not explicitly about a mistaken identity, or an unrequited love; her speaker is returning to their reflection to assure them of their existence, to state "you're alive" despite how little sense it might make, and how their mouth is a "false prophet" that can assure them of nothing, real, unreal, or otherwise. This struggle of language – of whose language, and what language, to believe – is central to the poem, and dodd confidently draws these many conversations together into one self-reflective piece in their work.

Aside from this conflict, however, dodd's poetry and the mythology that inspires it reflects an aforementioned theme in trans poetics: poetics of the present, of the being here and the recognizing of that 'here-ness.' This, too, is an effort of Black poetics, a poetics dodd is also writing from within. The "Black condition" that dodd speaks of is something she attempts to define in the final piece in the collection, stating that it is, in part, "an obsession with language for the impossible" and how she "condition[s her] body to obsess over itself / make Black a necessary fixation" (83). The writing of such poetry, and the performing of it, as mentioned in Huxtable's work, highlights and asserts the existence of its author and their necessity; dodd's collection, notably, begins with an epigraph from Huxtable that reads: "What's the nastiest shade you've ever thrown? Existing in the world." Before reaching dodd's poetry, the reader is already then aware of dodd's poetic: of assuring space for her and her work in the world as both a Black and a trans writer.

As conradi, Blythe and Awkward-Rich brought their poetry into the world in response to specific interpersonal, familial and societal difficulties cisgender people have with transgender individuals, dodd supports her speaker, in many instances a Narcissus figure, in the broader world with the ‘here-ness’ of her poetics. The form of this particular poem is prose-like, with forward slashes to indicate nonexistent line breaks, reading as an associative progression or an inner monologue. dodd’s speaker is in conversation with her reflection, and with the wider world, a world that invokes images of the harsh but beautiful world of the summer: heat, cicadas, floods, dogs barking at the moon, and so on. The poem ends with dodd’s speaker recognizing, that among this cacophony, as she tries to find and utter words to and for herself, that “nothing will sound its best here / this is an itching of a feral evening’s stupor / the night keeps its frequency on right now / every so often / taking a break / to remind me / it knows i listen” (11). Unlike in conradi, Blythe and Awkward-Rich’s pieces, dodd’s speaker is not faced with another human figure or figures; instead, the world is drowning her out with its noise. Amongst the racket, however, dodd’s speaker does find the moments of silence wherein she can speak to her reflection, to herself, and perhaps find understanding regarding what is real and what is not. In their conversation, Kahkonen and Ladin discussed “the role of poetry” in “experience, embodiment, and existence”; Ladin answered an important role is present in first-person poems, wherein “the speakers define – perhaps invent is a better word – themselves as they speak (64).” “narcissus #17,” as a first-person poem that reads as the thought and reflection process of the speaker, falls into this role. ‘Defining’ the self is an ongoing, intensely personal process, and dodd’s speaker here feels the need to speak to her reflection, to find space for herself when the world falls into some silence, allowing for her voice to be heard.

dodd also addressed such themes in her selection of poems and her comment on the poetics in the anthology of poetry on bodies, *a portrait in blues*. Like the inherent “anxiety & release” in blues music like that of, they note, George Hannah’s, are essentially “a lament & acceptance of one’s own strangeness” (11). The poems in the anthology were selected, states dodd, for their “desire to link language around the body to a landscape” (12). Though not exclusively featuring works by trans-identified authors, dodd, as seen in their own poetry, has a vested interest in poems, poetic practice and praxis that explores the limits and reaches of how the self, the physical form, is expressed. dodd writes “I’m curious to what we make of ourselves under limitations — it feels easier to transcend when you can point to the barriers of your own departure” (11). Transcendence beyond language is difficult, as language works to define, and, oftentimes, contain — but working within these parameters to break down barriers allows for potential movement through a literary (and a physical) space, aided by language that helps rather than hinders the “becoming” of a trans poet. Mythology is one way to move through that space by refiguring famous characters, like Narcissus, in a poem reflecting on a trans poet’s experience. Mythology provides a language that is comfortable being remixed and reimagined, and though no less difficult than writing without the aid of myth, the poetic of modern usage of myth is, I argue, part-in-parcel of much of transgender poetics. These figures, whose presence in contemporary writing is familiar to both readers and writers alike, allow for a point of connection.

In *Lyric Sexology vol. 1*, Trish Salah, too, uses imagery from mythology, in a similar form and purpose to dodd. The “I” figures prominently, and is compared to Narcissus and

Tiresias, another Greek mythological figure whose position as seer and prophet made him a recurring figure in many epic poems, plays, and otherwise recorded myths. Salah's poetry, however, maintains an intelligibility that Dodd's does not. While "narcissus (unplugged)" poses deceptively simple questions, Salah's poetry gives us answers without alluding to the questions. Her collection opens with "Prelude," a poem that introduces us to her speaker and the overarching project of *Lyric Sexology*:

I didn't mean to become an I.
 I didn't mean to be.
 But, I got caught up, predictably, in a subject, History, yours.

(Or, it was a sequence of events. You wanted me
 to make sense of it all.
 Or, I thought so.
 Or, I wanted to think so.)

History (yours) catapulted me forward.
 Predictably, I was forwarded to you, catastrophically.
 Catastrophe gave way, gave me a body.

So, in time, here we are. What's *in time* for me, what's to come.

Know there are always other ruins. (9)

Salah's effort at avoiding the restrictive nature of being a being — of being an 'I' — has already failed, so to speak. Her speaker was "caught up" in a "subject" and "a sequence of events" that she felt required to understand, and a history not her own "catapulted [her] forward." This "catastrophe" of history is also one of the body, and one of language — the language of selfhood.

Both poets figure the 'I' and the body above all else. Everything returns to the question of continuance — how will these speakers, and their bodies, live on after the poem is over? What

will become of them, if they are not represented in language? Without a desire for immortality — both poets are highly aware of their mortality. Death and the disintegration of corporeal form are mentioned and addressed with acceptance, not fear or concern. What is concerning for Salah and Dodd, however, is, again, the relation of the body to written language. The continued presence — the desire Dodd expresses by stating “i hope to die knowing my mystery will become myth” (70) in the collection’s final poem, “narcissus unplugged” — is echoed in Salah’s speaker’s questioning, in which she asks “How do you narrate the end?” only to answer “begin at the end” wherein, presumably, “every one died” (9). Assuring that one’s personal “mythology” or history will live on long after they are dead are, I argue, is one of the primary goals of many, but not all, trans identified writers examined here.

Salah’s *Wanting in Arabic* is split into sections, its second titled “Language Becoming a Girl.” This section opens with a long-form, narrative, fragmented and rhythmic poem that ends with the lines

love is closed like a sign
saying “Closed”

my *i* knocking against it all night long
wanting *in*

mouthed *all the right words &*
still

your can’t is loose
i’m loose in it

your incantations
lost

this body
your love hits hard on the road

over
written &
opening

s/he sees

why you didn't want her
as difference re)cedes
 our ground moves,
 her(e horizon (33)

This poem, titled “when there are three” addresses a previous relationship that contained much difficulty regarding trans-ness, gender, and gender presentation. However, the speaker of this poem is largely concerned with how to get “in” to a body. Salah writes “boundless / compared to / *you're so big, how can s/he come to (be? / only this body*” which is followed by the image of a photograph, presumably of this boundless body: “in any frame some skin is in and some skin’s out” (30). Salah then asks, “is this *realization of body / an inhabitation of desire*” (30)? The speaker’s “I” wants “in” over the course of this poem – in a body, in a photograph, in a relationship, in a conversation, in an opening. Some spaces are physical; others, emotional or metaphorical; all, however, are linked to the attempt to reconcile the speaker’s body, the desire that the speaker feels and the desirous ways in which the speaker is viewed. Salah ends the poem with “her(e horizon,” a coy play on words that has the open bracket both block off and open up the letter ‘e’ that leaves the word read as either ‘her’ or ‘here.’ Perhaps it remains both – it is her horizon, here, at the end of a relationship that ended based on difference in bodily desires. The image of a horizon is, ultimately, a hopefully one – associated with a futurity, with a look to the possibilities of the day, Salah’s horizon is tinged with loss, but her speaker is still looking undoubtedly toward it -- despite the previous, incredibly taxing struggle with language, vocabulary, and the body upon which it was both used to express, impress upon, and oppress through harmful rhetoric.

I argue that, here, Salah, in keeping with Ladin, shows through her poetry that while the enterprise of trans poetics is assuredly and rightly fixated in addressing the language-based

“problem” of lacking vocabulary for the self, it is also focused on filling the gaps in *all* forms of expression related to being trans and writing as a trans poet, expression that goes beyond the self and into ways of seeing and being in the world. In order to extend the ability to express, of course, one must adjust and develop language, and represent an aesthetic in their work that carries the weight of that language’s effort. Ladin writes “trans poetics is defined by its ends (the creation of language for modes of self and being for which there is no language) rather than by the poetic means used to achieve those ends” (641), a statement which brings ideas of being into her overall definition of trans poetics. This language-creation leads to a continued selfhood, a space where the trans poet can be present, can, ultimately, always have a view with a horizon.

This aim based in futurity is not exclusive of trans poets, but due to the disproportionate amount of violence trans people, especially transfeminine people, are subject to day in and day out, it is unsurprising to me that part of the aesthetic/cathartic act of dodd and Salah’s trans poetic practice would address this idea of continuance. Through mythologizing the self, their speakers can not necessarily solve their own origins or create a legacy involving their own existence, but these are not the only functions of mythology.¹⁶ A personal history has as much of a place in myth as does fictional, near-supernatural figures. This idea of mythology is distinctly different from ideas of memoir or (auto)biography in that myth has, historically, required a set of poetics entirely separate from the poetic of such deliberate record-keeping, as writing of one’s life often entails. Myth allows for more fluidity, for interpretation, for adjustment where adjustment is necessary. Myth withstands time; stands out of time; and is carried throughout time by those who look to it for understanding of the self. Fundamentally interested in examining the human condition, personal mythology is made for and by the individual in a way that dramatizes

and uplifts the unique experiences of the writer, putting them on the same level as mythological figures, making their importance known. This type of work is often useful when used comparatively, or when a poet takes on aspects of a pre-existing mythological figure, as Dodd does in her poems.

The poetics of trans time and trans futures – Gwen Benaway, Wo Chan, Milo Gallagher and Kai Cheng Thom

Lyric poetry, much like prose, can often find it difficult to reflect the passage of time. Whether written in one hour or one year, a poem is, in effect, a static, physical object of ink on a book's page. The words may convey a sense of time passing, but it is difficult to capture the linearity — or non-linearity, as it so often stands — of an experience, an event, a life, that, again, may have taken countless hours to put into poetic form. However, in trans poetics, time is often important to note, and many poets go to great lengths to ensure that it is recognized and recognizable. In Gwen Benaway's poem, the passage of time is approached quite explicitly. "Goes On" begins with "the passage is infinite / but I'm not" (117) and continues on, addressing the grief that Benaway's speaker is feeling as she moves through space. No specific space is mentioned, but no specific place need be noted; this poem encapsulates the feeling of existing in a space that will remain even after Benaway's speaker is gone. She notes that "when I depart / cigarettes butts linger" and that "memory guides hands" (117) wherever she goes. Weighted with sadness, the poem is nonetheless both hopeful and optimistic. It ends on a turn — Benaway writes "yes, it's endless, / the weight of grief. // this country knows / nothing else. // but it's easy to forget / along the river's arc, // that everything I've been / is everywhere I am. // the land goes

on, even if I can't" (117). Here, Benaway extends her personal history of presence with the land she is on. As part of a collection that focuses on Benaway's travel through Northern Ontario and the Great Lakes, retracing her connection to herself, her expressions and experiences of indigeneity as an Anishinaabe and Métis woman, her ancestors, and the bodies of water that continue to flow in and on land still subject to violent colonization. "Goes On" is one of several poems that expresses both permanence and impermanence, reflecting and representing both a return and a departure. The travelling imagery expresses the idea of change, not only, of course, in the body, but in the mind – in ways of thinking, further reflecting, personal and shared memory, and feeling.

Wo Chan uses the imagery of a famous Greek statue to speak of their narrator's perception of and relation to a body that does, indeed, undergo observable change while simultaneously representing complex personal reflection on the self. In "Archaic Torso of Apollo," the statue of the same name is described as "all obscured" in regards to his "absolute feet" and "ankles, flexed ashen and intensely masculine" (52). All that remains visible is his "curved breast," "delighted hip" and "the ecstasy of hair cascading down" (52). Chan has chosen which parts of this statue the reader should visualize in a way that echoes back to Romantic poetic ekphrasis, but remains separate from such a writing practice all the same. Readers do not register the true nature of the poem until the final stanza, wherein it ends with

...you cannot, in all effort, see
 him anymore, and they are all themselves,
 so finally ready to let life change me (52).

The shift in pronoun — and to whom the pronoun is referring to — is an abrupt but necessary turn in this sonnet. Beginning with "you" and ending with "me," the poem reveals that the

speaker has been reflecting, rather than presenting; the reader is, essentially, seeing what the *speaker* is seeing of this statue rather than being guided through their own visualization of it. The speaker must ignore certain aspects of the statue, while simultaneously recognizing their absence, in order to “love him” and “recognize his fullness” alongside the bodily aspects that are mentioned and appreciated. The ending note of the speaker feeling “ready to let life change [them]” denotes the cathartic practice of viewing this statue and its component parts, both present and missing, lost to time, shaped by erosion and other natural forces of change.

This poem is can also be read as, a reworking of Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem of the same name that ends with a commanding line. Rilke writes “you must change your life” (*Poets.org*) whereas Chan has accepted that life, and the continued living of it, will change them, much as time has changed the statue they are looking upon. Rilke’s poem ended with a call to action, to change; Chan, already in the process of changing themselves has chosen to accept it rather than combat it, and in this there is, of course, a “fullness” rather than an absence.

Likewise, Milo Gallagher’s poem “No Funeral” imagines the author reconciling with their past self who exists only in parts, in memory — this “girl” has not died; there will be no funeral for her. Rather, the speaker “[holds] her like a sister, / a candle burning / in the room my body makes, / in the round and quiet room of sleep” (“No Funeral”). The image of holding one’s body in one’s own arms is both comforting and strange, this simile functioning as a way to highlight that contradiction to the reader. But the reader is not the one Gallagher is directing such imagery toward — there is a “you” here, one that has troubled Gallagher’s speaker in the past.

Now, however, Gallagher denies the “you” in this poem any power of their narrative as a trans person. The second last stanza reads

You mourn the girl I was
as if I killed her,
as if I left her
in a field somewhere,
shipwrecked in the dry grass –

This poem then refuses the harmful, largely cisgender idea that the transition many trans people undertake ‘kills’ or otherwise ‘destroys’ them. Gallagher did not leave their past self “in a field somewhere”; they, again, “hold her like a sister” and emphasize that “in the new forest” they “collect the dirt in jars / [they] drink the water, [they] label / all the bones” and create a space — and an image — for themselves. The interfering “you” cannot breach this space, and will not be invited to the funeral, as their will be none. Recognizing the fact that their body, though it has changed, is still holding that previous self, disrupts the narrative of linear temporality that cisgender people impress upon trans people.

In expressing such transphobia he experienced during their time completing a BA in Creative Writing, Gallagher responded to a series of tweets broadly claiming that not just anything could be named a poem with the following:

nobody seems to have considered the person, the kid, maybe, alienated by school,
looking for bugs at recess, building little secrets in the grass, or the gardener comforted
by their hands touching green things, the actual living breathing human who might say,
this dirt is my poem (@stoned_dads)

Gallagher, as a trans poet, addresses the issues surrounding defining poetry when those who define it are so often the ones in power, defining poetry so as to exclude those who are not in the

majority: white and/or cisgender and/or heterosexual. The trans body — and thus, the trans poetic — is excluded from institutions that inadvertently maintain an unchanging definition of poetry that, again, benefits the person or persons in power; the white, cisgender, heterosexual man or woman who conforms to binary notions of their gender identity. The metaphor of dirt as a poem speaks to the idea that even the most unexpected of forms can be named a poem if enacted with the appropriate poetics. Poetics-in-process, however, are often unfairly scrutinized as non- or inherently un-poetic. A poem as an enactment, as an action, as an affirmation of the “becoming” Ladin defines, is a practice Gallagher’s writing embodies.

Poetry, like all art, begins and ends in the body. One body produces it; another receives it. Chan and Gallagher are concerned with the change their bodies is undergoing, both actively and passively, and how they can possibly represent that in lyric while considering not only their own view, but the view of someone outside of them, whether that be themselves at a different point in life or a complete outsider, someone who is necessarily *not* them. By using the imagery of a statue — something unchanging and the subject of much literary reflection, and a funeral, or lack thereof, an event and experience where a deceased body is put on display and remembered subjectively by those still living, those with the control of the deceased’s representation — these two poets assert their position as both the viewer and the viewed, using trans poetics to navigate this complicate ‘becoming’ through, of course, dialogue. The conversation between the body and the self, the body and another body, and the body of work are all embodied through and within each other. Echoing Carl Phillips’ notion of wrestling with concerns difficult to put into words (“A Politics of Mere Being”), Gwen Benaway states that “I think of writing as a practice, almost like a physical act that opens up possibilities for beauty” (Benaway qtd. in Podaima). In this physical act, of course, lies the connection Benaway has with her literary work — though writing

is not a “physical” entity, it necessitates a physical effort on behalf of both the writer and the reader. In keeping with this, Phillips writes more broadly, speaking to all poetry. He states

the poem is itself essentially a body, comprised of various parts that work in various relation to one another—which could also be said, I know, of machines, but because poems are written by human beings, these relationships are unpredictable. A successful poem will never feel robotic or mechanized. It feels felt. (“Muscularity and Eros: On Syntax”)

‘Feeling felt’ is an intriguing turn of phrase; the poem is at once already felt (by the author, which Benaway addresses in her note on writing as a practice that remains open to possibility) and will be recognized as such by the reader (where the feeling of that ‘felt,’ that practice, is reciprocated). This bodily conversation — an exchange of emotion — is at once physical, emotional and intellectual. Poems, like bodies, as Phillips states, are made up of too many pieces to entirely understand, all at once. Conversation is needed; practice must be had; and, ultimately, careful attention must be paid to a poem in order for it to feel and to be felt.

Kai Cheng Thom’s piece, “Litany,” in its repetitive form, invokes such careful attention, practice, and literal actions that the speaker will perform in order to “honour the women who gave her life[.]” Thom also makes careful and caring note of the “women who came before” and the “women who are yet to come” (“Litany”) alongside notions of a more personal “becoming” that is arguably linked to Thom’s identity as a trans woman. The form of the poem is inspired in part by true litanies, that repetition of important, necessary invocations that more often than not have religious ties. Thom’s piece seeks to highlight women who have aided her speaker in becoming in the past, present, and the future, while also acknowledging her position as

“worshipper and worshipped and the slain,” a line that speaks to her solidarity with other women and femmes. The poem ends with lines that turn the focus of the poem from other women to the woman speaking them, where the pronoun “I” is repeated in quick succession:

i am the body am the altar am the temple am the flame.

i am the worshiper and the worshipped and the slain.

i am the ghost of a time that will come

again.

The final two lines solidifies her speaker’s position as someone who is voicing her praise and sending her prayers across time and space, reaching out to all women who she must honour and acknowledge and aid in the future. Ending on “again” adds, of course, another repetitive note to this litany-as-poem – at once, it calls for continuance and presence, as well as reflects upon a static, unchanging past that one can look to for guidance, as well as honour and commit to remembering. Thom’s speaker’s body holds all the prayers she wishes to offer to women, past and present and future, making her, ultimately, an “altar,” a “temple” and a driving, powerful “flame,” one that cannot go out, but is determined to continue even after death, as her ghost remains. This poem enacts the speaker’s desire to embody a figure who can be looked to as giving honour and paying tribute by existing at all: in writing this piece, Thom and her speaker have done exactly what they set out to do. Thinking back to DuPlessis’ notion of “writing-as-reading,” Thom is at once invigorating and uplifting herself through her writing process as she is enacting this process so that the piece, when read, will also work to remind the reader of women’s importance and continuance, or, perhaps, affirm the reader’s own necessity in existing.

The notion of “writing-as-reading” can arguably be applied to all the poets and poems that have herein been noted; all are dual efforts, processes that necessitate lyric for aesthetic

purpose alongside language creation for sociopolitical, cultural, and personal purpose. In the end, the two are joined, just as the joining of one author's effort to elucidate on their experience through exploration in poem results in a literary work that may validate the reader's experiences, or, at the very least, result in their empathizing with them, an act that, ultimately, leads to a question that carries on into conversation. The idea of communication – as seen in Conrad and Blythe's poems, for example – is pertinent to trans poets. Thom's poetry collection, *A Place Called No Homeland*, includes two short poems that strikingly note language and its uses. The first, "good communication," is a short prose poem that reads

someday, I'm going to finish writing down everything I mean to say. on that day
I'll be finished with language. forever. and anyone who wants to communicate with me
will have to have totally perfected the art of touching without causing pain (16).

This poem is stark in its directness: Thom leaves no room for interpretation. Concerned with the hypothetical future date on which she will be "finished with language," Thom's speaker notes that the only communication from thereon will be through touch. Anne Carson writes "as members of human society, perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is touching one another – whether the touch is physical, moral, emotional or imaginary. ... As the anthropologists say, 'Every touch is a modified blow'" (Crawley qtd. in Carson 135). Touch, to Thom, must be modified if communication is to happen.¹⁷ Many of her poems deal with violence – the violence the speaker experienced at the hands of family members, friends, sexual partners and people with which the speaker maintained long-term romantic relationships. In order for good communication to happen, then, Thom's speaker needs it to be modified into something other than language entirely. Not unlike the ongoing attempt at making a modified poetic, a poetic that

fits Thom's needs, this desire for communication that is unobstructed by language itself is carried throughout her poetry.

The second, "there is a poem," carries the title into the poem itself, reading

scratched onto the walls of my throat
no one has heard it
but it is there (10)

Preceded by a poem about the speaker being able to write but not to speak, emphasizing the lines "there are no words in your mouth / but there is a pen in your head (9)" and followed by a poem about surviving childhood abuse (11), this poem is set in the centre of a recurring idea in Thom's work that language is a difficult but necessary aspect of life. Acknowledging both the violence of the poem (it is "scratched" rather than 'written' or 'etched') and the presence of it is coupled with the line "no one has heard it," which speaks of a potentiality – a potential to be heard. Thom's speaker may one day be able to utter this poem, but, for now, she writes this one in its stead. The uniqueness of this poem and its poetic purpose is that it itself is a poem drawing attention to a non-existent poem, one that only exists in Thom's speaker's body as a literal part of it in the form of a wound, which may then become a scar.

These poems otherwise present intimate details of Thom's experiences in narrative form, weaving personal mythology together with lyricism to present the realities that Thom – and others like her – face. These poems focus on trans women, trans people of colour, femme identity, womanhood and Thom's own expression of her Chinese identity. Language, then, and the vocabulary used to explore these themes is important. For Thom's speaker to have that poem "scratched onto the walls of [her] throat" indicates, as it does in "good communication," that the effort she is making in her poetic is intrinsically linked to the body of the speaker, and, by

extension, the body of the author. It is a bodily thing, this writing, this particular poetic, and it aids in the continued survival of the one who is enacting it. The writer – Thom, in this case, but this can be applied more generally to trans poets – is in control of how their writing, and by extension their body, is represented and read, without dangerous and incorrect presentations or assumptions from others. Trans poetics allow for the trans poet in question to utilize language in a way that aids representation of their experiences, first and foremost.

Thom goes on to state that “if trans women's art and thought are ever to be freed from the machinations of other political and aesthetic agendas, we must also free our bodies” (“Representation”). Freeing the body from definition, and subsequent violence, is part of Thom’s poetry, and many other trans women like her who also operate in public literary communities — amalgamations of readings, book launches, author talks, interviews, etc. — often find that such work necessitates both careful attention to the languages of activism and aesthetic. The sociopolitical in poetry and poetics cannot be overlooked as it contributes as much to a trans woman’s bodily freedom in the form of aesthetic expression as it does to, say, literary studies. I argue, again, that trans poetics is unique in this way: these poetics are a tool for self-understanding, exploration, and care as much as they are a way to represent a trans experience in lyric that will evoke a sense of “felt-ness,” of connection, of the start of a conversation, between the work and the reader of said work.

Conclusion –

Yes, trans poetics start a conversation. Trans poetics moves toward a poetic of self-expression that is not limited by binaries. Trans poetics creates and reconstructs rather than reject cliché or deconstruct previous iterations and influences. Trans poetics makes space for new

forms, figures, and fluidity among bodies and ways of being. Trans poetics is a becoming, an eternal beginning, a way of writing the end that brings us back to the start. Trans poetics is, ultimately, offering us a way to change how we read, understand, and utilize the English language through a re-contextualization, a re-signification, a reworking of dominant hegemony that hereunto put cisgender bodies in places of power in poetry and poetics.

Trans poetics as enacted by trans identified poets ask readers to reconsider how they converse, which leads back to how they think, altering the landscape of language in a way that offers new ways of thinking, feeling, and understanding that, of course, can either be accepted or continue to be rejected. Regardless of how trans poetry is read and recognized by transgender and cisgender readers alike, it still remains that it is doing the necessary work of “becoming” in all sense of the word. Ladin, addressing the work of Oliver-Baez Bendorf in her review of his collection *The Spectral Wilderness*, says of his trans poetic mode that “[Bendorf’s writing] reminds us that the purpose of trans poetics is to create not only language to express who we are but also language that spurs us to imagine what we, individually and collectively, have yet to become” (647). I want to extend this notion to trans poetry — it is a spurring process, one that gets writers and readers alike moving through the present, toward a perpetual future that will contain the work they are doing in regards to understanding themselves through the language of trans poetics. The words move readers in many more ways than one.

Deeply important to the continued conversations one may have with trans poetry and poetics is the way in which these conversations, these readings, this exchange between poet and potential audience, are enacted. Carl Phillips, writing on the “musculature” of poetic language, its anatomy, so to speak, asks :“Why don’t we talk about poems in this way more often? As

living things made by living beings, as assemblages of parts working in various combination to convey both thought and feeling?” (“Muscularity and Eros: On Syntax”) Reading a poem in a way one might read a loved one’s body language is important in that it aids in a complete understanding of the piece, not as a static, finished product, but a poem rife with potentiality, impressing a sense of “becoming” on ever new reader who encounters it. By investing a level of care and consideration into what the language is doing and will do, rather than what it has done, is essential to trans poetics. As a branch of literary and queer theory that is relatively new, this approach and analysis are necessary in order to ensure a fair academic appreciation of trans poetry and poetics, showing how, of course, they can aid in the ‘becoming’ of poetics by all.

Ultimately, the continuance of trans poetics goes beyond representation in major literary or academic journals: it must move into the educational system. Teaching trans poetry and poetics specifically, due to their unique contributions to the revisioning not only of poetry, but of the English language and how it can be utilized to express gendered experience that goes beyond the binary of cisgender definition, will benefit all those in literary studies who are exposed to it. The creative effort undertaken by trans writers, who must consistently write against heteronormative, cissexist modes of experiencing the world, use language in ways that I claim were here unto mostly overlooked or ignored on account that they were coming from a marginalized group of peoples. Intersections of study – with race, disability, indigeneity, and so on indefinitely – will of course be necessary, and expected, in order to garner a fuller understanding of a trans writer’s experience, whose work will often, almost always, go beyond only their trans identity, naturally including all of who they are as a person.

By reading, teaching, and studying trans poetics, those in academic institutions and in the general public, can begin to expand their understanding of queer poetry, poetry as a whole, and the creative potential of the English language as formed in poetics as a place for an on-going revisioning, reformatting, redefining, and recontextualizing of a physical, emotional, and mental human experience that does not have to be relegated to a limiting, damaging binary wherein only two options for a gendered existence are “seen” and validated. “Transing” poetry and poetics allows for this expansion, this action, this representation, and this feeling. To read is to be drawn into an emotional experience – to allow that emotional experience to occur is what, in part, allows for such understanding to take place. Trans poets, in doing this work, allow for much of their poetry to be a body – and, as Phillips further says, allow us to read poems “as bodies, with a body’s ability to betray the feeling beneath language, even as we will tell a friend sometimes that we’re doing fine, but what the friend sees is that our hands are shaking, or our eyes are watering, as if we’ve either just stopped crying or we’re about to” (“Muscularity and Eros: On Syntax”). This poetic has the potential to embody and enact the fluctuating, feeling, essentially ‘alive’ aspect of perpetual existence of the self in writing. Giving care and attention to the reading of these poetics would bring the roots of liveliness and lived experiences beneath language to the surface. This surfacing will reveal the breadth and growth of possibilities in trans poetics that will undoubtedly allow for more modes of expression of the self, of existence, and of becoming’s continued nature than can currently – or ever – be defined.

¹ In *Poets Beyond the Barricade*, Dale M. Smith quotes Nancy Struever's theories of modality in relation to the modality of potentiality. In reference to the modality of becoming, I can loosely argue that Struever's theories can be applied to notions of "becoming" in trans poetics. "Belief in possibility as the primary domain of operation generates particular habits of action in rhetorical inquiry" (qtd. in Smith 7); this notion, when applied to trans poetics, addresses the fact that "becoming", as a mode of indefinite possibility and/or potentiality, "generates particular habits" in the poetics of the writers I look to here due to their interest in expressions of trans experience.

² See Kenneth Burke's work on language, and, more specifically, rhetoric's connection to agency. Notably, Smith references the difference between Burke's notions of "rhetoric of advantage" and "rhetoric of pure persuasion" that allow poets to develop both "models [that consider] social change and public engagement" and "persuasive [rhetorical] strategies developed for their own sake" (17).

³ The call for submissions for this "special issue" was announced on October 31st, 2017, via a news article published by Lambda Literary (Soto, "'Poetry' Magazine Will Feature Trans/GNC Poets in Special Issue"). There was no subsequent article announcing its cancellation.

⁴ In response to this cancellation, Chase Berggrun, Jos Charles, jayy dodd, Kam Hilliard, TC Tolbert, and Candance Williams wrote open letters to *Poetry* magazine's organizers and editors and compiled them on a single website under the title "Beyond Special Issue." They stated that this "folio ... serves as both community reaction & interrogation of a current state of Trans Poetics" (Some Trans/GNC Thought on Literary Ethic, <https://beyonddspecialissue.tumblr.com/>).

⁵ Peterson and Ladin explore trans poetics not with a focus on the genre of the poetry examined, but of works of individual authors, such as Max Wolf Valerio, kari edwards, Samuel Ace, and Oliver Baez Bendorf, among others. Notably, Peterson writes "[Valerio, edwards, and Ace] push the borders of genre, writing a kind of poetry-within-prose relying on 'gaps' or leaps that suggest ghostly line breaks. These qualities make their poems 'trans genre'" ("Becoming a Trans Poet" 524).

⁶ As it remains a burgeoning field, trans poetic necessarily overlaps literary studies with transgender studies due to the myriad of reasons for which such writing so often emerges: political engagement, personal catharsis, aesthetic interest, and so on. A definition of trans poetics does not yet exist in any concrete form, and does not necessarily need to – however, the writing of transgender poets vs. cisgender poets necessitates different reading methodologies, and this is why I push for the distinction of transgender literary studies from cisgender literary studies within LGBTQ+ literary studies as a whole.

⁷ For one of many examples of how trans writers express their thoughts and feelings on the complexity of identity in writing, see Max Wolf Valerio's 2014 conference paper, "a poet lost in transition," presented at the University of Winnipeg's Trans-Genres Conference. Valerio writes: "Identity is a process, and like a genre, it can shift and become oblique, or provide texture and consolation. A palisade along night cliffs... Identity can explode or dissolve. Genre contains the

glyphs and is intrinsic as a skeleton. Worn as a hairshirt to elicit response. Questions enclose identity in a reclusive sensational glide questions arc and collapse as they drift and open” (2).

⁸ Undoubtedly there are languages better equipped with describing experiences regarding gender; I do not have the lived or studied experience to comment on any of them, but I can acknowledge that the English language is a colonial language that actively sought to violently erase other languages and reinforce gendered binaries through this erasure.

⁹ A nod to Dionne Brand’s collection of poetry entitled *No Language is Neutral* (1990) I stand by the claim that all writing reflects the political climate wherein it was created. Works that claim to be devoid of politics, detached from politics, or existing autonomously from them is the result of an author who has the express privilege to create work that they then make these claims upon, which, paradoxically, is a political position in and of itself.

¹⁰ Fred Moten’s reading of the performativity and poetry, particularly the music-poetry of Cecil Taylor, invokes theories of the intersection of rhythm and ritual from Claude Levi-Strauss and David Parkin; Moten states that “if one thinks, though, of a poetry reading— which may very well be (for) a “profane end”—one confronts that which requires that we take into account the ways ritual consists of physical action (in time) that may *be*, as well as emit or transmit, the kind of meaningful aural expression that improvises through the distinction between the paralinguistic and the metalinguistic” (48). This type of reading informed my thoughts and my own reading on the performance of poetry and forms/styles of written poetry that express complex ideas of self, identity and the body regarding not only gender, but race, disability, sexuality, and so on.

¹¹ The systemic issues referenced here refer to intersections of general transphobia, transmisogyny, transmisogynoir, racism, classism, ableism, and all other manner of bigotry directed towards trans academics (students and educators alike) that is part and parcel of academic institutional structures.

¹² See “The Personal is Political: The Women’s Liberation Movement Classic with New Explanatory Introduction” by Carol Hanisch (2006) for one of many examples of ideas surrounding the notion that “the personal is political” as it emerged in North American feminist movements in the 1960s and 70s. Though these movements were largely trans exclusionary, the idea that personal and private existence can be/is often made political in definition remain relevant.

¹³ Erasure poetry is often cited as a product of postmodern poetics. Many examples exist, including Chase Berggrun’s *R E D* (2018), an erasure of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) that weaves a poetic narrative of a woman leaving an abusive relationship.

¹⁴ See also Robert Kaufman’s “Poetry’s Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion”, which notes how Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin state that lyric poetry “rather than being determined by the usual logical-conceptual rules about conceptuality’s own medium of language, constellates its workings of conceptuality’s linguistic medium so that, while still manifesting the formal appearance of logical

conceptuality, those formal, constellated reworkings will do something that real, logical, determined concepts generally do not do: sing” (107). This “singing” refers to aesthetic qualities that invoke emotion in the reader, something other forms of writing do not and do not aim to do.

¹⁵ See also “Queerness, Ecopoetics and Ecopoiesis: Pt. 1 Ecopoetics” for Avery’s notes on how queer people can write on nature and the natural world “by deconstructing it, by removing the Nature from Nature, by allowing for the non-normativity of bodies, sex, animals, rivers, weather, and so on, by allowing for the “naturalness” of parking lots, skyscrapers, pollution, radiation, plastic, toxicity.”

¹⁶ See also Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* (1999) for ideas on how mythology can be used to inform, reform and completely form autobiography, memoir, lyric, fiction, history, and/or personal mythology. A key component of much of what is considered modernist and post-modernist writing, the use of mythology in poetry is too large of a subject to tackle in entirety here.

¹⁷ See also chapter three of *Listening to Images* (2017) by Tina Campt. Her theory of haptic temporality and touch regarding photographs – in particular, photographs of criminalized Black people, people of colour, and Jewish people in the United States between the late 19th and mid-20th century. The connection she (and her husband) made to archived photographs of these criminalized individuals is “not merely a question of physical touch. It is the link between touching and feeling, as well as the multiple mediations we construct to allow or prevent our access to those affective relations. These haptic relations transpire in multiple temporalities, and the hands are only one conduit of their touches” (100). Similarly, I want to emphasize how connection to poetry can be “felt” in this way, and a link between being present with a piece of work written in some temporal past. In reading it (an action, not unlike and often utilizing touch) and engaging with it (in physical form, perhaps, on a sheet of paper or in a book-object) cannot be detached from the feeling that then develops in the reader. This link allows for “multiple mediations” that then, as Campt argues, aid us in making connections to the work before us – or not. Trans poetics can and has made such a link for me, among others, who I can cite only anecdotally and in passing. But assuredly, the link exists between reader and poem that goes beyond intellectual or aesthetic consideration into something undeniably physical.

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