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Decentering Pain & Centering Joy: Adding Transgender Stories to the Academy

Logan Henrique de Melo

As it stands, transgender stories are often framed through the cisgender gaze and by the pain transgender people experience from societal expectations. Being Transgender is not about and should not be equated to the pain and dysphoria that one may experience. Being transgender is about the joy of discovering yourself and beginning to feel comfortable within your own body. This paper reviews Queer theory and its gaps when it comes to transgender identity; as well as transgender studies and the reframing of transgender identity. This paper also reviews literature that focus on transgender joy and reframing transgender identity within a transgender gaze focusing on happiness and euphoria. I am a Queer and transgender man and this paper is about making the stories of my community heard - this is also my story. This paper is dedicated to all of my transgender siblings - things will get better, I promise.

Keywords: Transgender, Gender Dysphoria, Gender Euphoria, Trans Joy, Queer Theory, LGBTQ+

Logan Henrique de Melo is a first-generation, Queer, Latino, and transgender graduate student at the University of Vermont pursuing a degree in Higher Education & Student Affairs Administration. He pursued a master’s degree in education because he hopes to help create a system that is more inclusive and affirming to his siblings in the LGBTQ+ community. Logan found his family through the LGBTQ+ community and would not have made it without that chosen family; he hopes to work towards creating an environment in which other LGBTQ+ students can find the same support.
Decentering Pain & Centering Joy: Adding Transgender Stories to the Academy

Queer theory was foundational for LGBTQ+ people’s stories to be heard within higher education; it calls for their stories to be authentically heard. Within the LGBTQ+ community, the transgender community is one that is relatively new to literature. Transgender stories are only just starting to be told. A large portion of transgender stories currently in literature center the medical model, in which something is wrong with trans people and it needs to be fixed (Jacobsen, 2022). Scholarship in transgender studies is emerging and calling for a recentering of transgender stories. Instead of framing transgender stories by the hardship they face, scholars are calling for transgender stories to be framed by the euphoria and joy they experience.

I identify as a Queer, transgender, and Latino man. The Queer and transgender community is my home and where I found my family. This paper is a review of literature focusing on my communities and it serves an important purpose to me. I want the transgender story to be authentically heard for what it is.

What is Queer Theory?

Queer theory critically questions the normativity of cisgender and heterosexual identities in our society and emphasizes the identities that have not always been considered “normal” (Britzman, 1997 as cited in Patton et al., 2016). It places a focus on how people’s sexuality and gender are often shaped and policed by institutions, society, and culture (Abes et al., 2019). If gender and sexuality are arbitrarily shaped by society, Queer theory argues that multiple gender and sexual expressions should be allowed and that violence based on those identities should end (Abes et al., 2019). Queer theory calls for recognition, acceptance, and affirmation of fluid sexual and gender identities that exist outside of the norm (Britzman, 1997 as cited in Patton et al., 2016). It also calls for the deconstruction of false dichotomies such as heterosexual vs LGBTQ, cisgender vs transgender, and masculine vs feminine (Patton et al., 2016).

The emergence of Queer Theory was heavily influenced by The History of Sexuality written by Foucault (1990) (Abes et al., 2019). Foucault’s book discussed how social institutions were beginning to focus on sexuality as a crucial dimension of human life and creating new categories based on them such as the category of “homosexual”. “Homosexual” relations have, of course, existed before this classification, but the identity of being “homosexual” had not. This new identity gave people the power to form communities and organize politically around their identity, but it also allowed for new forms of violence, stigma, and oppression (Abes et al., 2019). Rubin (2011) further described the sexual identity hierarchy that exists within US society; namely, that heterosexual relationships are elevated as normal and ideal and other forms of relations are marginalized and labeled abnormal (Abes et al., 2019).
Challenging heterosexual culture and heteronormativity is foundational to Queer theory. Heterosexual sexual culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human relationships, the very model of intergender association, the basis of all community, and the means of reproduction that society would not exist without (Abes et al., 2019). Queer theory concerns itself with how Queer people may assimilate into heteronormative culture and perpetuate it and its harm (Abes et al., 2019). An aspect of Queer theory relevant to this idea of assimilation is performativity which is when people repeat or perform, actions in ways that society genders and sexes (Butler, 2006 as cited in Abes et al., 2019). Actions performed can communicate gender as interpreted by what is considered “normal” within society, however; it can also be used in the opposite manner where Queer folk perform gender and sexuality in a way that goes against the norm. Continuing to challenge aspects of heterosexual culture, Queer theorists have also discussed how Queerness often exceeds the categories of identity is instead manifests as a mode of perception, an attitude, an ethos, or a practice (Halperin, 2012 as cited in Abes et al., 2019).

Queer theory has only been around for a little over 30 years and there is still much work to be done to ensure that it is representative of the Queer community. Many critiques of it exist today such as how it fails to interrogate whiteness within Queer identity (Abes et al., 2019). Queer theory as it exists does not delve deep into how having other marginalized identities may affect one’s Queerness. While Queer theory does push recognition of diverse gender identities, it does not speak clearly to the transgender experience, and literature focusing on that identity has only recently started to surface. Radi (2019) argues that the study of Queer theory may be the most reluctant to be affected by trans* approaches and the most hostile to them; “Queer theory has functioned as a label that both guarantees the inclusion of trans* people as objects of inquiry and hinders their very participation in these same academic spaces” (Radi, 2019).

Scholars have only recently begun to study transgender identity and the experiences that come from it. Understanding Queer theory helps us understand the foundations of transgender studies and the introduction of the transgender experience to academia.

**Transgender Studies**

Research on transgender individuals and their lives is fairly new and is still being built. Before transgender studies can be discussed, the different terminology surrounding it must be discussed. Many scholars refer to transgender identity in different ways. For example, some scholars use trans* because the asterisk is a symbol representing multiple meanings and is used to open up the word transgender or trans to a greater range of meanings (Tompkins, 2014 as cited in Patton et al., 2016). Many also oppose the usage of trans* because the word transgender is already all-encompassing and should already represent a greater range of meanings (Titman, 2017). Transgender identity is very personal to an individual; keeping this in mind and out of respect for the authors, the terminology
when discussing transgender identity in this paper may shift depending on what source it comes from. Regardless of how it is being discussed, transgender should be used in an expansive and inclusive manner which recognizes that individuals with specific identities such as transexual, nonbinary, two-spirit, genderqueer, agender, and others may identify as transgender (Jacobsen, 2022).

Transgender studies has been defined as:

“Anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexual differentiated human body, the social roles, and status that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood ” (Radi, 2019)

It critiques the objectification of transgender people in the process of knowledge production where they are often viewed as instruments of analysis rather than the bearers of knowledge of their identity (Raun, 2014 as cited in Radi, 2019). It argues that research has ignored the daily lives of transgender people and has left out the most important matters in their agenda. It also argues that the way that transgender people are socially understood, and the way they have been focused on throughout much of the current public discourse, has been from the perspective of the “gazing cisgender eye” (Nicolazzo, 2021). Z Nicolazzo has called for a Transgender Epistemology that is made by transgender people for transgender people (Nicolazzo, 2021).

In Nicolazzo’s Imaging a Trans* Epistemology, she develops key tenants of Transgender Epistemology. 1: Trans* people may be from oppression, but we ourselves are not of oppression. 2: We all experience our trans*ness differently as a result of our varied intersecting identities. 3: In and through community with each other, we have the power to heal and remake ourselves as trans* people. 4: Our continued de/re/construction of our trans* subjectivities span to material and virtual environments. 5: “Trickle-up activism” and grassroots coalition-building are, and will remain to be, orientations for our community. 6: In/visibility and its varied meaning are central to our sense of self, community, and kinship.

The first tenant speaks to how transgender people first come to learn about their identities and how cisgender people learn about transgender identities is deeply connected to loss, fear, threat, harm, violence, and oppression. Transgender identity develops from oppression, but it is not defined by oppression. Nicolazzo (2021) states: “We are artists, poets, teachers, activists, and scholars. We are partners and parents. We are children and elders. We are engineers, we are knowledge producers, and we are travelers.”. Transgender people are not just the oppression that they face.

The second tenant speaks to how transgender people may experience their identities differently depending on other intersecting identities they may hold; those identities alter how they experience
and navigate various experiences. Nicolazzo gives the example of how her being white is a buffer that protects her from the overt forms of violence that Black and brown trans bodies may face.

The third tenant speaks to how transgender community gives power to transgender people. Through community, transgender people are given the ability to heal from the damage caused by society. Through community, transgender people are able to be seen as their genuine selves regardless of how their transgender identity does or does not show up. Through community, transgender people can create a world in which possibilities for them to live their authentic lives are proliferated. Nicolazzo states: “We better love ourselves, because we cannot – nor should we – wait around for others to love us”

The fourth tenant speaks to how transgender community can be built anywhere and many transgender people find community virtually (Nicolazzo, 2021). Online communities have been important for transgender youth to explore their identities without judgment. Being online gives transgender people the ability to use their chosen name and pronouns without being questioned (Jacobsen, 2022).

The fifth tenant speaks to how the transgender community needs to work alongside various marginalized communities because our interests are all aligned. Fighting for those the most oppressed within the transgender community will allow for access and freedom to trickle up to the least oppressed. It also acknowledges the intersection of identities within the transgender community. For example, someone is not Black or trans, they are Black AND trans. The transgender movement has never been, nor will it ever be, just about transgender people (Nicolazzo, 2021).

The sixth tenant speaks to how both visibility and invisibility are important for the transgender community. Nicolazzo acknowledges that visibility is not wholly rewarding nor a completely desired state for all transgender people. It is dangerous for some people in the transgender community, particularly those who are nonwhite, to be visible and proud; in some cases, increased visibility may lead to increased harm.

These tenants make room for the transgender narrative to be centered when discussing transgender identity instead of how the cisgender gaze views them. These tenants are written by a trans* person for other transgender people in order for our stories to be authentically told. Although the transgender experience often comes with many hardships, the beauty of being transgender comes from the joy that our identity brings us. Much of the literature about to be discussed seeks to decenter the hardships and center the joy.

Decentering Pain & Centering Joy – Themes in the Literature

Decenter Dysphoria

Dysphoria must be decentered for a fully authentic representation of the transgender experience. Niccolazo’s Tenants make room for transgender stories to be centered when discussing
transgender identity as opposed to the narrative that the cisgender gaze focuses on. The cisgender gaze has pushed the “wrong body” narrative which explains that transness comes from being born in the wrong body and experiencing gender dysphoria because of it; many scholars critique this narrative of defining transness (Radi, 2019). Gender dysphoria hurts. It is based on distress and associated with significant uncomfortable feelings and impairment (Jacobsen, 2022). It develops when there is a conflict between a person’s sex assigned at birth and the gender that they identify as (Jacobsen, 2022). Dysphoria brings a lot of harm to transgender people and it has become central in how transness is defined; because of this, the harmful idea that you need to experience dysphoria to be transgender is widely believed and negatively impacts many in the transgender community (Jacobsen, 2022). This belief directly impacts the mental health and self-esteem of transgender people and makes them continuously question if they really are transgender (Jacobsen, 2022). The emphasis on dysphoria, distress, and self-hatred seeks to reinforce cisgender people’s idea of what it means to be transgender; transness is associated with negative experiences and transgender people need to prove that they’re under extreme distress to justify needing to transition (Jacobsen, 2022). “Transgender people are born in the wrong body, so they experience great distress over their sex characteristics and use hormones and surgery to change their bodies and eliminate their distress – But increasingly, trans communities and scholars are pushing back against this focus on dysphoria to make space for discussions for more positive aspects of the trans experience” (Jacobsen, 2022).

Center Euphoria

Instead of centering transness in gender dysphoria, scholars push for narratives about the transgender community that highlight and center gender euphoria. Gender euphoria is a term that has been widely used by the transgender community for decades now, but academic literature on it is still scarce (Jacobsen, 2022). Gender euphoria is the happiness produced by presenting as one’s gender and being perceived as that gender by others; these are instances where performing as their gender feels right (Davis, 2022). Transgender people overwhelmingly agree that gender euphoria provides them with a joy that is unmatched. Gender euphoria has been described by transgender people as:

- “Moments of pure joy, when you feel good about your body, how you feel in it, what you’re wearing, and how you’re perceived by others” (Jacobsen, 2022)
- “A deep feeling of happiness that overcomes me” – “An affirmation that transitioning was the right thing for me” (Jacobsen, 2022)
- Acceptance, confidence, self-happiness about your body, a wonderful explosion, feeling of joy that radiates throughout your entire body, validates who you are, positivity that makes the brain stop in the best way possible (Jacobsen, 2022).
- “Freedom, joy, and love inherent in people’s gender experience” (Beischel, 2022).
- “A joyful feeling of rightness in one’s gender” (Beischel, 2022).
“Happiness, excitement, and a ‘high’” (Beischel, 2022).
“Trans celebration, happiness, wonder, hope” (Beischel, 2022).
“Sheer joy and contentment” (Beischel, 2022).
“It’s literally life-saving. I wish I could describe it to those of you who haven’t had it before, but existing in a space, in a moment where your body and gender align [and] feel right with each other when so often that is not the case is ELECTRIC. It’s what keeps trans folks alive, those moments of feeling fully and euphorically ourselves” (Beischel, 2022).

Gender Euphoria is an overwhelmingly positive experience for the transgender community. Centering transness from moments of gender euphoria instead of discomfort and sadness actively rejects the notion that trans people are mentally ill and depressed (Davis, 2022). Euphoria helps guide transgender people on their journey with gender and allows them to experience joy (Jacobsen, 2022).

**Center Joy**

Transgender identity is not just about pain; it is also about joy, love, self-love, and love of others which are fundamental to transness (Jacobsen, 2022). The joyful lives that transgender people live have to be focused on to position trans lives as lives that are worth living (Jacobsen, 2022 & Shuster, 2022). Transgender joy may come from the feeling of belonging, of being perceived as their gender identity, and trans kinship (Davis, 2022); transgender people experience joy from community and being around each other (Jacobsen, 2022 & Shuster, 2022). A study by Shuster (2022) found four main themes when centering joy amongst transgender participants. Answers about joy came to them quickly and were easy for them to talk about, they found joy in being transgender and preferred to be part of the community, being transgender facilitated meaningful connections with others, and embracing their transgender identity greatly improved their quality of life (Shuster, 2022). Transgender joy is the manifestation of the happiness transgender people get from living authentically and being proud of their gender despite how society may treat them (Davis, 2022). Feelings of joy are so powerful that they can override the negativity of hate, rejection, and discrimination (Davis, 2022). Joy gives transgender people the power to cope with dysphoria and the hatred they may receive for being themselves (Jacobsen, 2022).

**Conclusion**

Queer theory is a great resource for people to think outside of norms when thinking about identity. It is the foundation, but it still has a long way to go in order for it to speak to the transgender community and what they experience. Scholars have created transgender studies to fill in the gaps that are missing within Queer theory. Transgender studies is a great start to putting the transgender
narrative in academic literature and the community needs more scholars to push their stories. Transness, as it stands now, is often defined by dysphoria, uncomfortableness, and wrongness in one’s body. This is not the transgender experience. The transgender experience is full of joy, love, community, and pride. Transgender people love being trans. I love being trans. I would not change anything about myself or my story because of how much joy and euphoria I have experiences from being trans. This is the story that needs to be told.
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