A Coalitional Politics of Incoherence
Ethical (Trans)masculinities in New Zealand

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Abstract

Transmasculinity is a contemporary site for meaning-making about masculinity. I argue, more specifically, that queer-identified transmasculine people can practice queer masculinity in a way that resists hegemonic expectations of sexism, racism and homophobia. Queer (trans)masculinity, as I experience it, may be articulated through sexism/racism/homophobia or may create other forms of masculinity, which I call “incoherent” masculinities. The term “incoherent” signifies that these masculinities are articulated in resistance and critique of coherent hegemonic masculinity. The term (trans)masculinity refers to the blurry lines between masculine people who are trans and masculine people who are not: it is an effort to address a wider audience of masculine people, including men, butches, transguys, genderqueers, masculine femmes, and so on, while still recognising that I speak from a trans perspective.

In Chapter One I review the field of trans theory, in Chapter Two I describe my queer methodology, and in Chapter Three I ask “How can I speak, as a genderqueer transmasculine person?” After establishing a tentative speaking position, in Chapters Four – Six I outline different aspects of this politics of incoherence in relation to the practice of ethical masculinity.

The underlying premise of my thesis is that (trans)masculinity is a practice, not a static identity. I suggest that transmasculine people have a uniquely gendered perspective, for example, I was assigned female at birth, socialized as a girl, enjoyed my girlhood, moved into a genderqueer dyke identity, shifted to transmasculine queer, morphed into butch transfag and, most recently, transformed into genderqueer transmasculine femme. However, I do not position transmasculine people as the new exemplars of ethical masculinity. Alongside four other voices from transguys I interviewed in New Zealand, I speak from my embodied experience as a transmasculine person. I propose that simply identifying as queer and transmasculine is not sufficient for a politics of incoherence. Identity is an ongoing practice, thus, we must embody and advocate anti-racism, combat misogyny/sexism and homophobia, and articulate our masculinities with awareness of our particular position within wider networks of power. For example, being
white/Pakeha, I need to practice incoherent masculinity by refusing to affirm my masculinity through racism, by actively disrupting the dominance of white/Pakeha norms of masculinity in the postcolonial context of New Zealand.

A politics of incoherence relies on coalitions between political movements such as queer activism, third wave feminism, anti-racism, indigenous rights, disability activism, and workers rights. In my exploration of incoherent (trans)masculinities, I draw on queer, feminist and trans theories, concluding that academic and political cross-pollination between these movements will invigorate a resistant, critical and creative politics of incoherence.
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I have also been deeply inspired by the conversations I had with interviewees, and I know that this is just the tip of the iceberg. We have many more creative projects up our capacious co-operative sleeves. Thank you so much for sharing your stories with me, I hope you enjoy how I have woven them into this larger queer/trans tapestry.

Lastly, to my boyfriend Sam: You were there in the beginning, you are here in the end, and this rollercoaster postgraduate journey would have been unbearable without your company. Thank you for taking care of me, for listening to me, for all the food you make, and the songs you sing. Thank you for loving all the (incoherent) parts of me.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my Nana, who never saw me grow into my masculinity, but who I know would be proud of who I am today. Thank you for loving me, Nana, I miss you every day.
Contents

**Introduction:** From Uncritical Ambiguity to Strategic Incoherence ............................ 1
1. Snippets of a Conversation with Sunny Drake......................................................... 4
2. Noble’s Politic of Incoherence ...................................................................................... 8
3. Chapter Outline: Difference, Incoherence, and Community Support ....................... 12

**Chapter One** Mapping Social Constructionist Trans Theory: A Queer Transmasculine Perspective............................................................................................................. 16
1. Introduction: A Brief Chronology of Trans Theory .................................................... 17
2. Recent Developments in the Field: Echoes of Anzaldúa and Black Feminism .. 25
3. Performativity, Trans Theory, and Social Construction............................................. 28
   a. Misreading: Trans Theorists Assert My Gender is Real, Not Constructed .... 30
   b. Butler Clarifies: Your Gender is Real and Constructed .................................... 34
4. Methodologies in Trans Theory ................................................................................. 37
   a. Transgender Rage as Methodology ....................................................................... 37
   b. Embodiment and Experience in Trans Theory ..................................................... 39
   c. Stryker’s (De)Subjugated Knowledges ................................................................. 41
   d. Re-narration ............................................................................................................. 42

**Chapter Two** My Trans, Queer, and Feminist Methodology: Political Commitments, Relationships, and Creativity..................................................................................... 46
1. Methodological Assumptions ..................................................................................... 47
2. Methods: The Nuts and Bolts ................................................................................... 53
3. Queer Relationships: Researcher and Researched.................................................... 55
4. Relationships Within a Hybrid Methodology: Halberstam as Authorial Scavenger and Dahl as Femme Collaborator ................................................................. 58

5. Creativity: Discussion from Interviews .................................................................. 61

Chapter Three (Dis)Locations, Incoherent Genderqueer Masculinities, and Anti-Racism .................................................................................................................. 66

1. Narratives: Finn and I as Genderqueers ................................................................. 69

2. Dacumos and Gutierrez-Mock: Queer Mixed-Race/Biracial Experience and the Wisdom of Anzaldua .................................................................................................................. 73

3. Hale’s Abject Genderqueer ...................................................................................... 78

4. Noble, Anzaldua and Hale: Incoherence in Borderlands/Borderzones .............. 81

5. Margins, Borderlands, Borderzones: the Call for Demilitarization (or Speaking From My Power) ........................................................................................................... 84

6. Anti-Racism: A Practice for Incoherent (White) Masculinity ......................... 87
   a. A Critical Refusal ................................................................................................. 89
   b. An Active Transformation .................................................................................. 90

Chapter Four Queering (Trans)Masculinity ................................................................ 94

1. Situating Transmasculinity .................................................................................... 97
   a. Masculinity Studies in Relation to Female Masculinities and Transmasculinities ................................................................................................................................. 97
   b. Transmasculinity and Incoherent Masculinities ................................................ 102

2. Queering Masculinity Narratives from Interviews ............................................. 105
   a. Engaging, Critiquing and Rejecting Hegemonic Norms of Masculinity: .... 105
   b. Creating Alternative (Queer) Masculinities ...................................................... 111

Chapter Five Butchness and Transmasculinity: Incoherent Coalitions of Queer Masculinity and Desire ............................................................................................. 124
1. Relationships, Borderwars, and Coalitions ................................................................. 129
   a. Borderwars: Portrayals of Butch and Trans Identities as Oppositional .......... 129
   b. Narrative: Dylan and Visibility of Options ......................................................... 139
   c. A Comparison between Narratives: Dylan and Myself ............................. 140
   d. Synthesis: Incoherent Relationship, Shared Values, Coalitional Politics .... 142
2. Embodiment, Desire, and Incoherence .............................................................. 145
   a. Queer Desire and Communities .................................................................. 145
   b. Narratives: Embodied Masculinity ................................................................. 148
   c. Synthesis: Circles of Incoherence, Embodiment, and Desire ................ 153

Chapter Six Narratives of Feminism and Transmasculinity in New Zealand .......... 157
1. Embody and Advocate: Identifying With does not Necessitate Identifying As. 161
2. Narratives: Travis and Finn ........................................................................... 163
3. Sons of the Movement? .................................................................................. 166
4. Narratives: Dylan and Eric ............................................................................ 166
5. Subsuming Our Struggle? ............................................................................... 168
6. Coalitional Politics of Incoherence ................................................................. 171

Conclusion: Incoherent Genders and Coalitional Politics .................................. 174
1. Hale, Halberstam, Hall and Drake: Coalitions in the Borderzones .......... 175
2. My Experience as Femme: Gendered Incoherence of a Different Flavour .... 178
3. Relations of Difference: Femme Incoherence and Anti-Racism as Examples of Coalitional Politics ................................................................. 181

Bibliography .......................................................................................................... 185
Appendix A: Trans-Terminologies ........................................................................ 195
List of Illustrations

Note: All illustrations were created during a workshop in Dunedin (December 12, 2010) by queer and trans community members. Participants were invited to make art about anything related to their experiences of gender and sexuality.

Figure i.1 “Re-Telling”
Figure 1.1 “For Stone and Stryker”
Figure 1.2 “Sacred and Artful Gender”
Figure 2.1 “Ethics”
Figure 3.1 “Outlaw”
Figure 3.2 “Falling into Language”
Figure 4.1 “Hairy Boy-Tits”
Figure 4.2 “Visible Butch”
Figure 4.3 “Drag Queen”
Figure 5.1 “We’ve Got Options”
Figure 5.2 “Preference”
Figure 6.1 “Resistance”
Figure 7.1 “Gender as a Mutant Power”
Figure 7.2 “Faggy Child Becomes Staunch Activist”
Introduction: From Uncritical Ambiguity to Strategic Incoherence

Fig i.1 “Re-Telling”
Introduction: From Uncritical Ambiguity to Strategic Incoherence

1. Snippets of a Conversation with Sunny Drake
2. Noble’s Politic of Incoherence
3. Chapter Outline: Difference, Incoherence, and Community Support

The temptation is to reify ambiguity and to celebrate the disruption of binary oppositions without asking concrete questions about how power is distributed through that disruption or ambiguity.

(Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub 1991: 23)

In the last seven years of my life I have been grappling with what it means for me to identify as queer and transmasculine. I began by celebrating ambiguity uncritically, giving in to the temptation Epstein and Straub describe; I did not ask enough questions about power, privilege, and my own specificities of embodiment and social/cultural/political location. I wore rainbow shoelaces, performed in drag shows as a queer femme and shape-shifting fag, participated in rallies, organised queer tea parties. I made proclamations about how the gender binary oppresses us all; I refuse to be simplified into either male or female, my gender and my sexuality are queer.

Then, as I became more familiar with what C. Jacob Hale calls the social and cultural “borderzones,” (and in particular, my own borderzone territories of butch masculinity, queer femininity, and genderqueer transmasculinity), I began to understand that valorizing ambiguity at the expense of specificity is neither ethical nor politically effective. I needed to think about the intersections of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, age, and so on. I needed to appreciate one of the legacies of feminism: difference, not sameness, will sustain a movement.
I am schooled by feminists such as bell hooks, who argue that the challenges of difference enrich feminism when we are open to change on personal, political, theoretical and organisational levels:

Feminist willingness to change direction when needed has been a major source of strength and vitality in feminist struggle. That internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation. Just as our lives are not fixed or static but always changing, our theory must remain fluid, open, responsive to new information.

(bell hooks, 2000: xiii)

I am deeply involved in queer and trans communities: in these spaces I find friends, family, partners, lovers, and role models. I am inspired by these people and the relationships we have. We are not the same; it is not sameness that binds us. We are bound, sometimes, by shared experiences and common personal/political goals. Or mutual affection and respect based on being alongside each other and enjoying each other’s company. As a queer transmasculine person, I am motivated to ask important questions about my life as a result of my experiences in these communities. Questions such as: How can I live ethically, alongside other people who are different to me, without fearing or erasing our differences? What does it mean to practice my masculinity ethically, in keeping with my political commitments? What does transmasculinity look like? What does queerness mean? How can I embody and advocate feminism? Is it helpful or not for me to identify as a feminist if I no longer identify as a woman? As someone who was born female, who now presents and identifies as a white queer masculine person, how do I become a visible example of ethical or incoherent masculinity? How can I practice anti-racism? How can I celebrate ambiguity without disregarding privilege, power, and specificity?

One of the most inspirational conversations I have had recently was with Australian performance artist Sunny Drake, a fellow trans activist and role model of mine. We talked (via email) about masculinity and butchness, privilege, accountability, feminism, desire, the need for questions, the power of femme identities and knowledges, mysteries of embodiment and transition, intersections of marginalized groups and our political
struggles, the multiplicity of trans narratives, and our most recent personal revelations about our masculinities. All of these topics appear in this thesis. I need to acknowledge the significance of my dialogue with Sunny, though I only quote him directly in this Introduction, the final section about anti-racism in Chapter Three, and in the Conclusion. Our conversations frame this project, in my mind and in the structure: I begin and end with our dialogue.

1. Snippets of a Conversation with Sunny Drake

I begin my correspondence with Sunny by outlining my own political commitments and identities:

I am a Pakeha (white) transmasculine queer person, I identify as genderqueer and feminist. I want to talk about how you experience your masculinity and your queerness, and how your art effects political change. I am deeply invested in narratives about trans embodiment that move beyond the ‘wrong body’ idea. I hope to write about the power and privileges of queer Pakeha masculinity without segregating straight from queer or femme from masculine/butch. I see all these things as overlapping.

I enclose a series of questions designed to get our dialogue juices flowing, and I am overwhelmed with excitement with Sunny, who has written four pages responding to the first question.

One of Sunny’s comments is about identifying as a man, which is something that I have thought a lot about myself. I do not identify as a man, or as straightforwardly male. I prefer to identify as genderqueer, as transmasculine, as a specific variation on man or male. Sunny relates how his identifications have shifted:
I never used to identify with the word “man” and never thought I would – this is quite a new thing for me. I’m increasingly realising that my resistance to identifying with the word “man” was actually about subconscious avoidance of taking FULL responsibility for patriarchy/male privilege, especially white male privilege. I don’t want the privilege, but that’s the nature of privilege, it’s not something I can choose – privilege is given to people with certain identifies whether they want it or not.

(Drake 2011)

On personal, political and academic levels, privilege is a crucial issue in regards to transmasculinity, and masculinity generally. Whether or not I identify as male or as a man, sometimes I receive male/masculine privilege in the outside world because that is how I appear.

Sunny and I both identify as feminists, which is another hot button issue within our communities and academic/artistic work on transmasculinity. (Discussion of feminism occurs throughout my thesis, and particularly in Chapter Six, where I weave together various strands from previous chapters regarding transmasculinity and feminism in New Zealand.) Sunny says excitedly:

How amazing that I’m gonna get to increasingly figure out, along with others, how to be a feminist man! And yes I’m gonna continue to mess up, and I’m gonna continue to learn what it means to be accountable when I mess up, and what it means to change my behaviour, attitudes, politics etc to be more deeply anti-racist, feminist, anti-ableist etc.

(Drake 2011)

I am particularly struck by Sunny’s acknowledgement that he will make mistakes, and similarly, it is impossible for me to write this thesis without making mistakes: inevitably, some people will be excluded or silenced, some issues will be side-lined, some ideas communicated clumsily, perhaps offence caused inadvertently. As I continue to assert, I can only speak for myself, from my perspective, and I do not speak
as a representative of transmasculinity or queerness or anything else. I welcome opportunities to learn from my mistakes.

I ask Sunny what he thinks about the idea that transguys, butches, and masculine-identified people can embody non-hegemonic masculinities. I am thinking about the shift I have made from “non-hegemonic” to “incoherent” masculinities. While non-hegemonic masculinities are important because they challenge the dominant white heteronormative tropes of masculinity, when I use the term incoherent I am signalling something further: an active commitment to practicing masculinity that is anti-homophobic, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, and trans-positive. Some might call this feminist masculinity, or queer masculinity. Sunny is enthusiastic about this idea, and adds:

I don’t think it is possible to arrive at a feminist, anti-racist masculinity as long as there is still the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy (which I’m just going to refer to as the WSCP\(^1\) from here on!) ruling the world, because I don’t believe we can divorce ourselves from our context – ie, even if I don’t mean to be oppressive, my actions are interpreted within an oppressive, triggering context. So even if I’m behaving in exactly the same way as a femme woman of colour, my behaviour may still be inappropriate whereas hers may be appropriate to the context.

(Drake 2011)

Sunny emphasizes two crucial aspects of this masculinity: the ongoing practice of incoherent masculinity (it is not a static achievement) and the significance of context. Early on, I wanted to provide an ethics of transmasculinity, a rule book of some kind perhaps, something that I could hold onto and give to other people if they wanted it. But the importance of gender as a contextualised practice (as opposed to a rigid individual identity regulated by universal rules) makes this impossible: incoherent masculinity will

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\(^1\) bell hooks is credited with labelling Western culture “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” which Sunny Drake adapts slightly by adding “heteropatriarchy.” See Foss et al (2004) for a brief overview of hooks’ influential works, including her statement about white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.
be practiced in different ways by different people in different contexts, and it will never
be a finished product, only a continual effort.

So my question became: How can I encourage other transmasculine people to articulate
their masculinities in resistance to homophobia, sexism, racism, ableism, and all the
other isms? I realised that speaking from my own experience was the only possible
answer, and that instead of preaching to the choir, I should try to bring some of the
insights about masculinity, embodiment, and political change that I receive from my
queer and transmasculine friends (and interviewees), into my academic work.

One of these insights is about uncertainty and making room for creativity. Uncertainty
enables questioning, and I want to ask questions even if I cannot answer them.
Creativity, which I discuss at length as part of the methodological underpinnings of this
project in Chapter Two, works in a similar way: opening, expanding, connecting, and
exploring.
One of the comments that Sunny makes enables me to see how uncertainty can be part
of embracing incoherent masculinity:

I try to maintain lots of space for being “not sure” and having contradictory
feelings. This goes directly against the messages I get about how white men are
supposed to be. I am supposed to know the answers to everything. Subscribe to
scientific economic rational ways of thinking. So, it’s not very comfortable this
“not knowing” business, but I believe it’s important. And especially important to
have conversations and make performance and publicly acknowledge the “not
knowing.”

(Drake 2011)

Being a visibly uncertain white masculine person, then, can contribute to a queer or
feminist or anti-racist movement to make space for non-white or non-masculine people.
Instead of privileging rationality, which has historically been associated with white
masculinity, I want to value creativity, uncertainty, and embodiment.
Sunny specifically calls attention to body-knowledge and other ways of knowing that are associated with the feminine. The importance of embodiment is a constant theme in this thesis, and in particular, I discuss body-knowledge in relation to gender transition in Chapters Five and Six. As Sunny says, “It’s no accident that I’ve been taught to value things which are seen as masculine and/or male. So I’m interested in identifying that and proactively challenging it” (Drake 2011).

2. Noble’s Politic of Incoherence

*Should the category of the human be transformed, as Biddy Martin (1994), Naomi Scheman (1999), and Judith Butler (2004) have argued, or should the unintelligible be celebrated for their potential to oppose the status quo, as Halberstam (2006) and Noble (2006a, 2006b) argue?*

*(Patricia Elliot 2010: 13)*

Jean Bobby Noble argues for “an intersectional, post-queer politic of incoherence as a strategy of resistance” (2006: 12). I adapt his notion of incoherence to my own cultural and community context, focusing on the possibilities of incoherent masculinity, from a transmasculine perspective. My overarching argument is that (trans)masculine people can embody and advocate incoherent masculinities, which is the practice of queer, feminist, anti-racist masculinities, or, in a different formulation, the articulation of masculinity without buying into discourses of homophobia/queerphobia, misogyny/sexism, racism/colonialism.

In her recent book, Patricia Elliot highlights a tension between theorists who suggest that we transform the category of the human, expanding our understanding of personhood to include those who are currently rendered unintelligible, and theorists who celebrate unintelligibility (2010: 13). Elliot suggests that there is a third option: valuing “*both* intelligibility and unintelligibility, *both* similarities and differences” (2010: 151). I suggest that a politics of incoherence is most effective when inhabiting
this space of both/and rather than either/or. There are two examples of how this plays out in my thesis. Firstly, I am continually attending to the simultaneous coherence and incoherence of my identity and of this strategy which I call “incoherent masculinity.” My incoherence must be coherent, to some extent. I need relationships with others for whom my incoherence is understood and valued, relationships with people who are both similar and different to me, who appreciate and support my efforts. Secondly, I do not segregate transmasculinity from masculinity, or butch from transmasculine, because there are possibilities for incoherence in all forms of masculinity.

I agree with Elliot that we must not simply “achieve a reversal of the hierarchy,” placing incoherence above coherence, valuing unintelligible gender more than intelligible gender (2010: 81). Elliot further argues that we must consider the incoherence of the human, rather than the incoherence of transpeople: “I have been suggesting, beyond the celebration of trans incoherence that remains a project for only some transpersons, that we consider the alternative project of acknowledging multiple forms of transgender as human, and the human as lacking the coherence and intelligibility it pretends to possess” (2010: 82). In my desire to speak from my own experience, I focus on trans incoherence (in all its multiplicity, not as a monolithic force) because I am a transperson. However, my use of the term (trans)masculine is an effort to bridge these two camps, so I can write from a trans perspective without creating divisions between trans and non-trans masculinities. My recognition that trans and non-trans people and worlds are not distinct (these worlds are not separate) is a challenge to the coherence of the human.

Bettcher and Stryker, as leading trans theorists, have both noted that trans theory sheds light on dominant paradigms, on the wider construction of identity and embodiment, while foregrounding the experiences of transpeople in particular (Bettcher 2010, Stryker 2006). By focusing my project on politically viable incoherencies of (trans)masculinity I aim to highlight the assumptions and constructions of the wider social context in which I am immersed. I am assuming that this incoherence is/can be strategic, and is therefore coherent to the extent that it can be negotiated. In her online seminar series on
transgender studies, Bettcher describes a similar dynamic in relation to queer and trans theory:

If we take that which is assumed to be unintelligible, from the normative viewpoint, and treat it as intelligible, what does that show us about what can be exposed in the centre? So by treating the unintelligible as intelligible, that’s gonna cast a light on the heteronormative.

(Bettcher 2010: Class 8)

My assertion that incoherence is politically effective amounts to treating incoherence as intelligible, and furthermore, as valuable and strategic.

In describing my own politics of incoherence, I am informed by Noble’s argument for “an intersectional, post-queer politic of incoherence as a strategy of resistance” (Noble 2006: 12). The primary difference between our views, apart from the necessary differences of context and method (he in Toronto/North America, looking at media as cultural artefacts, myself in Aotearoa New Zealand, looking at theory and interview material) is his suggestion that we are now “post-queer.” Queer fails on two counts, according to Noble: it is an empty signifier and it fails to connote intersectionality (2006). As an empty signifier, queer is “becoming a term that marks everything, and, by implication, absolutely nothing at all” (Noble 2006: 14-15). Queer’s failure to “connote intersectionality,” as Noble puts it, could be read a number of ways (2006: 125). I interpret this as queer theory’s failure to appreciate its roots in black feminism, and also as a criticism about who is allowed to be queer, or the privileging of whiteness and masculinity within queer. This is useful criticism. When queer fails to be intersectional, when it presumes the white masculine subject as the preeminent queer subject, it surrenders to what Sunny Drake called the WSCP.

Taking these criticisms of queer seriously, I still find use for the term in my context. It functions, in my life, as a bridge, a connection between me and other people. Queer requires further specification: it is not sufficient, in itself, but it is one of the tools I use when describing myself and participating in movements for social change. I am more
than any one term that I may use to describe myself: Pakeha, trans, queer, feminist... rather than complete descriptors, these terms function as relationship-builders with other people and communities.

Noble suggests that if a queer practice is “no longer viable given the degree to which it fails to connote intersectionality,” then he offers instead a “practice of trans-incoherence” (2006: 125). Such a practice, he suggests, “troubles the singular fiction that is to accrue or cohere from the meeting point of intersections into a singular, ontological essence that we call self” (2006: 125-126). As a subject, I am multiple and contingent, rather than fixed or singular. This incoherence, based on the multiplicity of the subject, can be practiced by many different people. As someone whose gender is regularly policed (for being mutable or non-conforming), I am particularly struck by Noble’s question, “What happens if we refuse that coherence and practice incoherence instead?” (2006: 126).

Practicing incoherence in relation to intersections of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexuality, class, ability, sexuality (and so forth) appeals to me as a way of understanding myself and as a political strategy. It is not, in my view, a replacement of queer. But we must also differentiate between queer as an identity term and queer as a practice (or a strategy of resistance). Noble may accept that some people identify as queer but still suggest that as a strategy of resistance, queer is ineffective. From my perspective, queer is both an identity and a practice. It is something that I undertake alongside a practice of incoherence.

A practice of incoherence need not become post-queer. I use practices of queerness and practices of incoherence, in my life and in this thesis. Queer is effective within my particular context, but a practice of incoherence, as Noble suggests, throws a wider net (2006: 15). For example, it can more easily address the intersections of race and the privileging of whiteness than queer (2006: 15). Rendering my identity incoherent, as a white transmasculine person, undermines the coherence of both whiteness and masculinity. I also appreciate incoherent/incoherence as words and concepts that are not strictly about identities. For example, when I talk about queering masculinity (in
Chapters Four and Five, particularly) I could be limiting my scope, because people who do not identify as queer may not want to queer their masculinity. When I talk about *incoherent* masculinity, my scope is broader. Furthermore, at times I talk about incoherent masculinity as an identity, but only insofar as identities must be continually enacted: it is a practice, not a static achievement.

3. Chapter Outline: Difference, Incoherence, and Community Support

In their edited collection published twenty years ago, Epstein and Straub target the “celebration” of ambiguity and the risks thereof: we must ask “concrete questions about how power is distributed through that disruption or ambiguity” (1991: 23). This remains one of my most basic concerns as an activist and a scholar.

Speaking from the position of incoherence, as I do, requires specific attention to how my being in the world (as an active, ongoing project of self-making) is articulated through matrices of power. For example, I am white/Pakeha. I am middle-class. A simple celebration of my unintelligibility or incoherence will not adequately address these factors, which are sites of privilege. I endeavour to remain attentive to my own privilege and to the specific but multiple entanglements of race/class/gender/sexuality/ability/etc in my context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

I form two vital questions in regards to this concern. One: How can I, as a queer transmasculine pakeha person, remain mindful of my own power and privilege; how will my politics of incoherence reflect my own specificities while also being relevant to other people’s lives? Two: How do I construct my own masculinity; will the practice of anti-racist, anti-homophobic, pro-queer, pro-feminist, anti-misogynist, anti-classist masculinity facilitate a critique and transformation of masculinity from a queer and trans perspective? Each chapter is a response to these two questions.
Chapter One provides an overview of the wider theoretical framework, an area that is commonly referred to as transgender studies or trans theory. Chapter Two explains my trans, queer, and feminist methodology. Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six offer various answers to the question of how one can practice incoherent masculinity.

Chapter three, an exploration of genderqueer masculinity, is my initial foray into overlaps between transmasculine, butch and genderqueer subjectivities. It is designed to accentuate the connections between feminist, anti-racist, queer and transgender bodies, theories and communities. I describe genderqueer masculinity from my white/pakeha perspective, informed in large part by non-white people/scholars and their criticisms of white transmasculine and genderqueer privilege. I conclude with a discussion of anti-racism as a specific aspect of incoherent masculinity as practiced by white/Pakeha (trans)masculine people.

Chapter Four introduces the field of masculinity studies as a backdrop for transmasculinity. I concentrate on the creation of alternative, queer, or incoherent masculinities by transmasculine people such as myself and my interviewees. These incoherent masculinities can be practiced by many different people, and in Chapter Five I pay particular attention to the convergences between butchness and transmasculinity, as two important sites for this incoherence. Emphasising the need for relationships, I argue that convergences between these communities and identities contain deeper knowledges of embodiment than are currently reflected in scholarship surrounding masculinity, bodies, and gender.

Chapter Six maintains the emphasis on relationships: the relationship between transmasculinity and feminism, in particular, and the need for mutually productive coalitions between these communities. I consider several different narratives from interviewees surrounding feminism and pakeha transmasculinity in New Zealand. In the Conclusion, I argue that practices of anti-racism and femme power are specific

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2 I refer to this primarily as trans theory, occasionally as trans studies. It must be explicitly noted that in this overview and in subsequent chapters I focus only on queer social constructionist trans theory, though I may abbreviate this to the above formulations.
examples of a politics of incoherence that requires coalitions between feminist, queer and trans movements. Informed by Syrus Ware’s trans of colour critique, I suggest that white transmasculine people must actively challenge homonormativity, which privileges white able-bodied people who are not trans (Ware 2010: 19). As a white femme queer (who is transmasculine), I also suggest that the practice of incoherence is not limited to sites of butchness or masculinity: femmes practice incoherence too.

Since so many of these concepts (masculine, femme, butch, queer, trans, and so on) are context-specific and rely on self-identification, I use them strategically. I do not pretend that they are universal or complete. I enjoy how often they overlap in my own identity and experience, and I assume that categories/concepts such as trans, queer, feminist, or lesbian, for example, oversimplify the lived experiences of many people. Language seems both woefully incomplete and overly deterministic: simultaneously too little and too much. Perhaps this incoherence of language is inevitable.

In contrast, practicing incoherence as a political strategy is a conscious and ongoing effort to critique and transform categories of personhood. This practice includes asking the “concrete questions” that Epstein and Straub describe, about specificities of privilege and relations of power (1991: 23). It also requires community support: relationships among community members and between different communities. Refusing the neoliberal ideology of individualism is, in my account, an intrinsic part of a coalitional politics of incoherence. Valuing “both intelligibility and unintelligibility, both similarities and differences,” as Elliot recommends, requires less emphasis on individual identities and greater appreciation of relationships (2010: 151). Community support does not require homogeneity. These need not be relationships of sameness, but rather, relationships of difference: my incoherence is articulated in relation to my particular socio-cultural location, my privilege, power, and embodiment. Valuing relationships enables specific and collective instantiations of incoherence: each person

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3. I explore what this “strategic use of language” entails in more detail in Chapter Four, as inspired by Dean Spade (2006) and my interviewees. See section b, specifically, entitled “Creating Alternative (Queer) Masculinities.”
does it differently, yet only with community support will our incoherence become coherent and sustainable.
Chapter One Mapping Social Constructionist Trans Theory: A Queer Transmasculine Perspective

Fig. 1.1 “For Stone and Stryker”
Chapter One
Mapping Social Constructionist Trans Theory: A Queer Transmasculine Perspective

1. Introduction: A Brief Chronology of Trans Theory
2. Recent Developments in the Field: Echoes of Anzaldúa and Black Feminism
3. Performativity, Trans Theory, and Social Construction
   a. Misreading: Trans Theorists Assert My Gender is Real, Not Constructed
   b. Butler Clarifies: Your Gender is Real and Constructed
4. Methodological Tools in Trans Theory
   a. Transgender Rage
   b. Embodiment and Experience
   c. Stryker’s (De)Subjugated Knowledges
   d. Re-Narration
5. Conclusion: Towards Incoherent Masculinities

1. Introduction: A Brief Chronology of Trans Theory

Trans theory is an interdisciplinary field in which contributors critique binary sex/gender systems and offer re-articulations of sex/gender/race/class/sexuality/ability from particular geographical locations with an awareness of historicity and cultural specificity. Trans theorists interrogate existing and historical models of (trans) bodies and identities and suggest new visions and pleasures of embodied subjectivity. One of the goals within queer social constructionist trans theory is to maintain a critical balance of materiality and performativity, insisting on the importance of embodiment and subjective personal experience as a basis for knowledge and theory.

Sometimes called Transgender Studies, or Trans Studies, or Transgender Theory, this field is both quickly growing and frequently homeless: “the amount of academic work
on trans issues is increasing,” notes Gayle Salamon, “but, institutionally speaking, ‘transgender studies’ is not always a legible category” (2010: 96).

Trans theory emerged from community activism, and maintains blood-ties with political activism on a wide range of issues, for example, the medical pathologisation of transpeople and lack of access to health services, immigration, human rights, de-stigmatizing sex work, phobic violence against bodies, and discrimination in regards to housing and employment. Stephen Whittle contends that trans theory has “created new ways in which to be an activist, as well as new ways of being trans” (2006: xv). Like queer theory, trans theory traverses political activism, personal experience and academic exploration.4

Trans theory has been called “Queer Theory’s Evil Twin” by trans theorist pioneer Susan Stryker (2004). This twinning is evident in the slipperiness of terms such as “queer” and “trans.” It is difficult to define these terms and their respective academic incarnations. I welcome this difficulty as a political tool. This allows for trans/queer theory to mean different things to different people and to still build connections between us. However, it also makes it challenging to attempt an overview of the field.

My use of “incoherence” as a political strategy (in the style of Bobby Noble) draws upon the “slippery twins” model of queer and trans theories to explicitly argue that definitions are, at best, contextual and difficult, and frequently incoherent. Like queer theory, trans theory involves recognition of the changing and subjective nature of definitions, a struggle against taxonomy, and a purposeful emphasis on self-naming rather than external categorizing.

Trans theory sprang into existence in the early 1990s: the first politico-academic call-to-arms was issued by Sandy Stone in her essay *The Empire Strikes Back: A (Post)transsexual Manifesto* (1991).5 This was followed shortly after by Les Feinberg’s

4 See Stephen Whittle’s Foreword (xi-xvi) and Susan Stryker’s Introduction to Transgender Studies (1-17) in their edited collection, *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006). Both explicitly link community activism and academic theorizing within trans studies.

5 Stone’s article constituted her reply to Janice Raymond’s scathing critique of transsexuals, which focused on trans women, and specifically targeted Sandy Stone herself. See Raymond (1979).
small but powerful pamphlet *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come* in 1992. Several crucial works were produced in 1994: Susan Stryker’s essay *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*, which “transgender rage” as a methodological tool for experiencing/writing in trans theory, Les Feinberg’s fictional novel *Stone Butch Blues*, Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw* and Patrick Califia’s *Public Sex*. Stryker was the first to explicitly link queer theory/activism with trans theory/activism, and Feinberg laid strong groundwork for coalition building between various groups of gender diverse or trans people. Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw*, written with Bornstein’s characteristic creative flair, was especially popular with young people because it described queer and trans perspectives in accessible and humorous language. In *Public Sex*, Califia, a queer/trans activist and writer, continued to foster connections between queer and trans theories and communities.

In 1998 there was another explosion of trans theory: Judith Halberstam produced the influential book, *Female Masculinity*, which sought to foreground butch masculinity. Bornstein delivered *My Gender Workbook*, Feinberg offered *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink and Blue*, and Jay Prosser, in a critique of queer theory, reinforced the significance of embodiment as a base for theorizing in *Second Skins: Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. Furthermore, in 1998 Stryker edited a special transgender issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, which included material from intersex activist Cheryl Chase and theorist Henry Rubin, as well as Patricia Elliot and Katrina Roen, who discussed transgender embodiment and queer politics. Most importantly for my project, Stryker included a joint article by Jacob Hale and Judith Halberstam: “Butch/FTM Borderwars: A Note on Collaboration,” and also individual articles in which Hale and Halberstam critically assess the “borderwars” between butches and

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6 I respectfully include Halberstam’s work as trans theory because Halberstam describes her work as “creating a theoretical and cultural space for the transgender butch that did not presume transsexuality as its epistemological frame” (1998b: 289). Queer social constructionist trans theory, in which I locate my own work, does not presume transsexuality as an epistemological frame. If anything, it presumes an epistemology of self-identification and gender/sexuality diversity.
FTMs. Halberstam describes a transgender butch perspective on masculinity, and Hale depicts the dangers and delights of genderqueer transmasculinity.

Stryker, Halberstam, and Hale are particularly crucial theorists for my research in different ways. Stryker frequently invokes the queerness of trans theory. Halberstam insists on the inclusion of butch experience and knowledge within trans studies, and Hale writes from a genderqueer transmasculine perspective about his experience as a borderzone dweller and ftm. All of these arguments are embedded in my understanding of how queer and trans theories can challenge and enrich each other.

Noticeably, all of these theorists write from a North American location and perspective. Similar political movements and activism were brewing in many places, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but the first slew of academic work came to light from the United States. Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, in her book *Southern Theory*, an influential text for my own work and location, describes a dynamic between the global north, the “metropole,” and the global south, the “periphery,” where data is extracted from the periphery and theory is produced in the metropole (2007: ix, 89-110). While much of the early trans theorists I have listed did not mine the colonies or the periphery for material, they did begin a trend that has continued in academia: the most influential trans theory is produced in the metropole.

As a trans scholar located in the periphery, it is difficult to produce theory that both engages with the influential northern thinkers and remains centred on my specific location in New Zealand. By interviewing other transguys from New Zealand (and one from Australia) I hope to privilege the experiences of peripheral trans people, without reducing them to data. Connell notes that “Metropolitan sciences, continuously updated at home, continue to be exported,” and this trade “now includes Foucault and Habermas, queer theory, economic modelling and evolutionary psychology” (2007: xi). I aim to balance my commitment to southern theorizing and my interest in utilizing these exported goods. Foucault and queer theory are two significant influences on trans theory. In my use of these tools, I acknowledge the danger of exporting the coloniser’s

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7 See Chapter Five for a detailed examination of these “borderwars,” informed by both Hale and Halberstam.
ideas into the colonies, while also demonstrating that people in the periphery are capable of interacting with northern theory to produce our own knowledge.\(^8\)

There are many ways to narrate the emergence of trans theory, and mine is motivated by my position as a young white person who identifies as both trans and queer. It is also motivated by my disciplinary locations: a Gender Studies programme in New Zealand that encourages sociological, historical and political scholarship spanning social sciences and humanities. I trace a path that I describe as a queer social constructionist vision of trans theory and I do not doubt that there are other ways to frame these debates. I avoid dipping into the vigorous arguments for and against the use of terms “transsexual” and “transgender,” because I would rather focus on particularity and the possibility for coalition building from all of our respective positions. New Zealand theorist Katrina Roen writes about the internal politics of trans communities, and while I appreciate her work, I do not immerse myself in the debates about whether it is better to pass or not to pass, to transgress or not to transgress (Roen 2002).\(^9\)

I assume that there are as many ways of being trans as there are of being human. We are all dependent on our social, geographical, historical context for the words and frameworks we use, and while I privilege queer social constructionist trans theory, I do not pretend this is the only option. For my work, it is the most valuable approach, and I hope to show that it has been and will continue to be productive for many other trans, queer and feminist theorists.

My work is also significantly influenced by my position as a white/Pakeha transmasculine person, on the FTM spectrum. From this perspective I draw on trans, queer and feminist theories to explore the creation of alternative or incoherent masculinities. So, while I am deeply influenced by theorists who are women or who are transfeminine, I exclude work that focuses on transfemininity, or femininity in general.

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\(^8\) I also want to note that while I am peripheral in my global location, I am privileged as a white/pakeha middle-class person, and that one of the reasons I have not sought to speak with or for Maori and Pacific trans/gender diverse people is because I do not want to export data from their communities back to the metropole via my privileged white academic position. Another crucial reason is containing the scope of this project and focusing on my own experience: I want to write comprehensively about my perspective as a pakeha trans person. See Chapter Two for further discussion of my methodological choices.

\(^9\) See also Elliot (2009).
This is a deliberate choice to narrow my field of inquiry, to concentrate on transmasculinity. However, this neglect of transfemininity (and transfeminist or feminist MTF perspective) may produce an unsustainable division between transmasculine and transfeminine knowledges/theories/experiences.\(^\text{10}\)

I am also concerned that within queer and trans scholarship, the dominant narratives of trans experience (both transmasculine and transfeminine) are white. In this respect I am especially influenced by Syrus Ware, who develops a “trans of colour critique” of trans theory (2010). Influenced by Roderick A. Ferguson’s “queer of colour critique,” Ware challenges “ideologies of discreteness” which posit the separation of class, race, disability and gender (Ware 2010: 12, Ferguson 2004: 4). In his research about post-secondary school education, Ware aims to “connect the experiences of racism and transphobia that affect trans students of colour” (2010: 12). Ware’s work is also shaped by Audre Lorde and her notion of integrated research (2010: 13). Ware includes the following quote from Lorde:

\[\text{[M]y fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition.}\]

\[(\text{Lorde 1984: 121, cited in Ware 2010: 13})\]

Consequently, Ware states: “Research that writes trans people as white, straight and non-disabled does not consider the interconnectedness of the power exchanges implicit in this construction and is limited as a result” (13). In my research I do not assume that transpeople are white, straight and non-disabled, but I do speak from my own white, queer, non-disabled position, a position I share with my interviewees. I explore (trans)masculinity with an awareness of the intersections of power/identity, and of my own white privilege. (Chapters Three, Four and Five are particularly relevant to this goal, as I discuss shortly.)

\(^{10}\) For a comprehensive overview of transfeminism, and connections between transfeminine and transmasculine theorizing, see Talia Bettcher (2009b).
Responding to Stephen Whittle’s comment that trans theorists can now build careers from writing about their experiences, Whittle states:

Trans scholars who write about their lives without an analysis of white privilege can still form academic careers based on their work, and can be considered valuable contributors to trans studies. Systemic white supremacy is designed to support those who choose to ignore the real ways that white privilege works through a constant prioritizing and centralizing of a white voice as neutral and dominant.

(2010: 44)

This critique of trans theory is also relevant to queer theory, as Rinaldo Walcott (2007) and Siobhan Somerville (2002) argue. Queer and trans theories share many investments, and as researchers in these fields we need to recognise white privilege and work to de-centerize white narratives/experiences/voices, which Jean Bobby Noble advises as part of a “politic of incoherence” (2006). De-centerizing the neutral white voice, from my Pakeha perspective, involves particularizing myself and my cultural context as well as engaging with work that bridges critical race theory/ethnic studies and trans theory.

According to the dominant white narratives in the academic field of gender and sexuality studies, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler are frequently cited as pioneers of queer theory, and therefore precursors to trans theory. I do not focus on Foucault, because he is less relevant to my particular project, but his influence is most visible (from my perspective) in the methodologies of trans theory. (I address methodologies in later sections of this chapter, and in Chapter Two.) Butler’s work provides useful material for my politics of incoherence, and here I examine her notion of performativity, in particular.

Butler’s earlier work (1990, 1993) inspires debate among trans theorists about social constructionism, performativity and embodiment, all important themes within my

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11 Whittle: “It is now possible, simply by ‘telling’ or theorizing my own life and the lives of other trans people, for me to build an academic career based on the fascination of the ‘Other’ with people like me” (2006: xii).
account of incoherent masculinity. Her recent work (2004) is also contentious; it is criticized by some queer/feminist/trans scholars for offering interventions in trans politics without seeking engagement with trans theorists/activists.\textsuperscript{12}

I suggest that the debates around Butler and performativity, which figure trans theorists Jason Cromwell, Jay Prosser, Henry Rubin, and Jamison Green, among others, are indicative of one of the main concerns that trans theorists articulate in relation to social constructionism, postmodernism, and queer theory. This concern is for the centrality of embodiment and the relationships between bodies and identities, or more broadly, the significance of materiality in discussions of identity transgression or construction.

Trans theory’s continued emphasis on materiality and embodiment promotes strong bonds with disability studies. Both trans theory and disability studies are academic-activist arenas, with theory firmly rooted in embodied experience and the political goals of expanding the dominant Eurocentric bodily norms and providing other ways of approaching embodiment, without pathologizing trans/gender diverse or disabled/differently abled people.\textsuperscript{13} As Syrus Ware notes, we need to shape “a trans studies that incorporates an intersectional and interconnected analysis of race, gender and disability into its fabric” (2010: 39).

Before exploring Butler and Foucault’s influences on trans theory, I consider the legacies of Gloria Anzaldua and black feminism. If trans theory is to survive as a cutting-edge interdisciplinary field, we need to remain attentive to where it overlaps with disability studies, queer feminist social constructionism, post-colonial studies, critical race theory, and women of colour work.

\textsuperscript{12} See Elliot (2010) for a careful evaluation of Butler’s contributions, in which Elliot reproaches Butler (who is positioned as a queer feminist theorist writing in trans theory) for her lack of interest in trans scholarship. I suggest that the relationship between queer and trans theory could be described using Raewyn Connell’s formula periphery and metropole: the periphery (trans people and experience) mined for data but theory produced in the metropole (queer theory). This is certainly not the only way to frame the relationship, and instead I consider some of the mutually beneficial overlaps between trans and queer theories.

\textsuperscript{13} See Iwakuma (2002) as an example. Also Corker and Shakespeare (2002).
2. Recent Developments in the Field: Echoes of Anzaldua and Black Feminism

In 2006 and 2010, anthologies of short essays on experiences of queer/trans/mixed-race/etc people demonstrate the renewed need for queer of colour analysis and critical race theory: the perspectives of people of colour, indigenous people, and colonized communities must inform trans theory. *Nobody Passes* (2006) and *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation* (2010) contain a myriad of multiple-subject-positions, examples of creative self-and-community-making, speaking from specific locations, and engaging with dynamics of power from the intersections of race/class/ability/sexuality/etc. I argue that pivotal women of colour feminist works such as Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua’s *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) did influence early trans theory, but this is not often acknowledged in the work being produced by mostly white, middle-class, English-speaking academics in the global north. Anzaldua’s poetic theoretical work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) resurfaces in the first decade of the new millennium as inspirational for young cutting-edge scholars and activists, especially Chicana and Chicano feminists and queers in North and South America. I highlight Anzaldua’s legacy because in Chapter Three I return to discuss her work in relation to genderqueer subjectivity, and in Chapter Six I explore contributions to the butch/trans “border wars” from mixed-race/biracial scholars Logan Gutierrez-Mock (2006) and Nico Dacumos (2006), who are also indebted to Anzaldua.

Talia Bettcher provides a bridge between women of colour feminism and trans theory by noting the importance of Anzaldua and Donna Haraway for trans theorist Sandy Stone (2009b). Bettcher argues that Haraway and Anzaldua are critical influences for Stone’s foundational work *The Empire Strikes Back: A (Post)transsexual Manifesto* (1991). Haraway’s influence, as Stone’s doctorate supervisor, is easier to identify: like Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), Stone’s essay (1991) is a manifesto written from a trans perspective, in a similar creative and provocative style.14 The position of the

14 Bettcher also proposes that Stryker (1994) is influenced by Haraway’s cyborg, and therefore also influenced by women of colour feminism (Bettcher 2009b: 4.2). Stryker, who like Stone writes in a creative and provocative style reminiscent of Haraway, employs the concept of the monster. This monster performs the same function as the cyborg. Speaking as the monster, Stryker resists the pathologizing and
cyborg, as “a collection of disparate, incongruent parts” is similar to the position of the transsexual in Stone’s account, according to Bettcher (2009b: 4.2). Each cyborg, like each transsexual, “contains multiple elements of oppressor and oppressed” (Bettcher 2009b: 4.2).

Bettcher credits Haraway’s engagement with women of colour feminism as prompting this concept of the cyborg (2009b: 4.2). As a figure of resistance, the cyborg refuses ideas of naturalness and original innocence, rejecting any oversimplifying or monolithic account of oppression and liberation (Bettcher 2009b: 4.2). Stone’s figure of the transsexual is similarly implicated in wider discourses of sexism, racism, and heteronormativity, and seeks to work against these institutions while acknowledging that there is no simple distinction between oppressor and oppressed.

Anzaldua’s influence on Stone’s work is more oblique. Her poetic-theoretical work on border dwelling and mestiza consciousness is not cited by Stone. But Bettcher argues that there is considerable conceptual evidence: she cites the similarities between Stone’s assertion that transsexuals speak beyond the gender binary, that we must mix and match genres/genders, and Anzaldua’s description of her existence as a border dweller, with mestiza consciousness. Mestiza consciousness involves “the capacity to see oneself in accordance with the dominant ways in which one is oppressively represented and constrained in different, and often conflicting ways (Anzaldua 1987: 101, Bettcher 4.2). This capacity is similar to Stone’s notion that transsexuals adopt aspects of the dominant pathologizing discourses about transsexuality within a “subaltern transsexual culture which fails to accurately correspond to the official account” (Bettcher 4.2).

I suggest that southern or peripheral trans theorists benefit from engaging with this women of colour heritage, and we must continue to produce theory that emphasizes the overlaps and intersections between identity categories and also highlights the unequal dynamics of a global exchange of knowledge. We must also delve into relevant aspects

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marginalization of trans people. The cyborg’s resistance, due “to the possibility of the cyborg’s turning against the intentions of its maker” is echoed in Stryker’s essay My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage (1994), where Stryker’s monster similarly turns against its maker.
of northern theory. Stryker and Whittle (2006) do not explicitly address the relationship between the metropole and periphery. Both are rooted firmly in (and writing about) the metropole: Stryker focuses on her location in the United States, and Whittle on his location in the United Kingdom. While they do not attend in any depth to the silence of the periphery in their collection, Stryker and Whittle lament that trans theory is “impoverished by the relative lack of contributions from people of colour, and is therefore ultimately inadequate for representing the complex interplay between race, ethnicity and transgender phenomena” (2006: 15). I argue that this lack is not as simple as the assumption that institutional racism prevents non-white people from achieving recognition or publication, though Stryker and Whittle do acknowledge that such discrimination is a reality (2006: 15). Remembering that women of colour feminism is part of the heritage of queer theory, and hence, trans theory, shows that these voices and concepts are foundational, rather than absent.

Queer and trans theories that fail to acknowledge their historical debt to women of colour, and a contemporary allegiance with postcolonial, immigrant, indigenous communities, are aiding this erasure of our foundations and future possibilities. Rinaldo Walcott, in his essay, “Somewhere Out There: The New Black Queer Theory,” suggests that queer theory, while able to attack the stability of the established gay and lesbian studies paradigm “could not shed its own problem with whiteness” (2007: 31). Walcott cites Halberstam as recently critiquing the “white gay male hegemony” of queer theory (Halberstam 2005: 220, quoted in Walcott 2007: 31). Halberstam suggests that “a contemporary antihomonormative queer politics emerges from racialized groups and immigrant communities specifically as a critique of the mythologizing of the queer past that goes on in white gay communities” (2005: 222). “If queer theory is to remain,” states Walcott, “then it will have to actively engage the kind of political questions and

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15 Syrus Ware challenges Stryker and Whittle, as editors of The Transgender Studies Reader, to recognise that “the lack of writing connecting racialization and gender in the reader is due to the privileging of whiteness by the many white contributors, rather than exclusively from a deficiency of voices of colour as Stryker implies. As is exemplified by both Feinberg, Clare and Roen, authors who are not of colour have an important role to play in addressing the experiences of racialized trans people in their trans-themed research” (Ware 2010: 36).

16 See Somerville (2002) for an analysis of black feminism as a precursor to queer theory. Somerville suggests that in order to be viable, queer theory “must be thoroughly informed by and linked to theories of race and ethnicity” (2002: 788).
assertions that the black queer diaspora produces and articulates” (2007: 36). I suggest the same is true of trans theory, and in Chapter Three, (Dis)Locations and Incoherent Genderqueer Masculinities, I explore anti-racism and queer mixed-race perspectives on genderqueer identity, drawing specifically on Anzaldua and bell hooks. In Chapter Four I consider the whiteness of hegemonic (trans)masculinity, and in Chapter Five I consider coalitions between butch and transmasculine communities given the implications of race and class.

3. Performativity, Trans Theory, and Social Construction

Having signalled my concern that trans theory is predominantly white, I now turn to one of the major debates in this predominantly white field because it informs my work as a Pakeha queer transmasculine person, and helps me unpack what I mean by “social construction of gender.”

The debate centres around Butler’s notion of performativity, as she explains it in Gender Trouble (1990), and it exemplifies some of the key tensions between queer theory and trans theory. In later work, such as Bodies That Matter (1992), Butler responds to critiques that performativity reduces identity to performance (in other words, Butler is charged with creating a voluntaristic account of gender) or that it discounts the value of embodiment and the connection between bodies, personal identity, and a wider cultural context. In this discussion I focus on the initial tensions around Gender Trouble (1990), spotlighting the concerns of trans theorists such as Jason Cromwell, Jay Prosser and Henry Rubin while siding with Gayle Salamon’s critique of these theorists as misunderstanding social constructionism. I focus on these theorists because Cromwell, Prosser and Rubin’s concerns speak to a wider investment in trans theory, an investment in the meaning and value of bodies/embodiment and identities, and because queer social constructionism is the framework for my project.17

17 Most of the trans theorists I discuss here are male, (transmen, transmasculine, or FTM/ftm, depending on their preferred terminology) rather than female (transwomen, transfeminine, or MTF/mtf). This is
Stryker suggests that some transgender scholars misinterpret Butler because performativity does not equate to “mere” performance (2006: 10). As I interpret it, the crucial point made by Cromwell, Prosser and Rubin is that my gender is part of my sense of self and embodiment, that it may change over time, but is nevertheless not something I can take on or off or change at will. Stryker explains that for these theorists, the suggestion that gender is drag, or gender is play, risks “a profound misrecognition of their personhood, of their specific mode of being” (2006: 10). While this misinterpretation of Butler points to an important theme of trans theory, that of the significance of embodiment and an embodied sense of self, it remains erroneous.

According to Stryker, the popularization of the concept of performativity was/is useful for trans theorists who want to change how we look at gender and how gender is made. “The biologically sexed body guarantees nothing,” according to speech act theory, which Stryker notes is the field from which performativity is derived (2006: 10). It is “a ground for the act of speaking, but it has no deterministic relationship to performative gender” (Stryker 2006: 10). By dismissing biology, performativity does not necessarily dismiss the significance of embodiment. When performativity is erroneously simplified to mere performance it appears disconnected from bodily matter, and this combined with the rejection of biology prompts the misreading of Butler’s work as a voluntaristic account of gender identity. Trans theorists (such as myself) who utilize performativity, and a wider notion of gender as a social construction, often emphasize the importance of bodies and an embodied sense of self as a way of counteracting this possible misreading.

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partly because the primary contributors to this misreading have been transmasculine people/transmen, and partly because my project focuses on the transmasculine end of the spectrum.
a. Misreading: Trans Theorists Assert My Gender is Real, Not Constructed

Gayle Salamon, a contemporary of Butler, critiques trans theorists who misconstrue social constructionism. Butler’s notion of performativity lies at the heart of the debate. Salamon writes, “in the emerging field of transgender studies, many writers have suggested that queer theory’s most profound legacy has been the advancement of social construction as a way to understand gender and embodiment” (2006: 578). However a “growing number” present transgenderism (signifying both the theory and the experience of trans people) as a challenge to the theory of social construction, focusing specifically on the materiality of trans embodiment as the basis of this challenge (Salamon 2006: 578). Salamon mentions James Green, Jay Prosser, Viviane Namaste, and Jason Cromwell as examples.

Green rejects social construction: “thanks to the feminist critique, we can now say ‘gender is a social construction,’ as if we are above it all” (2001: 59-70, cited in Salamon 2006: 578). Salamon observes that firstly, this does not specify whose feminism, and that secondly, this portrays social construction as “unconnected to lived gender, something that obscures, or even threatens, the stakes of gender, a gender that ostensibly exists for subjects and bodies outside of simplistic ‘constructions’” (2006: 579).

While Green positions social constructionism as overly simplistic, Prosser moves in the other direction. Prosser alleges that the materiality of the transsexual body “gives the lie to social construction,” because the dysphoric body asserts what Salamon calls “a simple truth” (Prosser 1998: 7, Salamon 2006: 580). This simple truth of being in the wrong body is contrasted with overly complicated or obscure social constructionist theories of gender.

Salamon describes how Green purports to believe that social constructionism “imperils” gender itself (2006: 581). Green is quoted as saying “we must wrest gender loose from the grip of social constructionism” (2001: 60). Namaste also rejects queer theory because of its connection with social construction: “queer theory as it is currently
practiced needs to be rejected for both theoretical and political reasons” (Namaste 2000: 9, Salamon 2006: 581).

Jason Cromwell provides the most fertile discussion of Butler and social construction more generally, in his book Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities (1999). Cromwell states:

According to performative theory, gender is a ‘routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment’ by members of society who thus express masculinity or femininity. That people ‘do gender’ in the presence of others (West and Zimmerman 1987:126) may have some validity. Even when alone, however, people have and manifest a gender. If gender were only important in social situations, then transpeople would not know that their gender is different than what societies dictate they should be according to their bodies. Transpeople do not take off gender as though it were clothing. Contrary to Judith Butler’s statement about there being ‘no gender identity behind the expressions of gender’ (1990:25), gender and gendered identity are, and feel, basic to beingness. (1999: 42).

The first crucial misinterpretation is the meaning of the word “social” in social construction: Cromwell associates this with “social” as in socializing with other people, and rightly rejects the idea that when a person is alone (not social) they have no gender. The second concerns Butler and performativity: Butler is not suggesting that gender identity does not exist, she is arguing that gender, and one’s sense of self as gendered, is produced through social processes. The comment about clothing refers to the misunderstanding that Butler advocates a voluntaristic account of gender. Salamon describes this misunderstanding as “a common one” but it is nevertheless wrong (2006: 585).

The assertion that gender feels, as Cromwell puts it, “basic to beingness,” (1999: 42) amounts to the question: how can gender (or sex) feel completely internal, as if it stems
from the foundation of myself, and still be a social construction? This question, as we have seen, haunts much of trans theory, because one of the foundational assumptions of trans theory is that trans people are the authority on themselves. If trans people are the authority on themselves, so the argument goes, this conflicts with the idea that discourse constitutes the subject. This is an oversimplification of “discourse” versus “subject,” but it is a serious tension within some trans theorists’ work, especially those who are grappling with social construction.

Some trans theorists, such as Namaste, Prosser and Green, reject social construction altogether, while others, like Rubin and Cromwell, attempt to balance between social construction and their concern that the experience, embodiment and identity of trans people is being neglected within some social constructionist accounts. Rubin, seeking to counteract he sees as “an undue emphasis on structural constraint and the discursive constitution of the subject,” suggests returning to an “essential self,” or “core male identity” in the case of FTMs (2003: 11).

Prosser elaborates on the claim that queer and/or social constructionist approaches emphasize discourse at the expense of the subject. He asserts that this is especially problematic in relation to trans people and medical discourses: “constructionist theories of transsexuality overwhelmingly fail to examine how transsexuals are constructing subjects: participants and actors who have shaped medical practices as much as they have been shaped by them” (1998: 8). Prosser and Rubin (and to a lesser extent, Cromwell) contend that trans people’s agency is neglected in social constructionist accounts.

According to this view, social constructionism (particularly of the kind influenced by Foucault, as evidenced by the sprinkling of “discourses”) is incompatible with trans experience and theory because it perpetuates the idea that trans people are not an authority on themselves. Or, to put it another way, social construction denies the

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18 Prosser also cites the idea that transsexuals are viewed as somehow “more constructed” than nontranssexuals, as an argument against social constructionism (1998: 8). I agree that the average non-trans person sees transsexuals who have had surgery and hormonal treatment as “more constructed” than his/her self, but this is not an argument against social constructionism.
significance of self-definition and self-identification, two concepts that are crucial in trans theory and practice. This model of social constructionism supposedly positions external (medical) discourse over and above the internal identities of trans people.

I argue that social constructionism is compatible with empowering trans people and recognising our agency. This compatibility hinges on acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between discourse and subject, and recognising that an internal gender identity and sense of self is still socially constructed. To counteract the preceding arguments against social construction and performativity, I offer Butler’s formulation of the relationship between norms and agency.

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19 I would also note that the mid-1990s saw considerable debate about the perceived lack of agency in Foucault’s work, with scholars contending that this had been missing from previous discussions of Foucault and power/resistance/discourse. Trans theorists were not alone in questioning the uses of discursive analysis that had proliferated in the years since his death. For a representative example, see Kevin Jon Heller (1996).
b. Butler Clarifies: Your Gender is Real and Constructed

Though Butler discusses the dynamic between norms and agency in her early work (in relation to performativity) some of the clearest formulations appear after *Gender Trouble* (1990), in subsequent works such as *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004). In response to the accusation of voluntarism, which relates to a perceived disconnection between performed identity, internal identity, and the body, Butler explores embodiment and materiality at great length. She asks questions such as “how is it that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only bears cultural constructions and, therefore, cannot be a construction?” (1993: 28). While bodies are central to our experience and politics, Butler insists that our interpretation of what bodies signify is culturally constructed, regulated, and policed (1993). Problematizing “the matter of bodies” does not negate their importance, rather, this “unsettling” can be
“understood as initiating new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter” (Butler 1993: 30).

Some of the new ways that bodies matter, I propose, are as sites of trans identity, experience, and knowledge, and hence, as central to trans, queer, and feminist theory. Instead of exploring materiality, I focus on Butler’s account of norms and agency because this answers the charge of voluntarism more clearly and provides an explication of performativity that is compatible with (my) trans experiences. My politics of incoherence is a call to disrupt hegemonic norms of masculinity, to create new (trans)masculinities, to refuse to articulate ourselves through the coherent narratives of racist, sexist and homophobic masculinities. This is predicated on what I call a Butlerian understanding of norms and agency.

According to Butler, performativity posits gender as “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (2004: 1). I enact my gender, I improvise my personhood, within a wider cultural framework. I have agency; I improvise and negotiate with dominant and subcultural norms. However, my agency is constrained: this “scene of constraint” is the wider social context in which I exist, my relationships with the people and the socio-political institutions that surround me.

Butler is particularly eloquent in Undoing Gender (2004) regarding the dangers of being unintelligible according to norms. Performativity does not equate to obedience or acceptance of whatever the dominant discourse on gender proclaims, as Prosser and Rubin describe it. I am compelled by norms that I do not choose to become intelligible (coherent) but I can choose, to some extent, how much I capitulate and how much I resist by remaining incoherent. In some cases, it is not a conscious choice, I simply find myself at odds with the dominant framework of personhood by virtue of being myself as a non-binary gendered person. Butler is attentive to the dangers that trans people face when they are, for whatever reason, unintelligible or incoherent. She suggests that we remain critical of norms and constantly refer to the lived experience of gendered beings: “The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the questions of what maximizes the possibilities for a
livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death” (2004: 8).

We must be critical and also maintain a transformative element in our relationship with norms. Transformative because norms can shift, so there is a need for social and political change, though we must remain cognizant of the dangers of unintelligibility or incoherence:

The ‘I’ that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavours to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. This is not easy, because the ‘I’ becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this ‘I’ fully recognizable.

(2004: 3)

I am dependent on norms: I constitute norms and am constituted by them. My sense of self is both a deeply internal identity and a discursively produced external identity because in fact both are social constructs, both are discursively produced. My internal world is not separate from the social world. The worlds of social construction are the worlds we live in, all the time. There is nothing outside the social realm. Queer theory’s project of de-naturalising involves recognising that we are social creatures, not natural creatures, and that my sense of self, while being “basic to beingness” as Cromwell (1999) put it, is social rather than natural. My sense of self is articulated through social constructions of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and so on, while also grounded in my own material specificity.

In Chapters Four, Five, and Six I describe how (trans)masculine people can disrupt hegemonic norms of racist, classist, homophobic, misogynist masculinity, by employing their subversive Butlerian agency to create new norms of masculinity. I also argue that in creating these alternative, queer, or incoherent masculinities we must retain what Butler calls a “critical and transformative relationship” (2004: 3) with these
practices/norms of masculinity in order to avoid replacing an old hierarchy with a new hierarchy.

4. Methodologies in Trans Theory

My argument for incoherent (trans)masculinities is situated within queer social constructionist theory and as such incorporates a Butlerian understanding of norms and agency. I also position myself as a trans scholar, and I solicit specific methodological and conceptual tools, such as Stryker’s transgender rage, from trans theory. After discussing transgender rage, I follow Stryker’s account of the methodological underpinnings of trans theory: the importance of embodiment and experience; a Foucauldian excavation of subjugated knowledges; and re-narration by trans people of historical and contemporary “archives,” such as medical institutions, which contain knowledge about trans people and gender/sexuality diversity (Stryker 2006).

a. Transgender Rage as Methodology

On a methodological level, Stryker’s essay “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” first published in 1994 (I cite 2006b version in The Transgender Studies Reader) demonstrates the productive overlaps that occur between queer and trans theory. Stephen Whittle, in his synopsis of the essay, notes that it was the first published academic work to link trans theory to queer theory (2006: 244). This linkage is evident in Stryker’s definition of transgender rage as “a queer fury,” her intention to “perform self-consciously a queer gender,” and also in her use of different writing styles (2006b: 253, 245). In “Introductory Notes,” Stryker describes how she appeared at the conference at which she read this essay:
I stood at the podium wearing genderfuck drag – combat boots, threadbare Levi 501s over a black lace bodysuit, a shredded Transgender Nation T-shirt with the neck and sleeves cut out, a pink triangle, quartz crystal pendant, grunge metal jewellery, and a six-inch long marlin hook dangling around my neck on a length of heavy stainless steel chain. I decorated the set by draping my black leather biker jacket over my chair at the panelists’ table. The jacket had handcuffs on the left shoulder, rainbow freedom rings on the right side lacings, and Queer Nation-style stickers reading SEX CHANGE, DYKE, and FUCK YOUR TRANSPHOBIA plastered on the back.

(2006b: 245)

Stryker’s intention to perform a “queer gender” and “transgender aesthetic” is echoed in the structure and style of her essay. “I wanted the formal structures of the work to express a transgender aesthetic by replicating our abrupt, often jarring transitions between genders – challenging generic classification with the forms of my words just as my transsexuality challenges the conventions of legitimate gender” (2006b: 245). This queer transgender aesthetic is a challenge to traditional scholarly values of coherence. I incorporate an incoherent aesthetic in my work through inclusion of visual materials and conversational quotes, but instead of Stryker’s aim for “jarring transitions” I strive for a queer incoherence in which each chapter builds my argument in a different direction, like branches of a tree, instead of proceeding in a linear fashion.

Stryker explicitly connects transgender rage, which is the underlying force guiding her methodological choices, to Butler’s notion of intelligibility, and the norms, or “regulatory schemata,” which determine what forms of gendered subjecthood are/are not livable (2006b: 253). Transgender rage enables us to resist these schemata and reform ourselves. Transgender rage is also informed by Foucault: it is a counter-discourse. It demonstrates the multiplicity or “polymorphous techniques” of power; power as not merely repressive but also productive and relational (1978).

Transgender rage is similarly polymorphous: an emotional experience, an embodied performance, a source for renewing one’s self when faced with difficult circumstances
(especially when those circumstances involve transgressing norms or being confronted with the violence of normative discourses), a means by which we can challenge dominant modes of gender and create new modes governed by different “codes of intelligibility” (2006b: 253), and a methodology for trans theorists. I draw upon all of these aspects of transgender rage in my thesis.

Transgender rage as a methodology is not prescriptive, but it does necessitate blurring the boundaries between personal and academic, practice and theory. On a structural level, it is creative and non-linear. It involves moving back and forth between different voices or writing styles, allowing for contradiction and adjustment.

b. Embodiment and Experience in Trans Theory

As seen in the discussion of Stryker’s transgender rage, embodiment and performativity are crucial to a trans methodology. Embodiment and performativity are both experienced (doing, being, becoming) thus embodiment, performativity, experience and knowledge are intertwined. Speaking from experience as an embodied subject is fundamental to a trans methodology. Stryker:

Transgender studies considers the embodied experience of the speaking subject, who claims constative knowledge of the referent topic, to be a proper – indeed essential – component of the analysis of transgender phenomena; experiential knowledge is as legitimate as other, supposedly more ‘objective’ forms of knowledge, and is in fact necessary for understanding the political dynamics of the situation being analyzed.


This does not mean only trans people can produce trans theory, or that knowledge of transgender phenomena gained through other means cannot be useful. Experiential, embodied knowledge can be produced from any person. Transgender phenomena have
been studied by many “objective” observers, especially medical “experts,” for example sexologists, psychiatrists/psychologists, and endocrinologists. The knowledge gained may still be valuable, but it must not be regarded as more “true” than the experiential knowledge of trans people. The privileging of “expert” knowledge is thus dismantled in Foucauldian style: trans methodologies include awareness of the multiplicity of power and the possibility that trans people are the best authority on what it means to be trans/transsexual/transgender. Stryker sums it up as: “an assertion that no voice in the dialog should have the privilege of masking the particularities and specificities of its own speaking position, through which it may claim a false universality or authority” (2006: 12).

Experience and embodiment are intertwined. On the level of embodiment, trans methodologies insist that the body of the researcher be acknowledged, along with the context of their embodiment, and the impact of their own “contingent knowledges and practices” on “the formation and transformation of the bodies of others” (2006: 12). Trans theory maintains that speaking (or writing or researching or presenting) is an embodied experience, it is an experience of the subject. Bodies are not objects: we are embodied speaking subjects. The body is “the contingent ground of all our knowledge, and all our knowing” (2006: 12).

Stryker notes that this attention to embodiment, and the simultaneous concern with power and positionality (evident in the valuing of experiential knowledge), “aligns transgender studies with a growing body of interdisciplinary academic research in the humanities and social sciences” (2006: 12). Some forms of feminist and queer theory have been attending to embodied, experiential knowledge prior to and alongside trans theory, and similar observations can be made about many other interdisciplinary areas such as disability studies/crip theory and critical race theory.
c. Stryker’s (De)Subjugated Knowledges

Stryker contends that transgender studies “exemplifies what Michel Foucault once called ‘the insurrection of subjugated knowledges’” (2006: 12). There are two main types of subjugated knowledges: “historical contents” that have been buried or hidden in records or “functional and systematic ensembles,” and “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges” (2006: 12).

The first historical kind of subjugated knowledge is found in trans theory when researchers excavate the archives of systems, such as the literature of anthropology, the records of legal proceedings, the files of psychiatric patients. This material is then “recontextualized” (de-subjugated) within current academic debates (2006: 12). De-subjugation of the second kind of knowledge occurs when researchers address and centre their own embodied, experiential knowledge in accounts of gender diversity or different ways of being. These knowledges have been denigrated as “non-conceptual,” “insufficiently elaborated,” “naive,” and “hierarchically inferior” (2006: 13).20 “Such knowledge,” writes Stryker, “may be articulated from direct experience, or it may be witnessed and represented by others in an ethical fashion” (2006: 13). These knowledges have been subjugated or “disqualified” (2006: 13) but trans theory demands their inclusion, and furthermore, requires other researchers to recognise their own embodiment, experience, and social position, and to take this into account in their work.

Historical subjugated knowledge (the first kind) requires a methodology that is meticulous and precise; the second requires a methodology that is innovative and flexible, able to acknowledge the impact of embodiment and experience upon theorizing. This latter methodology blurs the line between theory and practice, vowing, as Salamon does, that “how we embody gender is how we theorize gender, and to suggest otherwise is to misunderstand both theorization and embodiment” (2006: 578). Both these subjugated knowledges disrupt the established hierarchy of knowledge, where rational/objective/scientific knowledge is privileged above irrational/subjective/non-scientific knowledge.

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20 Before work emerged that was specifically trans flavoured, it should be noted that feminists, queers and people of colour had been articulating these knowledges within and beyond an academic context.
The two types of subjugated knowledges can be revealed separately or as mutually enriching strands of what Bettcher calls the “coming-to-voice” of transpeople (2009). I focus on de-subjugating the second kind: I base my work on my own personal, embodied, experiential knowledge.

d. Re-narration

Further elaborating on the de-subjugation of these knowledges, Stryker proposes the term “re-narration” for the project within trans studies (and other fields such as queer theory) that seeks to tell new stories about “things many of us thought we already knew” (2006: 13). This re-narration is often interdisciplinary, since it involves layers of cultural signification: the layers of race, sex, sexuality, gender, class, ability, and age, all bleeding into each other within historical and contemporary narratives of difference, otherness, abnormality, and monstrosity.

Stryker observes that “The regulation of homosexuality, hermaphroditism, gender inversion, and other forms of ‘social monstrosity’ have figured prominently in the development of ‘regimes of normalization’ whose latter-day descendents in the modern era remain decidedly active and robust” (2006: 13). Re-narration critiques these “regimes of normalization” and demonstrates simultaneously their material impacts and their vulnerability to change. Forms and figures of “social monstrosity” are centred instead of marginalized and valuable knowledge is shared from these re-centred perspectives.

Within trans theory, re-narration is practiced primarily when engaging with the clinical archive (extensive medical histories and literature on transgender phenomena) and ethnographic or anthropological literature. Drawing on both kinds of subjugated knowledges, re-narration pays attention to experience, embodiment, positionality, context, and construction.
I also argue that re-narration is practiced on a daily level by many trans people; remember Salamon’s suggestion that “how we embody gender is how we theorize gender” (2006: 578). When I seek to position myself as the authority on my own experience, embodiment, and identity, I am practicing re-narration. Part of my current project is a re-narration of transmasculinity from my perspective as a transmasculine subject, claiming my right to speak without being pathologized or marginalized, recognizing that I must also remain mindful of the privilege I experience as a white, masculine person.

Re-narration, undertaken by many different gender diverse people, is one powerful form of counter-discourse within (and beyond) trans theory. Informed by a Foucauldian account of power and a queer agenda of anti-normalization, re-narration makes room for multiplicity. Dominant discourse is not simply replaced with new alternative discourse (which would risk the solidification and normalization of the “alternative” discourse), rather, dominant discourse is simultaneously de-centralized and turned into the object of study. Re-narration positions the trans subject as the author, instead of the object.

Stryker references “the vast philosophical-historical research project” of Foucault as evidence that “attending to what we would know call transgender phenomena has been a pre-occupation of Western culture since Greek and Roman antiquity” (2006: 13). Like Foucault’s project, trans theory involves making visible the frequently unseen apparatuses of power and oppression. This effectively de-centralizes dominant discourse/apparatuses and brings them into view, enabling challenge and critique from those who were previously positioned as “marginalized” but who are now claiming their voice.21

As I previously argued, this framework must include analysis of marginalization from a number of positions, and trans theory as it stands is dominated by analysis from white

21 Trans and gender diverse people are clearly not the only marginalized subjects. Feminist theorists such as bell hooks argue for the value of knowledge on the margins (1990). I see this “speaking from the margins” mantra as something that links many interdisciplinary areas such as disability studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, gender studies, queer theory, and trans theory. I explore the potential of the margins in Chapter Three: (Dis)Locations and Incoherent Genderqueer Masculinity.
trans perspectives. Connections with disability studies, race and ethnic studies, and third wave feminist theories, must be made: marginalization is one potential area for this bridging. Black feminist theorist bell hooks, for example, argues that knowledge from the margins is valuable, that we can theorize from this space (1990). I explore the creative potential of the margins in Chapter Three: (Dis)Locations and Incoherent Genderqueer Masculinity.

Conclusion: Towards Incoherent Masculinities

Trans theory emerged in early 1990s, exploded over the millennium, and by mid-2000s had spread its fingers into various disciplines throughout the academy. I focus on queer social constructionist work, from which some key themes emerge: agency, norms, embodiment, and intersectionality. These themes play out as part of an ongoing interaction between activism or social justice and theory or academic work, and as such, they continue to morph and multiply.

I propose that the overwhelming message from trans theory (for queer, feminist and other theorists) is that embodiment is vital and a valuable place from which/about which to create theory. On a methodological level, the most important message is that personal stories and narratives are critically needed as part of situating oneself in relation to one’s writing/work/contribution/intervention. Transgender rage and re-narration are two examples of methodological tools within trans theory that take into account both of these messages.

Some of the silences within trans theory must be attended to: people of colour are still marginalized within the field; the global north remains the focal point for the production of theory while the global south is perceived to be data for theory; people who embody too much difference (intersections of disability, queerness, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and so on) are still “othered” and their contributions delegitimized; the historical realities and ongoing struggles of colonisation and post-colonial contexts are
under-theorized; poor and working class people continue to be excluded from institutional privileges such as university access (to attend conferences, to sit in my office writing about myself, to present my work and receive feedback from other privileged academics); femme and feminine people face misogyny within and beyond the academy and are also marginalized by the shift within trans theory that has produced more work on masculinity (female masculinity, transmasculinity, genderqueer masculinity) than on femininity.

In my politics of incoherence I draw on transgender rage, employ re-narration, and aim to describe my perspective as a genderqueer Pakeha trans boy without further entrenching these silences. I rely on queer and feminist theorists and activists to help me in this aim, and as I continually reiterate, I believe that coalitions between movements are essential. In recommending incoherent masculinities, from a transmasculine perspective, I offer Butlerian notions of interaction between norms and agency and maintaining a critical and transformative relationship to whatever queer, feminist, and anti-racist masculinities we construct.

In Chapter Two I locate myself more specifically within methodological intersections of trans, queer and feminist theories. My politics of incoherence appears at these intersections, and after describing this methodological framework, I will put it to work in explorations of genderqueer identity and the ethics of (trans)masculinity.
Chapter Two My Trans, Queer, and Feminist Methodology: Political Commitments, Relationships, and Creativity

Fig. 2.1 “Ethics”
Chapter Two
My Trans, Queer, and Feminist Methodology: Political Commitments, Relationships, and Creativity

1. Methodological Assumptions
2. Methods: The Nuts and Bolts
3. Queer Relationships: Researcher and Researched
4. Relationships Within a Hybrid Methodology: Halberstam the Authorial Scavenger and Dahl the Femme Collaborator
5. Creativity: Discussion from Interviews

While there is no quintessential queer perspective, queer analytical approaches employed by geographers are largely grounded in wider formulations of poststructuralist, postmodernist and Foucauldian ideas that dispute traditional appeals to ontological coherency, universal truth and causal connectedness that underlie modernist thought (Browne 2000, Knopp and Browne 2003, Browne et al. 2007).

(Catherine J. Nash 2010:131-2)

1. Methodological Assumptions

In Chapter One I explored some key aspects of trans theory from a queer social constructionist perspective. In Chapter Two I aim to link trans, queer and feminist theories in a sweeping survey of my own hybrid methodology. The overwhelming message from trans theory (for queer, feminist and other theorists) is that embodiment is vital and a valuable place from which/about which to create theory. On a methodological level, the most important message is that personal stories and narratives are critically needed as part of situating oneself in relation to one’s writing/work/contribution/intervention.
I presume that “methods” refers to the concrete details, the nuts and bolts, of the research: interviews; surveys; workshops; recruitment of participants; and so on. “Methodology” refers to a set of ethics or ideas informing the design of research, which therefore relates to the wider philosophical or ontological framework of the project (the worldview of the researcher in relation to the project). I begin by outlining my wider framework, my worldview as a researcher.

I speak from my embodied experience. I can only speak for myself, even as I draw upon other people’s stories, and my politics of incoherence will not be useful for everyone. Theory and practice (or praxis) are two forms of the same thing, or, academic writing is one version of praxis, or, activism can be academic and scholarship is invigorated when practiced as activism. Theorists such as Gayle Salamon, Talia Bettcher and Jacob Hale are my mentors in reading and creating theory/philosophy: Salamon arguing that “how we embody gender is how we theorize gender”; Bettcher recognising that in her experience, philosophy is best practiced/theorized when linked with political concerns (Salamon 2006; Bettcher 2007). Bettcher also recommends that we ask what motivations this theorist has for producing this work and how it will make an impact (or not) upon the lived realities of others: what purpose does it serve? Similarly, Hale (Bettcher’s colleague) advises that when we demarcate boundaries in theory, or create definitions of identities, we must ask “Whose power and privilege are increased, whose diminished, and how does this fit into hegemonic power structures, reproducing them or loosening them?” (1998: 333). I extend Hale’s suggestion to apply to the production of all theory. As researchers, philosophers or theorists, we must take responsibility for the political consequences of our work entering the world.

Furthermore, I suggest that asking questions is as important as providing answers. Being clear about my political agenda enriches my research. Relationships, such as the

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22 Specifically, Bettcher remarks that her trans experience motivates this conceptualising of philosophy as productive when stemming from or relating to a political agenda or motivation. See Bettcher (2007).

23 Bettcher (2010: Online Seminar on Transgender Studies, Class 8). In some cases theory performs specifically the kind of labour he mentions, which is “definitional boundary marking,” and Hale specifically recommends taking responsibility for the “political consequences” of the loss of some people’s specificities in the creation of “distinct logical types of definition” (1998: 333).
binding of researcher and researched, are crucial to both my survival and my project (inspired by Mathias Detamore, I explore this “binding” in greater depth later in the chapter). I am in a constant state of becoming, and this becoming myself is contingent upon my relationships with others and the world in which I live. Language cannot convey all of the complexities of my experience or identity. I cannot move outside of the social realm, there is no “real” world except that in which I live. I am enmeshed in a matrix of (social) power. I am privileged on many levels: my whiteness, my middle-classness, my institutional affiliations, my able-bodiedness, my masculinity, my access to resources. Awareness of my privilege does not detract from my accumulation of privilege; my practice of incoherence can disrupt or make visible these privileges but because they accrue in accordance with the larger social system in which I am immersed, I can never avoid responsibility for them or successfully invalidate them. My politics of incoherence is in part the practice of awareness and disruption of privileges. Lastly, I assume that despite my best efforts, I will make mistakes.  

My methodology is constructed upon these assumptions, which stem from my formal education and also my personal experience of feminist, trans, and queer communities. While I can cite academic work, I cannot cite (or at least not as easily) the community work or experiences and relationships that have enabled this work (and my personal growth). The inclusion of art in this thesis is a visual manifestation of a mutually constitutive relationship between theory and practice, or the academy and the community. I propose that art functions as an educational tool, a bridge, enabling social justice dialogue between academic and community circles. The clearest connection between theoretical work and experience in a community, from my perspective, is a political commitment to social change.

This connection is present in trans, queer and feminist theories. Catherine J. Nash likens queer research to feminist research: “Arguably, in a manner similar to feminist research agendas, what renders queer research distinctive is not only its underlying theoretical,  

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24 I reflect comprehensively on mistakes or difficulties with this project in the conclusion, so that the reader journeys with me and will understand some of the mistakes or silences in my research before I enumerate them. I also point to some of my inadequacies along the way.
epistemological and ontological starting points but its political commitment to promote radical social and political change that undermines oppression and marginalisation” (131). Citing theorists such as Sedgwick (1990), Seidman (1996), Warner (2003), and Jagose (1996), Nash proposes that queer theory (like feminist theory, and I would argue, like trans theory) has a “political and ethical commitment to radical and progressive social and political change that addresses unjust social hierarchies structuring social relations” (131).

My political and ethical commitment is twofold: I argue that (trans)masculine people must practice ethical masculinity, which involves my speaking to members of the trans and queer communities in which I live about the specific ways that we can do this, and I also argue that (trans)masculinity is already a site of ethical masculinity, which involves my speaking to people outside of trans and queer communities. I value the knowledge and perspective of my fellow queer and trans people, in particular I value the contributions of the four New Zealand transguys I interviewed, alongside one transmasculine person from Australia. My political commitment is to demonstrate both the need for ethical masculinity and the existence of ethical masculinity from a trans perspective. My use of the term (trans)masculine signifies that while I speak from a transmasculine perspective myself, I speak to a wider context of masculinity and people who identify as masculine. In my experience there are often blurry lines between categories such as transmasculinity and masculinity, or between transmen and men, with no fixed boundaries or criteria, and my use of (trans)masculine is meant to bring this uncertainty, this unfixedness of identity, into my work.

I answer Bettcher’s question: what purpose does my work serve? (Bettcher 2007). It serves the political purpose of widening and undermining concepts like masculinity and femininity, creating more space and value for trans experience, bodies and knowledges. I answer Hale’s question: whose privilege is increased, whose power diminished? (Hale 1998). I aim to make visible my privilege as a white, middle-class, educated, queer, transmasculine person, and to address the power imbalance that occurs between butch communities and transmasculine communities, when masculinity attached to maleness is privileged over masculinity attached to femaleness. I aim to diminish the power of
hegemonic white straight middle-class masculinity, which may result in decentring men assigned male at birth who identify as masculine and fulfil the criteria for hegemonic masculine person. Also, while I do not speak of femininity frequently, I work from the assumption that masculinity is privileged over femininity in my postcolonial New Zealand context, and therefore I attempt to challenge this privilege: by recommending ethical masculinity (which involves among other things, awareness of feminist struggle or possibly a feminist identity, see Chapter Six for more details) and by demonstrating the inevitable decay of boundaries between butch, trans, masculine, feminine, female, male, and so on, in our lived experiences of identities and communities.

As I continue to suggest in subsequent chapters, trans and queer theories, or perhaps more specifically queer trans theories, are indebted to the insights of black feminism, and, more widely, feminism produced in historical and contemporary contexts by women of colour. Having identified this heritage, I try to pay close attention to the overlaps between feminist/trans/queer/etc theories and also maintain a critical understanding of these theories as not entirely separable. Trans theory, as I discuss in chapter one, is entangled with feminist and queer theories, and I specifically describe my methodological framework as a queer social constructionist working within trans studies.

This theoretical entanglement is reminiscent of the intermingling of identity categories (such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, black, white, mixed-race and so on). These categories/aspects of ourselves are not separable from each other, and are insufficient to describe our experience and identities. Thus, just as one could be positioned as a black disabled bisexual woman, one could be a queer feminist, or a trans queer, or a queer trans feminist. Subjectivity is relational, ongoing, and context-specific.

Just as I exist in relationship to others (in an intersubjective social world), trans theory exists in relation to queer and feminist theories. Relationships are crucial. I also recognise that all of these “theories” are heterogeneous: there is no monolithic feminist or queer theory. It is noticeable that in the academic context, as in the social context, the
most visible or dominant forms of theory are produced from the metropole, often from white middle-upper class scholars. So, even as I note the diversity within feminist and queer theories, I also see the danger of gesturing to “diversity” without acknowledging that theory/practice emerges within a matrix of power and social norms. This means, for example, that in the colonial/post-colonial context of New Zealand, indigenous knowledges and methodologies are given less space than established white methodologies with European and North American connections. Despite the relationship between Maori land rights and feminism, I believe that the dominant form of feminist theory in New Zealand is white/pakeha. When I note the importance of relationships, this is also pointing to, for example, relationships within feminist theory (amongst different forms of feminist scholarship and practice, which prioritise different concerns) in addition to relationships between the broader movements of feminist theory and queer theory, or feminism and trans movements.

In this chapter I focus on the bond between researcher and researched as the relationship most relevant to methodological concerns. This interest in relationships extends throughout the thesis, for example, in Chapter Four I address relationships between alternative and hegemonic masculinities, and in Chapter Five I examine the relationship between butch identity/community and transmasculine identity/community. Relationships are crucial to understanding connections between different academic fields of inquiry, between different communities and identities, between myself and others or myself and the world around me. I imagine the human subject to be relational, multiple, embodied, contextual (historical, social, political, geographical contexts) and in a process of becoming.

Relationships, intersubjectivity, affect, care: all of these counteract individualism by insisting that I exist in relation to others, that these relationships fundamentally enable my survival.  

25 While I list the various options to illustrate the recurring importance of the concept, I use the word “relationships” because it is the best suited for my purposes. “Intersubjectivity,” as I understand it, emerges from a continental philosophy context of theorists such as Heidegger, Hegel and Merleau-Ponty, all of whom interest me but are beyond the scope of this project. Similarly, some theorists advocate a “politics of affect,” which serves a similar function as my emphasis on relationships. See Rosalyn Diprose...
Ethics of Intimacy (2010), argues that “people becoming more aware of broader possibilities for their relational and intimate lives is a positive move for all” (142).

Sanger suggests that trans and non-trans people can reconfigure their intimate lives in ways that resist neoliberal governance and regulation by considering the fluidity and complexity of relationships and desire (2010: 143). Clearly, relationships are a key area of sociological, philosophical and social justice work, and consideration of relationships from a trans perspective (or in Sanger’s case, from the perspective of a trans person’s partner) will benefit trans and non-trans people alike.

Before launching into a discussion of methodological relationships, I will briefly explain the practical methods aspect of my project.

2. Methods: The Nuts and Bolts

In March 2010 I conducted four face-to-face interviews with four transguys in different cities around New Zealand. I specifically sought white/pakeha, educated, queer-identified transmen because this is the demographic that I am immersed in. All interviewees were known to me before the project, they are all activists and leaders within the trans and queer communities of New Zealand. I made no attempt to describe the “typical” New Zealand transguy, seeking instead to explore my own experience interspersed with narratives from other similarly positioned people. I also conducted an email conversation with Australian performance artist Sunny Drake, and while this did not function as an interview, it has significantly informed my thinking on this area.

With Sunny’s permission, I include the occasional snippet from this conversation, but I do not seek to analyse these contributions. Instead I note the impact that dialogues (2002) for a feminist consideration of the politics of affect and generosity. A feminist “ethics of care” is the equivalent within moral philosophy.

26 In a New Zealand context the most common colloquial terms for transmasculine people are transguys and transmen, so I use these in reference to my New Zealand interviewees because this shared cultural context. However, the words “transguys” and “transmen” have connotations of maleness, of being man, in a more fixed way than the term transmasculine, so in other parts of the thesis I prefer to use transmasculine as a term that includes many other people as well.
within our communities (and, increasingly, these communities cross geographical boundaries) have on our work: my conversation with Sunny Drake is evidence of the abundant cross-pollination between activist and academic work. When I refer to “interviews” I refer to the in depth face-to-face dialogues I had with four New Zealand transguys. I refer to my interaction with Sunny Drake as a conversation.

I have used the words of my interviewees to inspire, inform and motivate my enquiries, and to deepen the conversations that occur in this text. I have selected pieces of interviews that correspond to particular themes, and while some of these pieces perform a “validation function” (verifying that other transmasculine people have similar thoughts or concerns as the author) they should not be taken to mean that all interviewees articulate the same perspective or that they necessarily agree with my arguments. I have remained attentive to the overall perspective I perceived interviewees to have, and have endeavoured only to use their words in ways that they would agree with or feel comfortable with. However, I may have been mistaken. Furthermore, the arguments that I make in this thesis, on a broader level, may not correspond with the views of my interviewees.

Interviews ran from one to four hours per person, and while I provided a list of possible interview questions and points of discussion prior to the event, our dialogue ranged across various topics relating to our experiences as queer and transmasculine people. I made no attempt to appear objective or detached, opting instead to participate fully in the conversation and share my own stories as part of honouring their commitment to being open with me.

In addition to interviews I facilitated a four hour workshop in which seven participants created art based on their experiences of gender and queerness. These seven participants were all members of the queer community in Dunedin. I purposefully kept the workshop open to people of any gender/sexuality and race/ethnicity in order to prioritise relationships (rather than identities) within queer and trans communities, especially relationships that bridge differences of gender/sexuality/race/class/ability/etc. I asked that they create something that related to their own journey as a gendered person. The
art produced in this workshop appears sporadically in this thesis, between different sections, and is not subject to analysis. As I will reiterate in the final section of this chapter regarding creativity, the goals are: to highlight the importance of queer and trans visibility; encourage creative exploration of community and identity in both the making of art and the receiving of it by the reader; and disrupt the expectation that uniform written text is the only acceptable medium for a scholarly work.

While the art reflects relationships because it was created by variously positioned people (who maintain relationships with each other within the queer community in Dunedin and beyond) as part of queer community building, the interviews reflect relationships on a more personal level. The voices of the four transguys are important not simply because they deepen or inspire my argument(s), but because I could not do this academic or activist work without them. I needed to represent these relationships in my thesis. On an academic-activist level I collaborated with my interviewees in the production of this work; the conversations we had were vital for the development of my own ideas and for the inspiration and sustenance of this project. On a personal level, my life continues to be enriched by my relationships with these men, who are also my queer family, my fellow-activists, my mentors, my friends.

3. Queer Relationships: Researcher and Researched

Mathias Detamore advances an argument for queer ethics as method. Queer ethics signals a “radical notion of a queer attachment to the bonds created through research” (2010: 178). He teases apart the implications of what he refers to as the “binding” of researcher and researched, and in this mutual vulnerability he finds “new ethical constructions that transform and shape alternative social worlds” (2010: 180). What are the implications of this for methodologies? Instead of aiming for distance or objectivity, Detamore proposes that a researcher aims for intimacy and mutual vulnerability.
Detamore suggests that alternative social worlds emerge from the intimacies of researcher and researched, but it is not clear to me whether he means that these social worlds and their accompanying ethics are co-constructed in that moment with researcher and researched, or whether these are social worlds (and ethics) that already exist and are pulled into the conversation from both sides.

I favour the idea that it is a combination of the two: in each encounter, a variation of ethics is co-constructed with researcher and researched reaching back into their own experience and making offerings to the emerging ethics or social world created from the conversation. The researcher may have a very different background and knowledge system than the researched and both contribute with the hope that neither will be silenced (though that is a risk in any encounter). Hypothetically, this means that if the social worlds of the researcher and the researched were extremely different, there could be difficulty with communicating and reaching an understanding together. In my project, this was avoided because I knew all of my participants prior to the interview and had established, to some extent, common ground. We also had shared experiences as queer-identified transmasculine Pakeha people.

In either case, Detamore makes the argument that an intimate relationship between researcher and researched (he is provocatively vague about what constitutes an intimate relationship) is a valuable and useful aspect of the research process and that this relationship both constructs and draws from alternative social worlds. A queer ethics as method, from his perspective, recognises the value of these relationships and aims to create ethics/methodologies that fit with the alternative social worlds without eliding differences or imposing false divisions between researcher and researched.

Detamore:

The tethering of the researcher to the researched (and equally vice versa) through the bonds of intimacy creates a political space – or ethical terrain – that binds one to the other. It is in this binding that new kinds of alternative social worlds are formed and defended.
In my interactions with interviewees, I “formed and defended” alternative social worlds where transmasculinity is a site of knowledge. Our transmasculine experiences/identities were sources of knowledge that we drew upon as we discussed our embodiment, our relationships, our politics, and our worldviews. We fore-grounded Pakeha transmasculine and queer concerns because they are central to my project and because my relationships with these people already have a strong queer and trans flavour.

I appreciate Detamore’s account of the mutual vulnerability of researcher and researched, because that is my experience of the research process. I agree that “the emotive bonds and affective ties that research produces can no longer be overlooked” (2010: 179). But the most important question, at least for my work, is posed by Detamore in his penultimate paragraph: “How do we account for our privilege(s) as researchers if intimacy is our goal?” (2010: 182). I do not have an answer for this question. But I agree with Detamore that questions like this must be “continuously attended to” (2010: 182).

One of my privileges as a researcher is that I hold the pen (and retain responsibility for what is written). The process of doing interviews, the conversations themselves, the experience of talking about transmasculinity with other transmasculine people, the writing of the transcripts, the reading and re-reading of the transcripts, the coding, the unpacking: through this process I formulated the structure and content of this thesis. I pulled out the stories or comments that were most interesting to me. I provided a list of possible questions and areas of inquiry prior to the interviews, and some of the stories that I found most interesting related directly to these questions or topics. Embodiment is one example. Others, such as creativity, developed through the interview conversations.

When I looked at the transcripts, I realised creativity was the most obviously recurring theme in all four interviews. Instead of writing a chapter on “transmasculine creativity” I have tried to incorporate this creativity into my thinking, my writing, and the
presentation of my work. I decided to hold the art-making workshop because the
creativity that my interviewees discussed was primarily visual, and I wanted my thesis
to reflect this, in combination with creatively written text.

Before concluding with an exploration of the various ways in which my interviewees
articulate their creativity and how I connect this to my project, I consider the
contributions of Judith Halberstam and Ulrika Dahl. Dahl’s recommendation of a
“collaborative” femme method further extends the conversation about the
researcher/researched relationship.

4. Relationships Within a Hybrid Methodology: Halberstam as Authorial
   Scavenger and Dahl as Femme Collaborator

I describe my methodology as a hybrid, similar to Judith Halberstam’s notion of a
“scavenger methodology,” in which a queer interdisciplinary scholar pulls from various
disciplines the concepts that inform their approach (1998: 13). In her influential book,
Female Masculinity, Halberstam suggests that “a queer methodology, in a way, is a
scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information
on subjects that have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies
of human behaviour” (1998: 13). Furthermore, she defends her methodological choices
to use “some combination of textual criticism, ethnography, historical survey, archival
research and the production of taxonomies,” by stating that this scavenging is “queer” in
the sense that it “remains supple enough to respond to the various locations of
information on female masculinity and betrays a certain disloyalty to conventional
disciplinary methods” (1998: 10). Similarly, I see my work as interdisciplinary gender
or cultural studies, with disciplinary influences from philosophy, sociology, feminist
theory, and social science research more generally. My methods are not as far-ranging
as Halberstam’s: I restrict myself to interviews, an art workshop, and the writing of
academic/activist theory.
I hear echoes of Halberstam’s approach in my attempts to privilege the narratives of my interviewees over academic texts. Like Halberstam, I have tried to respond to information on masculinity from “various locations” and more specifically, I have prioritized the information that comes to me directly from other embodied beings. Instead of looking at dominant themes in the literature (of any given field) and finding examples of these in my transcripts, I looked at the interesting and recurring topics and stories from interviewees and tried to start from there, expanding outward from lived experience to textual sources or theory. This is also an effort to keep a local focus as much as possible given that the vast majority of theory is produced in the metropole.  

Queer theory, like feminist theory, is best understood contextually, and my privileging of local narratives reflects my understanding that a queer methodology attends to locality rather than attempting global relevance. I am informed by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (who in turn are informed by J. Law) that “queer” is “a way of knowing that is a ‘situated inquiry’ that relates to specific ways of knowing in particular locations,” (2010: 7). “Yet,” note Browne and Nash, “queer rarely recognises its own location and how it travels” (2010: 7). Writing from postcolonial New Zealand, I am mindful of the danger that queer may become a colonising term or frame of reference. Browne and Nash remark that “Much queer theorizing originated in the Global North with its particular social and historical contexts and its uncritical engagement with gendered and sexual lives in other geographical locations is not necessarily appropriate or helpful” (2010: 7). In privileging the stories of my interviewees (the stories that I designate as important, not necessarily the stories they would choose to include) I try to create a balance between northern theory and southern experience.  

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27 I discuss R.W Connell’s conceptualising of metropole and periphery in subsequent sections. See *Southern Theory* (2007).  

28 However, the “southern experience” I describe is overwhelmingly white and middle-class, it cannot be generalised beyond this social and political location. The geographical location is important but there are layers of privilege here that I do not have time to unpick. Suffice to say that a pakeha experience of transmasculinity is a mere morsel of the whole cultural banquet. I hope the whiteness of my experience and my interviewees will not facilitate the erasure of non-white transmasculinity here in New Zealand. To put it another way: if northern theory is predominantly white, and the southern experience I describe is predominantly white, there is a risk that whiteness is universalised and anything that does not fit that white theory or experience is ignored. I further address racism, whiteness and masculinity in Chapters Three, Four and Five.
In creating my hybrid methodology I am also inspired by femme theorist Ulrika Dahl. Dahl describes Halberstam’s scavenger methodology as “innovative, inspiring and useful” but questions Halberstam’s distancing of herself as author from the texts she discusses (2010: 149-151). Halberstam’s authorial voice remains intact, argues Dahl, and this distances Halberstam from her subjects. This is especially evident in Halberstam’s discussion of “cultural representations,” often in film and media, in which Halberstam retains the status of expert rather than relinquish authority and engage in a more collaborative interaction (2010: 149-151). Dahl’s insistence on the importance of collaboration as a queer methodology (arising particularly from her experience as femme queer person) and her desire to problematize the idea of a coherent subject significantly influence my project:

I argue that methodological frameworks of collaboration and co-production of ideas can queer research conventions and contribute to a reconsideration of what counts as theoretical work, particularly with regards to femininity and its place within queer feminism. In so doing, I want to further work that explicitly critiques the radical individualism, self-congratulatory nature and liberal understandings of both positivist social science and other projects that assume unified and coherent subjects and objects.

(2010: 145)

My politics of incoherence relies on a notion of the subject as relational, multiple, and creative. In terms of the construction of the text, my methodology could also be described as incoherent, with juxtaposition of different mediums such as art and writing. I concur with Dahl that queer projects must (to whatever extent possible) disrupt/critique/counteract liberal or neo-liberal discourse of individualism. In my project, this entails an understanding of the subject as relational: as dependent on and constructed through relationships. My project articulates a way of being, a philosophy/political standpoint, a set of strategies for taking up masculinity without reinforcing sexism, racism, and homophobia. I am empowered through this work,

29 I discussed this earlier, in the first section, Methodological Assumptions.
through reflection on queer, alternative or incoherent masculinities, and my highest ideal is that others will be empowered also. Neo-liberal discourses of individualism, entangled with capitalism, allege that to be empowered is to identify one’s self as an individual (with X identity, whatever that is) and buy or consume whatever it is that one needs to live as an X individual and be seen as an X individual by others. Dahl advocates collaboration, co-construction of information with researcher and researched, as an antidote to radical individualism. Inspired by this, I underline the importance of relationships in my work, both methodologically and theoretically, and I construct the entire project with the goal of providing a possible (though not universal) process of empowerment for transmasculine and genderqueer folk that either refuses capitalist individualism or actively works against it.

Interviewees articulate various ways in which their empowerment as trans, queer and masculine people is linked with creativity, and in the final section I explore their stories as underpinning my methodological choices.

5. Creativity: Discussion from Interviews

The creativity of this text is evident in the inclusion of art and the multiplicity of narratives from both myself and interviewees. This creativity is specifically queer. Like Ulrika Dahl, I argue that “if queer is about critiquing norms, then calling research and writing conventions that presume stable distinctions between subjects and objects into question should remain central to queer studies and methodologies” (2010: 154). I do not position myself as the objective researcher or expert on transmasculinity. I include quotes from myself in interviews, and occasional vignettes from my experience.

As a recurring theme in interviews, creativity is heralded as that which sustains us in academic and activist work, as an approach to politics and activism, and as vital for self-discovery and self-transformation. When I ask Dylan about his experience of creativity,
particularly in relation to performance, he says: “The places that I feel most alive are creative places,” and continues:

What I get from a great performance or a great piece of art is something that I can look at and see how I fit in relation to it and also see someone else’s worldview as well. So it takes me out of my box. And I really love that. So I love spaces that take us out of our boxes.

(22)

My project is an explication of my worldview, as a queer transmasculine person, and I hope that it takes me, my participants, and my reader out of our boxes while maintaining our grounded specificity. Being taken out of my box, for me, signifies being positioned in relation to others, in relation to another person’s perspective, and being open to dialogue or change as part of the exchange. Dylan also describes his politics as creative:

And similarly, that’s what good politics is for me, it’s not a place where people come with rigid stuff and know right from the beginning what they’re gonna do and just keep rigidifying fixed positions. I’ve done that kind of politics but that’s not what excites me now. It’s the where a diverse group of people come together and something unexpected happens ’cause people come with open hearts.

(22)

My politics of incoherence is most effective when generated from a place of openness and reciprocity. During interviews I attempted to maintain this reciprocal relationship, which Detamore would call “mutual vulnerability” (2010: 180). Dylan further elaborates on how creativity sustains our lives and our politics:

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30 When citing interviews I do not cite the year or date of the interview because all of them occurred in March 2010, as previously noted. I do note the page number from the interview transcript, for my own records, but these transcripts are not available to the public.
I think it’s crucial. Partly because you need to be sustained in doing this work and creativity is what sustains you. And also you know things do shift. We can get stuck in saying ‘society is like this’ but the society is different and there are very different pockets of society and when you look to people being creative that’s when you actually see people expressing who they are and what’s important to them. And any political movement dies unless it taps into things that matter to people.

A political movement, for example, the multi-headed queer and trans political movement in Aotearoa New Zealand, must remain connected to that which matters most to the people involved. A politics of incoherence must include creativity for this reason, and consequently, my exploration of this politics must also include creative approaches to writing, to conducting research, and to interpretation of interview material.

Travis regards creativity as a political tool and a method of self-exploration: “I think for me creativity is a central part of my identity and it’s not just a tool I use politically but a tool I use to explore myself and to help myself be seen as well” (6). Creativity helps when negotiating with norms and understanding one’s self, observes Travis:

“Creativity for me is about rule-breaking, or at the very least rule-bending; moving outside the rational, the expected, or the ‘norm.’ I feel like creativity is the key for unlocking a way of looking at myself that allows me to redefine who I am.”

My hybrid methodology bends the rules of academic enquiry by challenging the expectation that the researcher will remain objective or assert expert status, and by including a range of theory, narratives, and art, pulling from my own and others’ experiences. Like Travis, I employ creativity (in my writing) to unlock ways of looking at myself, to redefine who I am and how I fit in the world.
Creativity is similarly crucial in Eric’s account: “creativity was the only thing that saved me, I think” (22). Eric specifically refers to visual art as a medium for creative self-exploration. Being creative visually, especially in representation of ourselves, enables us to recognize ourselves in new ways. Eric recognized his own masculinity, and had it recognized by others, in his artistic explorations of his embodiment: “It was fascinating, it was the first place that I found who I was. Was a number of photographs” (22). Creativity relates to intersubjective recognition: we can use visually creative representations of ourselves to better understand ourselves, and to communicate our gender/race/class/ability or the intersections thereof in ways that avoid the simplification that may occur through words or text alone.

Finn connects creativity to imagination and the importance of playing, “because you learn so much from playing” (11). Finn’s experience of being playful is located in queer spaces:

There is a connection between that and things around queer community and stuff, that actually people are picking up on concepts and using them in a really local way. And I suppose that’s probably one of the things I like about it. And you can play with that. It’s open to a playful reinterpretation.

(12)

How much “playing” can an academic researcher engage in? The playful reinterpretation that Finn mentions is queer, and queer is itself open to playful reinterpretation. My use of the term “incoherence” constitutes this queer playfulness, where I argue that incoherence is positive, useful, dynamic, a form of resistance. I try to use this term in “a really local way,” as Finn says, without shutting down the option for others to extend it, play with it, apply it to a different situation in a different way.

Within this text, I move back and forth between coherence and incoherence. As a subject, I am incoherent: I am multiple, relational, creative, ongoing. As a subject, I need to communicate (coherently) my incoherence: I need others to understand my incoherence, to support me and be in alliance with me. This is a constant tension. My
methodology similarly reflects this tension: I include art, disrupt traditional scholarly expectations of disciplinary loyalty (like Halberstam), emphasize relationships (like Dahl), and advocate playful incoherence. But I also need to communicate effectively, and be understood by my readers. One way of approaching this tension is to suggest that what we commonly understand to be coherent is actually no more coherent than the other options which seem incoherent. In this, I follow Bettcher’s lead. In a lecture reflecting on Naomi Scheman’s essay, “Queering the Centre by Centring the Queer,” Bettcher remarks:

There’s a way in which that which is othered is rendered unintelligible. And it’s rendered unintelligible so that what is normative can secure its status as normative. Are you with me? In order for heterosexuality to be universal, normal, natural, and virtuous, we need something that’s not universal to be, you know, sinful, to be a sickness, etc etc. If we take that which is assumed to be unintelligible, from the normative viewpoint, and treat it as intelligible, what does that show us about what can be exposed in the centre? So by treating the unintelligible as intelligible, that’s gonna cast a light on the heteronormative.31

I am treating the incoherent as coherent: I am assuming that my experience as an incoherently gendered human being will shed light on the supposedly coherent structures of dominant white, heteronormative, middle-class, binary-gendered, capitalist society. In my methodology I similarly advocate incoherence as a way of maintaining integrity, as a way to accurately represent the incoherence of myself and my interviewees: the marginalisation we experience as queer transmasculine people along with the privileges we experience as white, masculine and middle class.

Chapter Three (Dis)Locations, Incoherent Genderqueer Masculinities, and Anti-Racism

Fig 3.1 “Outlaw”
Chapter Three: (Dis)Locations and Incoherent Genderqueer Masculinities

Introduction

1. Narratives: Finn and I as Genderqueers
2. Dacumos and Gutierrez-Mock: Queer Mixed-Race/Biracial Experience and the Wisdom of Anzaldúa
3. Hale’s Abject Genderqueer
4. Noble, Anzaldúa and Hale: Incoherence in the Borderlands
5. Margins, Borderlands, Borderzones: Calling for Demilitarization and Deterritorialization (or Speaking From My Power)
6. Anti-Racism: An Practice for Incoherent (White) Masculinity

Joe: “Without asking for definitions, what does being genderqueer mean to you?”

Sunny Drake: “It means space. Like having the space to actually feel way more masculine when I dress up with some femme accessories like lacey gloves and eye make-up. Space for contradictions and not knowing, like how I totally identify as a boy/man, yet also trans, yet also something which I don’t understand (=carnivalesque magician).”

(Drake 2011)

Introduction

In Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six I suggest various ways in which genderqueer, transmasculine and butch people can embody and advocate incoherent masculinities. This is, in essence, articulating one’s masculinity without buying into homophobia, racism or sexism. In this chapter I explore genderqueer as a concept and identity that links queer and trans communities, looking first at narratives from my own experience
and interviewee Finn, then referring to mixed-race/biracial queer and trans/butch scholars Nico Dacumos and Logan Gutierrez-Mock. My guiding question is: How can I speak as a genderqueer person? In responding to this question I draw upon Gloria Anzaldúa, Jacob Hale and Bobby Noble. I conclude that speaking from my power as a genderqueer person requires community support and a commitment to social justice. Furthermore, as inspired by Dacumos in particular, I suggest that anti-racism is a specific example of this commitment to social justice and to the practice of incoherent masculinity, especially for people who share my (dis)location as a white/Pakeha genderqueer and transmasculine person.

Although I write from and about a transmasculine genderqueer perspective, many genderqueer people do not identify as transmasculine. One of the strengths of genderqueer is this flexibility: what genderqueer signals is different for different people. I suggest that this is contingent upon the embodied experience of the person in question, for example in my case my understanding of genderqueer is grounded in my embodied experience as a female-born masculine person who is simultaneously effeminate and butch. The transmasculine genre of genderqueer (which is itself multiple and cannot be rigidly defined) fits within the purview of my project, but it is crucial that (as with queer) genderqueer remains open, flexible, disruptive, rather than becoming fixed to any particular view point. The danger of flexibility is a possible loss of specificity and the potential for universalizing privileged experience or narratives of genderqueer. This is one of the dangers I face in writing from/for/about transmasculine genderqueer subjectivity from a white middle class position.

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32 As an example of the diversity of genderqueer: my close friend of genderqueer identity and experience was assigned male at birth, is male-bodied, and very feminine, which is in direct comparison to my genderqueer experience/identity. I presume that my writing from a transmasculine genderqueer perspective is useful because I make visible this point of view - not because it is genderqueer par excellence.
1. Narratives: Finn and I as Genderqueers

_Problems of manhood, manliness, and masculinity are especially poignant to dislocated genderqueers assigned female at birth who have travelled and still travel in feminist worlds._

_(C. Jacob Hale, 2009: 57)_

I call myself a boy, but I would not choose to have been born male or assigned male at birth. I like being a transboy, or transmasculine genderqueer person. There are many different ways I could describe my genderqueerness: I feel I am both boy and girl; as a boy I am faggy and as a girl I am dykey; I am something else, something other than male or female, a different gender. When I describe myself as a butch boy I am stretching the meanings of these words in a genderqueer way.

These shifts of identity are not limited to trans or genderqueer lives. Following Butler (1990, 2004), I suggest that personhood is articulated through performative acts relating to themes of gender, sexuality, race, class, and so on. Through this performance one (re)iterates a sense of self. Identities are not static, though someone may identify as a lesbian, for example, for their entire adult life. This lesbian identity must be constantly (re)articulated as a process of social construction. By noting that my understanding of myself, and the labels I use to describe myself, have changed over time, I am not suggesting that trans or genderqueer people are exemplary figures of gender fluidity. I am pointing out that this is part of all of our lives. It is not trans specific. Or even gender specific. My own variations of identity, the changes in how I articulate or practice my personhood, are particularly evident along the lines of gender (intertwined with sexuality, as demonstrated by the use of words like faggy and dykey) and this is what I focus on here.33

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33 See Christine Overall (2009) for further discussion of gender transition as one of many life changes people may undertake: “The felt desire and quest for sex/gender transition is, I suggest, best understood as being one of the many powerful life-changing aspirations that human beings experience” (24).
As a genderqueer butch boy, I am subverting and reworking the popular definitions of these words. Finn describes genderqueer identities as the practice of subverting existing norms of gender and sexuality and creating new ones. “Play is as much constructed as reality is,” states Finn, “it’s just made up of different rules” (14). He continues: “And I think that that is true of a lot of the genderqueer stuff that comes through. It’s just people making up different rules and doing it different ways. And yeah I think that’s great” (14). Finn emphasizes that genderqueer means different things to different people, that it is context-dependent. Finn also refuses to grant “real” status to the dominant set of rules, instead insisting that both “play” and “reality” are constructed.

Further into our conversation, Finn attributes his deepened understanding of gender as contextual, constructed, and actively negotiated, to his genderqueer politics:

I picked up on genderqueer politics. Its timing was probably quite good for me, coz it did enable me to think beyond the gender binary. And to interpret that as actually, it’s okay to play with gender. And that you know, gender is just a construct, there’s space in between that. And I got into a place where I was very much negotiating gender in a really active way, in different places. Like I was very aware that how I was going to be seen in different places was gonna change. How people saw my gender would be different. And I couldn’t actually assume what that would be coz I didn’t know.

(19)

The first point that Finn makes is that genderqueer politics enables him to think “beyond the gender binary” (19) and this resonates with a larger cultural shift (visible on individual and community blogs and online support groups from New Zealand, Australia, Canada, North America, United Kingdom, for example) from a young generation of trans and queer identified youth who “don’t believe in the binary” or “live beyond the binary.”34 While I personally enjoy the proliferation of non-binary identity

34 For an example, see http://genderqueer.tumblr.com, which has the tagline “beyond the binary.” It consists of images and chunks of text from all over the world, compiled by anonymous editors who state in their “about” section that “This blog was created to post images of gender-bending, trans and queer people of all sorts, meant to empower and celebrate the beauty within all gender expressions. However,
discourse, I have two questions about how this takes place: does it invisibilize privilege, and is it prey to capitalistic individualism?

Genderqueer political perspectives, identities and presentations are vulnerable to individualistic capitalist approaches to personhood: it is dangerous to assert that a person can choose their own gender without regard for social context or pressures. This ignores the privilege that white wealthy people have and the systematic oppression of non-white and poor people. But the slide into (privileged) individualism can be prevented, by focusing on the relationality of identities and subjectivity. Salamon suggests that on a social and institutional level, trans studies is enriched by feminism’s use of collective struggle and structural analysis of oppression (2010: 96). Understanding “relations of power,” Salamon argues, is “especially necessary when discussing violence against transpeople” because such violence “cannot be made sense of using an entirely individual and voluntaristic theory of gender” (2010: 96).

Some of the voices in anti-binary politics, such as Dacumos and Gutierrez-Mock, are aware of the risk of capitalist individualism, and of the related risks of valorizing fluidity over fixity in a way that repeats the binaristic logic of male versus female.35 Similarly, instead of emphasizing one’s individual agency to invent one’s own gender, Finn talks about how his gender would be perceived differently in different situations, and how this was something he actively negotiated as part of his genderqueer politics. Genderqueer and non-binary gendered people can avoid some of the pitfalls of individualism and the capitalist grab for genderqueer communities by emphasising specificity, relationality, context, location, and privilege. For example, statements such as, “this is my experience” (specificity), “I am this particular person with these privileges” (context, location, privilege), must be part of ethical conversations.

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35 In addition to Dacumos and Gutierrez-Mock, see Erin Davis (2008) for a nuanced discussion of the dangers of valorizing fluidity and creating a new dichotomy of fluid transgressive genders versus stable traditional genders.
After the interview I realised that although we had talked about genderqueer politics, and being playful with gender, I had not asked Finn specifically about his interpretation of what genderqueer means, so I wrote a follow-up email asking if he would send me some of his thoughts. Finn’s response:

Well for me genderqueer is an expression which I passionately believe in - I see it as a space and self proclamation that promotes self expression of gender which is not confined by heteronormative ideas about binary gender, but rather enables you to embrace all aspects of your gendered self simultaneously without feeling any sense of lack or failure to conform. I still see myself as genderqueer as well as trans as it is not hierarchical - it is about saying you value all gender expressions and they can be as individual as the people who express them. It’s about saying fuck the social expectations that we are taught to constantly try to live up to, I am happy with who I am and believe that those expectations limit us and can be really damaging. It is about taking ownership of your own sense of gender expression and is especially powerful when other people's expectations of you constantly don't reflect how you see yourself. It makes me feel empowered and the fact that more and more people have embraced it shows that that kind of language and perspective is really important to have.  

So for Finn, his identity as genderqueer is about extending beyond heteronormativity, binary gender and the hegemonic social expectations about gender. Furthermore, and this enriches my practice of a politics of incoherence, it means valuing diversity of gender expressions and “taking ownership of your own sense of gender expression.” This is potentially empowering for many people whose incoherence is a public barrier or hazard, who risk not being recognized as who they are. In a world that is inhospitable to difference, and to gender diversity specifically, I need to feel that my knowledge of myself, of who I am and how I express myself along trajectories of gender/sexuality/race/etc, is valued and relevant. I need to be able to determine what my body means. This is what I take from Finn’s notion of “ownership.” Finn recognises that feeling ownership of one’s gender expression is “especially powerful when other

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36 Personal communication email 11 Jan 2011.
people’s expectations of you don’t reflect how you see yourself.” Considering the classism of trans and non-trans communities, which may require expensive surgical procedures for gender confirmation, it is crucial for trans and gender diverse people to find ways we can feel “ownership” of our embodied gender expressions.\(^{37}\)

2. Dacumos and Gutierrez-Mock: Queer Mixed-Race/Biracial Experience and the Wisdom of Anzaldúa

In 2006, Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore edited Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity.\(^{38}\) Sycamore describes the anthology as “a delectable variety of material that tears binary norms to shreds, and proceeds to embrace, challenge, and transform not only the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ but the categories of femme, transgender, butch, genderqueer, and ‘none of the above, thank you’” (Sycamore 2006: 12). Speaking to the ever-present overlaps of race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability/disability, and sexuality, Sycamore asks, “If we eliminate the pressure to pass, what delicious and devastating opportunities for transformation might we create?” (2006: 19).

One of the contributors, Nico Dacumos, talks about growing up mixed-race and queer, and the difficulty of living on the overlaps of transgender and butch lesbian. Dacumos does not identify specifically as genderqueer, but does emphasize “mixedness,” which is

\(^{37}\) That same classism combined with phobia about gender diversity or gender deviance results in government control of trans identities: in most capitalist nations, we cannot change our legal documents without fulfilling certain surgical and medical transition requirements. For more details see New Zealand Human Rights Commission (2008) To Be Who I am/Kia noho au ki toku ano ao, report of the Transgender Inquiry.

\(^{38}\) See also Kate Bornstein and S.Bear Bergman (eds.) (2010) for another recent collection of writing by gender diverse people. Anthologies such as these seem to fill a gap between academic theory and community discourse, bridging the two in a way that demonstrates the ongoing need to facilitate dialog in both directions. I suggest that the stories in anthologies such as these are effective signposts to theorists who wish to engage with community discussions or who, like me, want to bridge the two without oversimplifying the language, concepts or experiences of either.
an essential element of my own genderqueer identification (Dacumos 2006). I quote Dacumos’ words with the intention of honouring how much work has been done by and with people of colour/mixed-race and how this work has made it easier for me, a white transboy, to live with my own gender and sexual mixedness. I share with Dacumos the identification of “transgender butch fag” (2006: 30) and I agree that race and class are two powerful factors for the “butch exclusion” (or privileging of transmasculinity) that values white gender normative masculinity over any other form of gender expression and specifically devalues butch women and people of colour. Dacumos’ context of the United States and Chicana/Latina/Filipina culture and heritage are different to mine (British and Scottish heritage, New Zealand/Aotearoa location, Pakeha identity, Maori and Pacific context) but I find strength in Dacumos’ words while acknowledging our differences. Dacumos:

Thinking about things from a mixed-race perspective started me thinking that mixedness was somewhere at the heart of my discomfort with identity, my inability to ‘just pick one’ no matter what identity matrix I was being sucked into. So I stopped trying. I also stopped trying to just like girls or just boys. I even stopped trying to like just one girl or one boy. I stopped trying to be just a girl or just a boy. Or a transboy or a butch girl.

This is mixed consciousness, friends. Coming soon to a cultural studies class near you.

(2006: 27)

Dacumos’ facetious comment about cultural studies is followed by an observation, in an altogether different tone, that a “transgender masculine politic was founded and finds its home in the academy, which validates the history and experiences of economically privileged white people while erasing those of poor people and people of colour” (2006: 30). Transgender, as an identity and as a movement, fails Dacumos (and I would argue, fails us all) when it “does not fulfil its promise of butch inclusion” (2006: 30). Dacumos sees transgender and genderqueer as positions of privilege because they are so often tied
to white and middle-class status, whereas butch (or butch lesbian) is often connected to being poor and a person of colour (2006: 29-32).

Genderqueer is an identity that arises most often from a middle-class, white, educated demographic. Dacumos portrays transgender and genderqueer as identities that are “mainly concerned with medical technologies, psychology, and psychiatry, or else a masturbatory celebration of the radicality of ‘transversing’ or ‘performing’ gender without looking at why” (2006: 31). I aim to avoid falling into this trap. I negotiate (and critique) medical models within my personal life and community and academic work. In seeking to expand the possibilities for gendered embodiment and personhood, I also ask myself why I value gender transgression in myself and others. This thesis is one response to that question.

Genderqueer is, like any identity, caught up in the matrix of power and normativity. In wider New Zealand society, as in the United States, this means (at the very least) white middle-class supremacy and binary gender normalcy. Being genderqueer is, for me, a privileged position because I have enough money and enough cultural capital of whiteness to choose this ambiguous body (modified by testosterone). I also claim the word butch, though I do not call myself a butch woman or a butch lesbian.

When I read *Nobody Passes*, I notice that I feel most empowered by the stories of Nico Dacumos and Logan Gutierrez-Mock, who both talk about being biracial/mixed-race, queer and transgender. How can I use their words when I cannot claim their identity? Is it appropriation of their work as people of colour by myself, a white transmasculine person? The language they use resonates with me. I have a similar feeling (a gut feeling or heart feeling) when I read Gloria Anzuldua, who is quoted by Gutierrez-Mock. How do I reference their work, their massive contributions, without denying their specificity and difference to myself? Can I align myself with them, on personal and political levels, and be self-aware enough to recognize my own privileged position? My hope is that I

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39 A more nuanced discussion would address the interaction of sexism and racism, including denigration of femme and femininity, oppression of non-white masculinities and homophobia. I do not expand on this point here but aim to consider the interaction of gender and race throughout this work. The final section specifically discusses anti-racism as part of incoherent masculinity.
can acknowledge and honour the impact they have had on my work and my life, and explore some of the ideas they articulate, without appropriating their stories/identities/labour.

Judith Halberstam, in discussing a conference in Michigan about Gay Shame (a conference that was by Halberstam’s account dominated by white gay men and lacking the voices of people of colour), states: “The future of queer studies, I claim, depends absolutely on moving away from white gay male identity politics and learning from the radical critiques offered by a younger generation of queer scholars who draw their intellectual inspiration from feminism and ethnic studies rather than white queer studies” (2005: 220). As a pakeha trans queer person, I align myself with this goal, without denying the historical significance of white gay male politics, and with the hope that white gay male communities can similarly shift their perspective to one of coalitional politics with feminists and people of colour.40 A politics of incoherence, from a white transmasculine perspective, involves practicing anti-racism and also hearing and honouring the work and stories of women/people of colour.

Gutierrez-Mock connects his transmasculinity and his mixed-race identity, consciously choosing his “faggoty/divalicious/pink-is-my-favourite-colour/trans masculinity” at the same time that he consciously stopped assimilating as white (2006: 232). Like Dacumos’ discussion of mixedness in relation to gender, sexuality and race, Gutierrez-Mock notes that “sitting on the dividing line between male and female forced me to realize that my entire life I’d sat on a similar dividing line between Mexican and white” (2006: 233). He declares, “I am half and half, I am both, I am something different entirely,” and quotes Anzuldua:

   Cuando vives en la frontera people walk through you, the wind steals your voice. You’re a burra, buey, a scapegoat. Forerunner of a new race, half and half – both man and woman, neither – a new gender.”

40 I expand on this argument in Chapter Four: Queering (Trans)Masculinity, in the initial discussion of how masculinity studies needs invigorating through engagement with work from women of colour, femmes, and transmasculine or butch people.
Gutierrez-Mock titles his piece “F2mestizo” in tribute to Anzaldua and her concept of la mestiza and mixed consciousness. La mestiza (someone who is mixed, who has mixed consciousness) involves “the capacity to see oneself in accordance with the dominant ways in which one is oppressively represented and constrained in different, and often conflicting ways” (Anzaldua 1987: 101, Bettcher 2009b: 4.2). In the overview of queer social constructionist trans theory I reiterate Talia Bettcher’s view that Anzaldua’s notion of la mestiza is an oblique influence on Sandy Stone’s *Posttranssexual Manifesto* (1991). In this exploration of genderqueer identity, I turn to Anzaldua for inspiration regarding the interweaving of power, race, gender and language.

To speak as la mestiza, one must reinvent one’s language, and Anzaldua’s reflections on language (and other people’s interpretation of her reflections) are invaluable to me, as a genderqueer person who frequently struggles with language. Russell Ferguson (1990) suggests, in relation to Anzaldua (and other writers: bell hooks, Kobena Mercer and Teshome Gabriel), that “perhaps now it is only the impure which might claim any kind of authenticity” (12). Authenticity is a fraught concept in queer schemas. The queer social constructionism I employ insists on truth as multiple and authenticity as self-identification, for example. Yet, Ferguson’s suggestion of impurity speaks to an interweaving of experience, language and identity found in queer social constructionism. It also speaks to my notion of incoherence. A politics of incoherence requires recognition of language as inadequate, strategic, impure, and this correlates with the notion of identity-making as ongoing, performative, relational, multiple and context-dependent. Ferguson continues:

> The mixed languages of Gloria Anzaldua are the expression of a
deterritorialization which she feels physically, in her mouth, her tongue, her teeth. It is out of precisely that experience, however, that she has created her

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41 As Bettcher suggests, this capacity of la mestiza is similar to Stone’s notion that transsexuals adopt aspects of the dominant pathologizing discourses about transsexuality within a “subaltern transsexual culture which fails to accurately correspond to the official account” (Bettcher 2009b: 4.2).
own identity. To find one’s own language today means to recognize an endless series of interpenetrations, while at the same time resisting dissolution into the dominant culture.

(1990: 13)

I want to suggest a link between the deterritorializing of Anzaldúa’s embodied voice with Hale’s articulation of transsexuals as “convenient sites for colonization predicted on our discursive erasure and for struggles between gender colonizers of all kinds and political locations” (2009: 52). But I am wary of arguing that la mestiza and the transsexual (both mythic figures) are the same or that white transpeople are colonized just like non-white people of all genders, or worse still, that I know what it is like to be colonized and oppressed and silenced and therefore I can disown my privilege and assert my sameness with others, who are, in turn, silenced by my assertion. These are not my arguments. I feel empowered by Anzaldúa’s mestiza existence (and words), and as a transperson I relate to the strength in Anzaldúa’s method of survival (as described by Ferguson) which compels her to speak. She speaks from her embodiment, from her marginalized position, from her mixedness, somehow claiming her body/voice as her own, despite the inevitable entangling of self/other/discourse along levels of power that aim to subjugate difference to sameness. As Hale asks, “With so much invested in and contested on our bodies, on our tongues, how can we speak in and on our terms?” (2009: 53). Anzaldúa offers an example of how a “wild tongue” can survive in the face of gendered and racialized colonization. I return to Anzaldúa and the possibilities her work evokes in the final stages of this chapter.

3. Hale’s Abject Genderqueer

Genderqueer is experienced differently by different people; the areas of displacement or overlap or alignment are unique to each of us. Hale alleges that this multiplicity prevents us from “full occupancy of social ontology” because full membership would entail “more central, less multiple instantiation of social categories” (2009: 56). My
being neither male nor female, but somehow both, partially negates my attempt to enter the social world (described by Hale as social ontology, emphasizing the ideology of “being” and how we come to be, rather than any specific worldly location) because I cannot move easily or completely into either position.

Being genderqueer is partial, dislocated, contradictory, incoherent. Hale also describes it as abject: “Here is queer gender, here is genderqueer: a range of abjected subject positions, dislocated locations, from which the displaced can speak. Here is where I stake my place between places” (2009: 55-56). Being abject is being unintelligible, being less than human, not being recognized as part of the social world. Being abject relates to being marginal, “we place ourselves and are placed by others in the margins of any number of gender categories, never close to the paradigmatic core of any but also never falling fully outside all” (2009: 55). We are not outside of ontology, or language, or social construction, but we are granted only partial access to the public social world unless we conform to the expectations of unitary sex/gender. This is ideological and also has practical implications. I am challenged every day to find a single stall unisex bathroom, the only kind I feel safe to use. I risk discrimination from potential employers whenever I have to disclose my non-unitary sex/gender status, and this disclosure is necessary when I ask people to recognize me as a boy and use male pronouns but still have an F on my driver’s licence and passport.

The existence of the term genderqueer speaks to the significance of language and my need as a social being to communicate about important parts of myself to others who share my worlds. Hale describes category terms as “the signal-flags of social ontology”: genderqueer as a category term attempts to create a space, an identity, for my dislocated and abject self (2009: 55). There is a danger in creating a new category because simply adding another term to the list has limited impact on the hegemonic system of unitary sex/gender. Yet I need a term, I need to attempt this entering into social ontology, social worlds. Hale expresses this need, and the related issue of cultural intelligibility: “Unintelligible to ourselves and to others, we are driven to search for new category terms, since category terms are the signal-flags of social ontology, and we desperately long to reenter the world” (2009: 55).
Genderqueer has clear links to Butler’s concept of intelligibility, and to queer theory’s anti-normative agenda. Hale asserts: “Insofar as our practices of self dislodge familiar, comfortable notions about the naturalness of bodies and the natural foundations of the relationships between bodies, selves, others, and the rest of the world, we are cultural placeholders for anxieties about nature versus culture” (2009: 53). Transpeople, as Erin Davis argues, are sometimes positioned as those who expose the construction of gender (2008: 99). This model sets up a new binary: trans and genderqueer people express fluidity and non-trans or non-queer or non-genderqueer people demonstrate fixity (Davis 2008). Instead of valorising unintelligible (trans or genderqueer) gender and denigrating intelligible (non-trans or non-queer) gender, I speak coherently from my position as incoherent genderqueer. I also recognise that incoherent embodiment has oppressive material effects for those who are marginalized, regardless of whether their incoherence is purposeful or incidental.

What are the options available to genderqueer and trans subjects who are abjected from social ontology? Hale emphasizes the abject aspect of being genderqueer, but can this be viewed as a place of strength? In answering this question I refer to Noble’s politic of incoherence and Anzaldúa’s articulations of language and la mestiza.

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42 The full quote, omitted above for the sake of clarity: “Insofar as our practices of self dislodge familiar, comfortable notions about the naturalness of bodies and the natural foundations of the relationships between bodies, selves, others, and the rest of the world, we are cultural placeholders for anxieties about nature versus culture, artifice, perversity, human dominion over nature, natural limitations on human manipulation and control, science versus culture, normal versus pathological, inside versus outside, relationships of alterity, spectacle versus propriety, display versus taboo, agency versus domination, self versus body, self versus culture, and self versus other” (Hale 2009: 53).

43 Hale does in fact describe some strengths of a genderqueer ftm perspective: we have a unique position in relation to masculinity because we are able “to re-create manhood from the inside” and we can still align ourselves with feminism even if it is a somewhat fraught relationship at times (2009: 59). Both of these will be further discussed in Chapter Four (queering transmasculinity) and Chapter Six (feminism and transmasculinity).
4. Noble, Anzaldúa and Hale: Incoherence in Borderlands/Borderzones

Noble encourages the embodied subject to refuse coherence, to insist on multiplicity and the constant process of becoming a self, be-coming a subject (2006). Hale argues that gender is multiple and context-dependent: I embody different genders in different times and places, as a practice of incoherence, as a method of survival (1997). Noble emphasizes the political urgency of his politics of incoherence, Hale speaks more about the impact of abjection on the tongues/bodies/selves/community of genderqueer people.
From Noble’s perspective, we must challenge “hegemonic fictions of ontology” (2006: 126), such as race, class, gender, sex, sexuality. In the context of transmasculinity, I hear this as a call for resistance to hegemonic models of manhood. (Chapters Three - Six address this need to critique hegemonic masculinity and create alternative masculinities.) Hale’s observation that genderqueers are abjected from social ontology is reworked by Noble as provoking a challenge to social categories, which Noble labels “fictions” to highlight their purposeful construction. Both Hale and Noble appreciate that each person is positioned differently, in the intersections of identity categories. Hale offers a more specific position for genderqueer subjects: the (dis)location of borderzones. Borderzones, according to Hale, are “constituted by the overlapping margins of categories” (2009: 55). There is no single margin, or single centre, in Hale’s account. Noble’s notion of existence at the intersections (an idea enriched by a heavy debt to black feminism) is given specific context by Hale’s argument that some transmasculine subjects experience their intersections as borderzones.

Hale contextualizes Noble, and Noble expands Hale’s analysis to include a wider range of people. I read Noble, following Hale, as suggesting that people (not just transmasculine people but inclusive of and speaking from this perspective) can and should refuse the demands of hegemonic culture to become only man or woman, black or white, straight or gay. This echoes bell hooks and other women/people of colour who have argued for speaking from the margins, envisioning the margins “as a site of creativity and power” (hooks 1990: 343).

Hale explains: “those of us who live in the borderzones constituted by the overlapping margins of categories do so because our embodiments and our subjectivities are abjected from social ontology: we cannot fit ourselves into extant categories without denying, erasing, or otherwise abjecting personally significant parts of ourselves” (2009: 55). Noble’s concept of incoherence encourages us to refuse to “fit ourselves into extant categories” and to avoid the denial or erasure of significant parts of ourselves. There is clearly a tension here between the need for intelligible personhood; the need to

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44 See bell hooks (1990). I examine the parallels of “margins” (hooks), “borderlands” (Anzaldua) and “borderzones” (Hale) shortly.
be a functional part of the social world/social ontology, and the power to refuse to be intelligible; to insist that I can be a part of the social world on my own terms. This tension permeates trans and genderqueer discourse and is an ongoing theme in this project and my life.

Noble describes the significance of the word “trans” as evocative, as descriptive, as “marking lives lived across, against, or despite already engendered, sexed, national and even racialized bodies” (3). Being genderqueer is part of my politics of incoherence: when I challenge the idea that there are only two sexes or genders, that genitals are the final arbiter of sex or gender, that a trans/transgender/transsexual person can only transition from a stable gender to the opposite stable gender, I embody this challenge by mixing the signals that denote “male” or “female.” How does this affect my whiteness or my privilege as a white incoherently gendered person? Instead of a circle in which binary gender exists, and a surrounding uncharted space of fluid, non-binary gender, I imagine a messy cross-hatch, a skewing of the existing categories and an undermining of their signification.

How does this “undermining” work in relation to categories of race? Race and ethnicity are part of the messy cross-hatch, but the invisibility of whiteness as a race must be actively counteracted as part of a politics of incoherence. Being coherent in my race/ethnicity would entail acceptance of my privilege without recognition of the universalizing of whiteness and denigration of non-whiteness. I address the need for anti-racism shortly.45

45 I also discuss whiteness (and intersections of race and class more widely) in relation to transmasculinity and butch identities in Chapters Four and Five.
In considering the narratives I discussed in the first section, from Finn and myself, two aspects are pertinent to the work of Anzaldúa and Hale: the power of language, or how Finn and I are empowered by the word/concept/practice of genderqueer, and the need to feel ownership of one’s body and identity. How do these points relate to Anzaldúa’s mestiza and Hale’s abject genderqueer? Further, what are the connections between bell hooks’ notion of the margins, Anzaldúa’s borderlands/la frontera, and Hale’s borderzones?

Firstly, the underlying pattern is the interweaving of language, power and bodies. Secondly, the margins, borderlands, intersections and borderzones are all (dis)locations of simultaneous oppression/marginalization and power/resources. Thirdly, these concepts and narratives are linked because together they prompt further questioning: How can I speak as a genderqueer person? How can I feel ownership of my embodied self? How can I find strength on the margins? In Hale’s terms, how can I resist abjection while embracing my dislocation? How can I recognise the multiplicity of language and the complex relationships between power, language and bodies?

In the narratives of genderqueer identity I describe how Finn and I are empowered by embracing our genderqueer identities and politics. This is the first step, for me, in answering the question: How can I speak as a genderqueer person? I first find a word that I feel connected with, and interpret this in the way that best fits my situation. As Hale notes, we borderzone dwellers need to find language, especially “category terms” such as genderqueer because these category terms, functioning as “signal flags,” enable entrance into social life (55). If I have a concept/word to describe myself, and I understand how this word is a variation/subversion on dominant norms, then I position myself (and am positioned by others) somewhere on the social landscape. I can, effectively, enter ontology or social life. Others may not understand my position (not many people immediately grasp my identity as butch boy, for example) and I may still be marginalized, but I am located. In the spirit of Anzaldúa and Hale, I refer to this as being (dis)located, in order to signify the simultaneous entry into the social world and
marginalization as other/different. (Dis)location also recognizes that the use of category terms to enter social ontology is a strategic response to a flawed system, because language, especially taxonomizing language, cannot reflect the range and complexity of my identity/experience/self.

It is not a stable position, being on the margins, but it is in fact no more stable as one moves closer to the centre. The more privileges one has, the easier it is to appear stable, but this is a pretence: consider the homophobia of (some) hegemonic masculinities, which aim to stabilize masculinity by destabilizing alternative, incoherent, queer or otherwise non-hegemonic masculinities. One of the ongoing projects of queer theory is to point out how systems of compulsory heterosexuality or heteronormativity are attempts to protect, stabilize, and naturalize concepts of sexuality, gender, race, class, ability (and so on) precisely because of their instability.

Being on the margins, or in the borderlands, grants one a unique perspective on both one’s own language/cultural framework and the hegemonic norms of white, heteronormative, middle-upper-class, patriarchal, capitalist society. Anzaldúa describes this as mestiza consciousness, mixed consciousness, having awareness of one’s self as oppressed in multiple ways by dominant culture and also having a view of one’s self informed by one’s own point of view or subcultural norms.

As a genderqueer person, I am aware that my non-binary embodiment is difficult to code as male or female, masculine or feminine. In some instances I feel oppressed by this difficulty, such as when I need a cervical smear and the medical receptionist is confused by my request. Finn’s comment about genderqueerness as empowering ownership of identity and embodiment helps me construct a framework in which I determine the meanings of my body and simultaneously comprehend the difficulties I face (and others, such as the receptionist) because my body signifies differently within the dominant framework.

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46 I target hegemonic masculinity and homophobia in Chapter Four: Queering (Trans)Masculinity.
How can I speak as a genderqueer person? I must find a word for myself, or multiple words for myself, though I must also recognise that category terms are inadequate to describe the complexity of my personhood. In claiming a word for myself, I am positioning myself in the social world, and enabling other people to position me (though their interpretations may not tally with my own.) Once I am located, or (dis)located, how can I speak in my own language, from my own body, without losing my specificity, without speaking in the language of the dominant other? Ferguson argues that “to find one’s own language today means to recognize an endless series of interpenetrations, while at the same time resisting dissolution into the dominant culture” (1990: 13). In speaking from my embodied genderqueer perspective, I must balance between a subcultural language of queer/trans communities and the language of a dominant culture. In my subcultural language or framework, people may have different pronouns in different situations, or may identify as both/neither male or female, but these concepts are rendered unintelligible in dominant culture.

Speaking from my power, from my (dis)location, requires finding strength in the margins, finding community and valuing relationships. In Hale’s terms, resisting abjection, while simultaneously embracing my incoherence, requires community support and understanding. I am not alone in the borderlands/borderzones. I share this space with many others. These communities are crucial for my survival: I am only able to speak from my power, as a (dis)located masculine genderqueer subject, when my incoherence is understood and valued by others who share aspects of my condition. I need others who are both similar and different to me, with whom I share a political commitment to social justice.

The borderzones must be demilitarized, as Hale writes in relation to the historical conflicts between ftms and butches, because when we are busy fighting each other we are not gaining ground in the bigger battle for social justice. If we consider the borderlands to be places of power and resources as well as oppression and marginalization, we must also consider the dynamics of power/oppression within the borderlands, acknowledging that we are positioned differently in our (dis)locations. Embodying and advocating anti-racism, for example, is vital to a genderqueer politics
of incoherence, because genderqueer is a subject position often claimed by privileged white middle-class people such as myself. If we are committed to demilitarizing our borderzones, which exist not only the margins of dominant society but also in the overlaps between various (dis)located communities and subcultures, then we need to consider the intersections of identities/oppressions. Noble’s notion of incoherence constitutes a refusal to identify as a person with a single or coherent race/class/gender/sexuality and this refusal enables multiplicity and specificity: I will identify differently in different situations.

On a community level, this means that a politics of incoherence requires a commitment to social justice that extends beyond and across particular identity groups or causes while still grounded in a particular experience/identity/community. I call this coalitional politics.

The final section of this chapter extends the discussion of anti-racism as part of a coalitional politics of incoherence. It is written from my perspective, my (dis)location, as a pakeha person practicing incoherent genderqueer masculinity within a New Zealand context, and is primarily addressed to other white (trans)masculine people.

6. Anti-Racism: A Practice for Incoherent (White) Masculinity

My goal to embrace incoherence and resist abjection, to speak from my (dis)location, must involve asking concrete questions about my own power and privilege. As Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (cited in the Introduction) observe: “The temptation is to reify ambiguity and to celebrate the disruption of binary oppositions without asking concrete questions about how power is distributed through that disruption or ambiguity” (1991: 23). Some of the most crucial questions about my own masculinity pivot upon the intertwining of my race and gender: if my masculinity is inevitably articulated as white masculinity, what are my obligations to problematize “race” and “whiteness” and
“masculinity”? What effect does my incoherence have, if my masculinity is white/Pakeha? How can I practice anti-racism as a white transmasculine queer person?

Anti-racism may be practiced as part of feminism. I do not position it as such here, but in Chapter Six I explore experiences (mine and my interviewees) of feminism, some of which specifically relate to anti-racism or Maori rights. As Hale explains, “problems of manhood, manliness, and masculinity are especially poignant to dislocated genderqueers assigned female at birth who have travelled and still travel in feminist worlds” (2009: 57). My interviewees and I have different experiences of travelling in feminist worlds, in both historical and contemporary contexts, but we all felt the imperative to create non-oppressive masculinities, whether that meant identifying as a feminist or advocating feminism.

“We must be willing,” Hale advises, “to examine our implications in masculinities and to hold masculinities that attract us – and ourselves – to feminist and genderqueer standards of non-oppressiveness” (2009: 57). From my white/Pakeha transmasculine perspective, this means interrogating whiteness, being aware of my white privilege, and refusing to participate in the marginalizing of non-white masculinities or femininities.

The practice of incoherent masculinity can be broken down into two interrelated aspects: a critical refusal and an active transformation. These elements help me unpack what it means to practice anti-racism as an incoherently masculine person who is heavily implicated in discourses of race and whiteness. I also refer to my conversation with Sunny Drake, as his comments further illustrate the intertwining of race/class/gender/sexuality/ability/etc., and the need to recognise the centrality of femmes, working class women, and women of colour in our communities and political coalitions.
a. A Critical Refusal

A “critical refusal” strategy of white anti-racism could be construed as several different things: being aware of and disrupting white privilege; problematizing whiteness and notions of racial purity; recognising the interrelations of race/ethnicity/sexuality/gender/ability/etc; educating myself about colonial histories and post-colonial realities in New Zealand. All of these strategies work most effectively in combination. Importantly, a critical refusal could be interpreted as “refusing white privilege,” but, as Sunny Drake reiterates, I cannot refuse privilege: “that’s the nature of privilege, it’s not something I can choose – privilege is given to people with certain identities whether they want it or not” (Drake 2011). Hence, I recommend “being aware of and disrupting white privilege” instead.

This critical refusal constitutes a broad awareness of structural oppression and power dynamics, and as such, is connected to a long history of feminist analysis. Anti-racism is therefore connected to long histories (and contemporary movements) of black feminisms, women of colour feminisms, indigenous feminisms, and postcolonial feminisms. I am reminded by these movements that the intricate bonds between racism and sexism are most clearly understood by those who live on those intersections, and that I have an obligation to learn from them. Sunny Drake echoes this in his comment, “I’ve learnt a LOT of my politics from femme women, especially working class and/or femmes of colour” (Drake 2011).

In queer and trans theory, the social constructions of gender and sexuality are familiar theoretical fodder. One of the questions I am left with, in my exploration of incoherent (trans)masculinity, is how can we, as queer and trans activists/theorists/researchers, centre our research on the social construction of race/whiteness? (Or the intertwining of race/gender/sexuality as categories of embodiment.) “Race, like gender, is not a constructed and deployed scientific fact but a constructed and deployed cultural fact whose meanings are written onto bodies,” states Noble (2006: 92). My body bears the imprint of my race, but as a white (middle-class) body, it accrues privileges of universality and invisibility, thereby passing as “normal,” “natural,” or “standard.”
What would it mean to render my race incoherent, as I do with my gender? Or, since my masculinity is already white and already incoherent, how can I practice anti-racism as part of this incoherence? Furthermore, how do class and race, as entangled factors of privilege (or oppression), relate to a politics of incoherence?  

b. An Active Transformation

Practicing anti-racism, according to my politics of incoherence, requires an active transformation of “masculinity,” and “whiteness,” a challenging of hegemonic white masculinity. In regards to transmasculinity in particular, we must be careful not to reaffirm the same tired stereotypes: for example, communities of transmasculine and transfeminine people need to challenge the hegemony of the white trans subject. In Chapter One I referred to Syrus Ware and his trans of colour critique of trans studies, in which he argues that “Research that writes trans people as white, straight and non-disabled does not consider the interconnectedness of the power exchanges implicit in this construction and is limited as a result” (2010: 13). In both academic discourses and queer/trans communities we need a broader understanding of transmasculinity, one that considers the “interconnectedness of power” and the simultaneity of race, gender, ability, sexuality, and class, as social constructions.

Actively transforming whiteness and masculinity challenges both heteronormativity and homonormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the normalization of heterosexuality and the corresponding abnormalization (or abjection, or marginalization) of non-

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47 Noble goes some way towards answering this last question, in his chapter, “Our Bodies Are Not Ourselves: Tranny Guys and the Racialized Class Politics of Incoherence,” though his work is heavily contextualised by his own experience and his geographic and cultural location in North America (2006). His context produces a discussion that does not immediately or easily translate to a southern hemisphere/New Zealand perspective.

48 In the Conclusion I return to this point and describe how disability studies and critical race theory/post-colonial studies are crucial for the evolution of trans theory. In this Chapter I maintain a community focus, whereas in the Conclusion I target academic discourses.
heterosexual desire, personhood, and community. Homonormativity refers to the privileging of a certain kind of gay/lesbian/bisexual/queer/homosexual: a version that retains heteronormative aspirations on personal and political levels, for example, white capitalist middle-class aspirations to social normality and monetary wealth. Syrus Ware suggests that while queer theory challenges heteronormativity, it is heavily implicated in the development of homonormativity (2010: 19). Ware cites queer theorist Sara Ahmed (2004) as helping “us to understand how the legitimizing of queer comes through its proximity to heteronormativity, through a construction of a coherent queer subject” (Ware 2010: 19). Actively transforming whiteness and masculinity must therefore involve a commitment to incoherence, as far as incoherence is a challenge to both heteronormativity and homonormativity.

In his discussion of Ahmed’s work, Ware describes how “homonormativity privileges white, able-bodied and cis-gendered queer people” (Ware 2010: 19). As I suggest in Chapters Four and Five, we must maintain a critical awareness of norms and structures of power in relation to the construction of incoherent masculinities. Practicing anti-racism, as a commitment to challenging the intertwining of postcolonial heteronormativity and homonormativity with racism and classism, is one part of this strategy.

My critical awareness is grounded in my experience as a Pakeha in New Zealand: I am implicated in our history of colonial and postcolonial injustice. My masculinity is articulated through my whiteness: if I problematize one, I must be prepared to problematize both. By queering my masculinity (which for me often amounts to being visibly femme and transmasculine in public) I am challenging the dominant stereotype of Pakeha manhood. I do not know if this challenges Pakeha dominance generally and the supremacy of Pakeha masculinity in particular.

As people who accrue social and cultural privilege, Pakeha need to actively counteract and call attention to instances of racism. We need to talk about the implications of looking white or not looking white. We need to challenge the Pakeha expectation that masculinity is strong and silent, that men are rational rather than emotional. We need to
refuse, undermine, or step back from our privileged speaking positions as white, rational, masculine subjects and listen quietly and attentively. Likewise, Noble (2006) recommends that transmasculine communities need to create space for others to speak, especially female/feminine or non-white “others.”

Finally, I return to my conversation with Sunny Drake and his description of anti-racism because it draws out a crucial but often neglected element: longevity. Crafting anti-racist masculinities is an ongoing project, and endeavouring to create change (politically, socially, culturally, personally) is something that spans multiple lifetimes and movements. A politics of incoherence recognizes that I am in a constant state of becoming, and that I am immersed in my social context. This means, as performance artist Sunny Drake comments, “I don’t think it is possible to \textit{arrive} at a feminist, anti-racist masculinity,” because such an identity is not a static achievement, it is an action, an ongoing commitment (Drake 2011). I am also in agreement with Sunny Drake’s comment that “I don’t believe we can divorce ourselves from our context” (Drake 2011). Therefore, the practice of anti-racism is different for different people in different contexts.

From a white queer transmasculine perspective, displacing white supremacy is not something that can be achieved in a finished sense. As Sunny argues, we cannot \textit{arrive} at feminist, anti-racist masculinity, until the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy (WSCP) is no longer dominant. It is instead “a lifelong process of working on myself and participating in changing the WSCP culture” (Drake 2011). The process is “filled with many responsibilities and joys and heartache and mess-ups and liberations and confusions,” remarks Sunny, and “the message I try to remember as often as possible: this is a lifelong commitment” (Drake 2011).

Having established the need for ongoing commitments to social justice, and in particular anti-racism, in the following chapters I speak from my (dis)location as a Pakeha person practicing incoherent genderqueer masculinity in New Zealand. Situating transmasculinity and trans theory in relation to masculinity studies, I explore narratives
from my life and from my interviewees, asking what it means to queer transmasculinity and create alternative, incoherent masculinities.
Chapter Four Queering (Trans)Masculinity

Fig 4.1 “Hairy Boy-Tits”
Chapter Four
Queering (Trans)Masculinity

1. Situating Transmasculinity.
   a. Masculinity Studies in Relation to Female Masculinities and Transmasculinities.
   b. Transmasculinity and Incoherent Masculinities.

2. Queering Masculinity Narratives from Interviews
   a. Engaging, Critiquing and Rejecting Hegemonic Norms of Masculinity:
      i. Tension between Engagement and Rejection of Norms?
      ii. Travis: Rejection of Hegemonic Norms, Creation of queer aesthetics.
      iii. Eric: A Narrative of Engagement with Hegemonic Masculinity.

   b. Creating Alternative (Queer) Masculinities.
      i. All Masculine People Can Queer Masculinity.
      ii. Travis: Geek and Fag!
      iii. Disclosure: Does Being Openly Trans Queer Masculinity?
Incoherent Masculinities: Queering (Trans)Masculinity

1. Situating Transmasculinity

   a. Masculinity Studies in Relation to Female Masculinities and Transmasculinities

Fig 4.2 “Visible Butch”
Incoherent Masculinities: Queering (Trans)Masculinity

1. Situating Transmasculinity

   a. Masculinity Studies in Relation to Female Masculinities and Transmasculinities

   Eric: I think sometimes when people see our community, they expect us to want to be - and we sometimes do - expect ourselves to become these he-men, that are gonna be the answer to... You know, we’re gonna become the dream masculine men – but we don’t. We just become regular guys like everyone else, or, we become irregular guys like everyone else.

   (3)

Contemporary intersections between masculinity studies, feminism, queer theory and trans theory demonstrate the complexity of “masculinity”: what does masculinity refer to? The common understanding of masculinity is, perhaps, the gender expression of a male person. However, since the publication of Halberstam’s widely read Female Masculinity in 1998, scholars and activists have questioned the notion that masculinity is the property of male people.49 But, as Halberstam asks, “If masculinity is not the social and cultural and indeed political expression of maleness, then what is it?” (1998: 1).

Transmasculinity as a field of academic inquiry emerges at these intersections of feminism, queer/trans theory and masculinity studies. Feminist theory and the feminist movement(s) have demonstrated that assuming political solidarity on the basis of the gender “woman” is problematic, and similarly, masculinity studies must question what and who is/are the subject/s of this area: who are we talking about, who is included in studies of masculinity? Despite the interventions of theorists such as Halberstam and Noble, most work in masculinity studies does not engage with masculinity that is not

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49 See Halberstam (1998) and also Noble (2004).
Trans theorist and activist Jamison Green, in his review of masculinity studies, makes a similar observation, “I think most of the literature makes an assumption that only male bodies express masculinity” (2005: 295). I suggest that masculinity scholars (including myself) must challenge such assumptions, question fundamental concepts like “masculinity,” and learn from the evolution of the feminist movement as an analogous situation where assumptions (of what a “woman” or a “man” is) result in unproductive exclusions.

I do not provide a comprehensive overview of masculinity studies (it is a broad and vigorous area of scholarship). I draw upon R.W Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity (1998) and Connell’s more recent work (with J. A Messerschmidt) that charts the use of this term (2005).

First, Connell (1998) provides a useful summary of social science research on masculinity, focusing particularly on ethnographic studies. She makes several broad observations that inform my understanding of masculinity. The plurality (or contextuality) of masculinities is important: different cultures and different periods of history construct gender differently (1998: 4). Plural masculinities exist in relation to each other within a social field, and these are often “relations of hierarchy and exclusion” (1998: 4). Masculinities are collective, they are sustained and enacted by “groups and institutions” not just by individuals (1998: 4). Bodies are crucial, and Connell rejects a biological determinist or essentialist model of masculinity: “men’s bodies do not determine patterns of masculinity,” but maintains that bodies “are of great importance in masculinity” (1998: 5). Masculinities (like other aspects of subjectivity)

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I do not provide a summary of works that maintain this focus on masculinity as a property of men, but I offer the example of Michael Kimmel (2002). In this foreword, Kimmel states: “One must engage masculinity critically as ideology, as institutionally embedded within a field of power, as a set of practices engaged in by groups of men” (x). I personally appreciate an edited collection such as this one, which points to the overlaps between masculinity studies and feminist theory, but here I call attention to Kimmel’s assumption that masculinity must be considered as a “set of practices engaged in by groups of men” (x). Similarly, Kimmel proposes that “queer theory enables one to theorize masculinity as a system of power relations among men as well as as a system of power relations between women and men” (xi). While I appreciate the inclusion of power relations between women and men, and the highlighting of power, practice and ideology, I do not find any radical questioning of the link between masculinity and men or the notion that masculinity is the property of men. I agree with Kimmel that queer theory encourages the consideration of power relations but I also suggest that queer theory provokes questions about the automatic link between men and masculinities.
“come into existence as people act,” they are actively, socially, constructed (1998: 5). Masculinities are not homogeneous and are in fact often contradictory (1998: 6). Finally, masculinities are dynamic; they are open to reconstruction or change (1998: 6).

Connell (1998) only mentions female or transgender masculinities once. It is a comment regarding the relationship between masculinity and bodies, designating “masculine conduct with a female body” as “transgressive” (Connell 1998: 5). Seven years later, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) pay considerably more attention to female masculinities and transmasculinities, which signals that the contributions of theorists such as Halberstam and Noble have not been in vain.

Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, which first emerged in 1982, has been hugely influential. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) track the path of hegemonic masculinity as a concept. They recommend some aspects of this concept be dropped, such as the idea of “global dominance” of men over women, and others retained (2005: 846). The “fundamental feature of the concept,” according to Connell and Messerschmidt, is the combination of plurality of masculinities and hierarchy of masculinities (2005: 846). While Connell and Messerschmidt do not directly link these aspects to female masculinities or transmasculinities, I suggest that they are connected. Scholars agree that there are many different ways of embodying masculinity, and I maintain that the plurality of masculinities in masculinity studies is deepened by the inclusion of female masculinities and transmasculinities. Similarly, an understanding of the hierarchy of masculinities (grounded in a particular social context) would be enriched by consideration of how female masculinities and transmasculinities fit into the picture.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) question the assumptions within masculinity studies about what a “man” or “woman” is, and they advise the incorporation of female

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51 I perceive a link between this shift away from global dominance of woman by men and a growing awareness of the need for specificity instead of universalizing claims which often have imperialist/racist implications. This growing awareness, I would argue, stems primarily from recent intersections and tensions between feminist and queer theory, though it has previously been argued vigorously by women of colour feminists objecting to the universalizing of white middle class women’s experiences within the feminist movement. See Richardson et al (2006), particularly the introduction, for further debate about the shift from universalizing feminist politics to queer (or queer feminist) specificity.
masculinities and transmasculinities. They also recommend that “Not only the essentialist concept of masculinity but also, more generally, the trait approach to gender need to be thoroughly transcended” (2005: 847). I agree, given that the trait approach positions masculinity as a natural trait of men. Connell and Messerschmidt recognise the contributions of theorists such as Halberstam, in relation to female masculinity, and Henry Rubin, in relation to transmen (2005: 836; 843). Trans theorists, according to Connell and Messerschmidt, demonstrate the limitations of “discursive flexibility” (2005: 842). As subjects, we have some agency, some discursive flexibility, but we are also constrained by embodiment and context: “the possibilities are constrained massively by embodiment, by institutional histories, by economic forces, and by personal and family relationships” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 843). I share their view that trans theorists encourage the consideration of embodiment and context as constraints on discursive freedom and fluidity of identity (2005: 843; 851). Underscoring embodiment in particular, they remark that “the need for a more sophisticated treatment of embodiment in hegemonic masculinity is made particularly clear by the issue of transgender practices” (2005: 851). Embodiment, as a critical concern within trans theory, is an area of productive cross-pollination with masculinity studies. (The next chapter contains an example of this cross-pollination, in my concluding discussion of butch and trans embodiment.)

Connell and Messerschmidt also recommend that masculinity scholars turn towards the interactions between femininities and masculinities: “we consider that research on hegemonic masculinity now needs to give much closer attention to the practices of women and the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities” (2005: 848). Since gender is relational, “patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity” (2005: 848). We need to broaden the field of inquiry so that the practices and identities of women, femmes, and feminine people are part of the conversation.
Queer and trans theorists problematize the automatic linking of female-feminine-woman and male-masculine-man. This can also be framed as the “natural” relationship between biological sex and social gender, where binary sex underlies binary gender and there is a normative progression from sex assignment as male or female at birth (though some may be assigned intersex or undetermined) to adult gender identity as masculine man or feminine woman.

Lived experience proves that this ideology vastly oversimplifies the complexities of gendered embodiment and personhood. Transmasculinity as a field of academic inquiry (and lived experience) cannot ignore queer theory’s interrogation of sex, sexuality and gender. Similarly, we must keep in mind the historical interventions from women of colour, who emphasize the intersectionality of identity, the complicated interrelatedness of racism and sexism, the necessary questioning of the primacy of gender categories such as “man” and “woman” (over categories of race/ethnicity/class, for example) and the assumptions embedded within such categories. In particular, transmasculinity scholars must attend to power and the privilege of white (trans)masculinity. (See Chapters Three, Five and the Conclusion of this thesis.)

Two questions emerge: Who is the proper transmasculine subject? I consider some of the tensions and coalitions that arise in response to this question in the second half of this chapter and the following Chapter Five. First, what does masculinity refer to?

I adopt Connell and Messerschmidt’s suggestion that “masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (2005: 836). Masculinities as “configurations of practice” are, like other aspects of our identities, socially constructed and context-specific. This parallels Butler’s notion of gender

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52 Butler is often credited with problematizing the relationship between biological sex and social gender by her proposal that sex is just as constructed as gender and that the framework of biological sex underlying social gender is inadequate (1990, 1993, 2004). Chris Brickell observes that sociologists within symbolic interactionism and ethno-methodology performed this problematizing much earlier (Brickell 2006: 89, 93). See for example, Kessler and McKenna (1978).
performativity as “a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint” (2004: 1). Masculinity, like gender generally, is not a static achievement, trait, or fixed identity. It is a gendered practice of improvisation (within personal constraints, including social context and embodiment) that draws on shared, socially constructed understandings of masculinity.

One of the driving questions for this thesis is “how can transmasculine people construct masculinities that are anti-racist, anti-misogynist or feminist, queer, and trans-positive?” This could be reframed as “how can transmasculine people configure their practices of masculinity in ways that are ethically and politically aware?” or as “how can transmasculine people embody incoherent masculinities, masculinities that refuse to be constructed through the practices of racism, sexism, queerphobia and transphobia?”

After discussing other theorists’ contributions to the area of transmasculinity, I elaborate on the concept of incoherent masculinities and how this fits with the larger politics of incoherence, before turning to specific examples from interviewees about constructing queer or incoherent masculinities.

b. Transmasculinity and Incoherent Masculinities

Theorists often spotlight transmasculinity as a site for re-constructing masculinity. Henry Rubin, for example, suggests focusing on how transmen remake what it means to be a man, reject patriarchal forms of masculinity/maleness, and/or create new forms (2003). Noble emphasizes the need for anti-misogynist and anti-racist transmasculinities (2006). Kai Peetoom, a genderqueer transman who also promotes a Noble-inspired politics of incoherence, asserts that FTM embodiment of masculinity can be a site of reworking masculinity in service to feminism (2009: 56-57). From a slightly different angle, Hale proposes that “we must care more about our moral and political values than we do about our gendered self-identifications” (1998b: 120, 2009: 59). All of these

53 I examined Butler’s concept of performativity and agency in Chapter One, when describing the queer social constructionist context of trans theory.
works focus primarily on transmasculinity as gendered embodiment, with different suggestions for an ethics or politics of transmasculinity. For example, Noble calls attention to the need for anti-racist and femme-positive approaches to masculinity and Peetoom positions FTMs who adopt his model of gendered incoherence as part of, or allies to, the feminist movement. Hale points to a wider project of social change undertaken in coalitions with those who share similar ethics or values, rather than identities, an argument that I return to in my Conclusion, after considering intersections between butchness and transmasculinity, and relationships with feminism.

In contrast to the emphasis on gendered embodiment, trans theorist Dean Spade reiterates the feminist notion of intersectionality: he resists the view that his gender or masculinity has been the most important difference in his life, arguing that he cannot separate it from “the class, race and parentage variables through which it was mediated” (2006: 319).

Spade challenges the traditional narrative of an FTM transsexual who, it is expected, will want to pass full-time as male with no complications, ambivalences or changes of heart. In regards to the medical institution of the United States, Spade notes that “my undoing in their eyes” is his recognition that “the use of any word for myself – lesbian, transperson, transgender butch, boy, mister, FTM fag, butch – has been/will always be strategic” (2006: 322). I am inspired by Spade’s insistence on intersectionality and his observation that we can use language strategically (or that sometimes we can only use language strategically). I aim to be strategic in my use of words like masculine, man, boy, etc, and this will be further discussed in relation to an interviewee who similarly uses the word fag strategically.

In my discussion of transmasculinity, I invoke Noble’s concept of incoherence. This strategy avoids segregating the variables through which our masculinities are articulated (race/ethnicity, class, ability/disability etc) and suggests instead an intersectional approach to masculinity. My proposal, similar to Peetoom’s, is that transmasculine people can embody and advocate anti-racist, anti-sexist, feminist, queer, trans-positive masculinities. I use the word “embody” with the expectation that we must do more than
agree that these values are important; we must bring them into ourselves, our bodies, our awareness of how we fit into the world around us. bell hooks informs my use of the word “advocate”: she suggest that people can advocate feminist change whether or not they identify as feminists (2004).

In writing and living this project, I am also inspired by Halberstam’s words:

There are transsexuals, and we are not all transsexuals; gender is not fluid, and gender variance is not the same wherever we find it. Specificity is all. As gender-queer practices and forms continue to emerge, presumably the definitions of ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ and ‘transsexual’ will not remain static and we will continue to produce terms to delineate what they cannot. In the meantime, gender variance, like sexual variance, cannot be relied on to produce a radical and oppositional politics simply by virtue of representing difference. Radical interventions come from careful consideration of racial and class constructions of sexual identities and gender identities and from a consideration of the politics of mobility outlined by that potent prefix ‘trans.’

(1998: 173)

Embodying gender variance, whether configured in the form of femme, transmasculine or butch personhood, is not enough in itself to produce a politics or practice of incoherence. As Connell and Messerschmidt observe, transmasculinity is “not inherently counterhegemonic” (2005: 851). Creating incoherent masculinity involves refusing to articulate masculinity through forms of sexism, racism, classism, able-ism, queerphobia and transphobia. This is a project that requires ongoing commitment to social change on all of these issues and recognition of their intersections and attendant privileges.

In what follows I explore specific examples from my interviewees about creating incoherent masculinities. These are broken into two parts: a) Engaging, critiquing and rejecting hegemonic norms of masculinity, and b) Creating alternative, queer or incoherent masculinities.
2. Queering Masculinity Narratives from Interviews

   a. Engaging, Critiquing and Rejecting Hegemonic Norms of Masculinity:

      i. Tension Between Engagement and Rejection of Norms?

Travis and Eric relate different experiences of queering masculinity. Travis describes his politics of queering masculinity as “a rejection of hegemonic gender stereotype norm stuff” (3). Eric recounts a particular experience of engaging with hegemonic New Zealand masculinity, and queers this hegemonic masculinity in his retelling of this narrative. Is there a tension between these approaches: rejecting or engaging with hegemonic norms of masculinity? Travis further elaborates on his notion of queer aesthetics as part of queering masculinity, and I propose that this enables reconciliation between rejection and engagement: we can critique (hegemonic) norms and rework them. I conclude by drawing on Butler’s work on the possibility of critical engagement with norms.
ii. Travis: Rejection of Hegemonic Norms, Creation of Queer Aesthetics

Travis explicitly states his commitment to queering masculinity, and his intention not to become a hegemonic man:

Yeah I feel like I’m queering masculinity, within my trans identity. That feels quite important. Within that. Regardless of any sexuality or desire that goes on, I guess queerness signals to me a rejection of hegemonic gender stereotype norm stuff...Oh, yeah, so I’m not transitioning to become a hegemonic heterosexual male.

(3)

Both gender and sexuality can be queered, says Travis, and he identifies as both queer in his sexuality and gender and as actively queering both levels (3). Queering masculinity is an act, a doing, a becoming, that may or may not correlate to an individual who identifies as queer. Travis suggests that straight or non-queer-identifying people can also participate in the project of queering masculinity (or femininity, or any similar category) (3). My interpretation of Travis’ statement that queerness signals rejection of gender norms is that this rejection constitutes a refusal to construct one’s gender in complicity with dominant norms or expectations about masculinity. Travis rejects the expectation that men should be heterosexual, for example. He describes his queerness as something that relates to his own attraction to other people (sexuality) and as something that relates to his own queer masculine presentation (gender) but in our conversation we could not easily distinguish between these layers of sexuality and gender, which suggests to me that while it may be useful to consider them separately, they are (like race/ethnicity/class/ability/etc) tangled together in our identities and experiences. Travis:

The queerness is a part of my attraction as well as my identity and the signals I put out for other people in terms of saying, you know, I’m quite an effeminate guy who uses lots of hand gestures and gets excited and jumpy and you know...
Being effeminate, for Travis, is part of queering masculinity, and also part of rejecting dominant expectations of white heterosexual manhood, which prohibit such effeminate behaviour. I suggest that this rejection of hegemonic masculinity (which would in this context be white/Pakeha, heterosexual, middle-upper-class, able-bodied masculinity) can be part of a politics of incoherence because it directly relates to the suggestion that masculine people refuse to articulate their masculinity through racist/sexist/classist/homophobic/transphobic/etc practices.

Travis’ notion of queer aesthetics further elaborates on the possibilities for a politics of incoherence. Travis describes queer in three layers:

Yeah I guess I’m talking about queer as an aesthetic, queer as an identity and queer as a sexuality, as well. Yeah. Which I feel like I’m queer in all three aspects. Aesthetic being, you know, the way I present myself and what I put to other people; identity being how I feel about myself, and where I position myself as an identity; and sexuality in terms of attraction.

A queer aesthetic is part of Travis’ wider project of queering masculinity and I interpret this aesthetic to be more than external appearance or presentation. It is an embodied political statement: wearing one’s queer politics on one’s sleeve, making visible one’s commitment to pro-queer social change. Travis again breaks down the distinctions between queer and non-queer communities; he mentions that one can adopt a queer aesthetic without identifying as queer in terms of gender or sexuality:

I know many people who I would say adopt a queer aesthetic, who don't necessarily identify as queer.
As an embodied political statement, a queer aesthetic involves the way I relate to others, the way I see myself, the way I function in the social world. In the context of capitalism, queer aesthetics are often reduced to clothing/accessories (external presentation) as a result of capitalism’s co-opting of counter-cultural movements. Hence it is important to distinguish between a queer aesthetic that is constituted by clothes you buy, and a queer aesthetic that works as a political tool; an external representation of a desire for pro-queer social change. I understood Travis to be talking about the latter.

This queer aesthetic builds on the rejection of hegemonic masculinity or gender norms and links to two upcoming discussions: the creation of alternative or incoherent masculinities and Eric’s retelling of his engagement with hegemonic New Zealand masculinity. Constructing a queer masculine aesthetic, according to Travis, requires rejection of hegemonic norms of masculinity. This rejection is not simply saying “no” to hegemonic masculinity, it is developing a critical engagement with these norms and stereotypes. In rejecting hegemonic masculinity, Travis simultaneously constructs his own masculinity (a queer aesthetic is one aspect of this construction) in response to those norms. “I’m not transitioning to become a hegemonic heterosexual male,” says Travis (3). I view his transition in the wider context of his commitment to queer social change and I relate to this because of my own transition and politics of incoherence. I suggest that for Travis and myself, transition is about embodying our own queer, incoherent masculinities, and maintaining a critical engagement (which sometimes arises in the form of refusal/rejection) with hegemonic expectations of masculinity.

iii. Eric: A Narrative of Engagement with Hegemonic Masculinity.

Eric describes a moment where he knowingly engaged with stereotypical “Kiwi bloke” masculinity, while he was overseas. There was an All Blacks game the night before, and the next day he went down to the pool at his hotel. Eric relates:
And there was a Kiwi guy, I could tell he was a Kiwi, coz of his accent really, and he came over, he was standing there, and we had this really Kiwi masculine moment. Which I designated as New Zealand masculinity. And it was this conversation which went like this:

Eric: Oh, hi bro.
Kiwi Guy: Yeh, hi.
Eric: Did you watch the rugby?
Kiwi Guy: Yeah yeah.
Eric: Did they win?
Kiwi Guy: Yeah yeah.
Eric: Oh cool. See ya.

That was a really formidable masculine moment. And I just sort of stood there going I don’t believe I just did all that bullshit that’s hilarious!

Eric emphasizes the monosyllabic rugby-oriented conversation by pausing for a long time between each response. He describes the moment as “formidable” and his behaviour as “bullshit” and “hilarious.” He further explains that he sees himself as “emulating” hegemonic masculinity in this story, and distinguishes between “relating” and “emulating”: he does not relate to stereotypical masculinity but he is capable of emulating it (15). I suggest that emulation can constitute queering masculinity, especially when it is narrated as a parody of hegemonic masculinity. Eric’s narrative of parodying hegemonic New Zealand masculinity is reminiscent of Butler’s notion of performativity and her use of drag performance as an example of the performative nature of gender (1990). Gender is socially constructed through our constant performance of it (Butler 1990). Eric’s story reveals that hegemonic masculinity is indeed performative; it is an act, and one that masculine people can choose to engage with or not. Eric alludes to the performativity of masculinity when he designates this conversation (or his behaviour) as “bullshit” and “hilarious” (15).

Butler, as I mentioned in Chapter One, paints a complex picture of my relationship with social norms. As a subject, I both create/maintain norms and am constituted by them. I
am immersed in a world where the norms of masculinity are decided by a kind of non-consensual group consensus, and I must engage with these norms, even if this means becoming purposefully or accidentally incoherent because I am not legible according to them. Butler suggests that we must endeavour “to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation” (2004: 3) to these norms. When I engage with normative or hegemonic masculinity, I am critical of it as a cultural construct or behaviour and I seek to transform these norms: from expectations of legibility to possibilities of incoherence.

In relation to Eric’s narrative, his engagement with hegemonic masculinity is depicted (by both of us: him during our interview and me in my writing) as a comic portrayal of the performativity of all gender identities. It also highlights the power relations between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities. The power of stepping into that hegemonic position is captured in Eric’s expression that it was a “formidable” moment. He is aware that his performance of stereotypical norms was successful (in the sense that the other person did not seem to notice that Eric was parodying hegemonic masculinity) and in his retelling he strategically undermines these norms in his description of “that bullshit” as “hilarious” (15).


A politics of incoherence cannot dictate that masculine subjects avoid any engagement with hegemonic masculinity. The intersubjective reality is that we are subject to norms regardless of whether we consent to this process and we cannot position ourselves as somehow outside or beyond hegemonic norms of masculinity. Queering masculinity, according to my politics of incoherence, entails acknowledging the importance of our social contexts and living in ways that express our critical and transformative engagement with norms, as Butler suggests (2004).
Eric narrates his experience of engaging with hegemonic masculinity as parodying Pakeha New Zealand masculinity. He identifies several key elements: understated emotional tone, monosyllabic responses, rugby as topic of conversation, bonding between men over common interests and style of masculinity. Eric’s self-awareness and his awareness of the dominant norms of masculinity create this parodic conversation in which the other participant may have been completely serious and unaware that Eric was *emulating* normative Kiwi guy behaviour. Queering masculinity is sometimes humorous work. Through storytelling, as Eric demonstrates, we can engage with norms of masculinity in unpredictable ways, ways that demonstrate our critical and transformative relationship to norms. For the duration of that conversation, Eric transformed himself into a normatively gendered New Zealand male, and in his retelling of the event he emphasizes that he was knowingly emulating stereotypical behaviour, thereby revealing that the creation of “typical Kiwi masculinity” is a cultural construct open to reinterpretation or reworking.

Similarly, Travis rejects hegemonic masculinity insofar as he does not wish to articulate his own masculinity according to those expectations. A masculinity that defies stereotypical gender norms and does not rely on racism or sexism or homophobia to prop itself up is, in many public situations, incoherent. Furthermore, I argue, a queer masculine aesthetic involves the construction of a public self that signals commitment to pro-queer social change and is therefore an action as well as an appearance. This action of refusal and simultaneous construction of an alternative queer masculinity is crucial to the politics of incoherence that I advocate as a queer transmasculine subject.

b. Creating Alternative (Queer) Masculinities.
   i. All Masculine People Can Queer Masculinity

The creation of alternative or incoherent masculinities is a driving theme of this project. In the following discussion I focus first on how being a genderqueer, a fag or a geek can queer masculinity and second on the question of disclosure: does being openly trans
queer masculinity? I take these examples from conversations with Finn, Travis, Dylan and Eric. In thinking about alternative masculinities, I am informed by Halberstam: “I suggest we think carefully, butches and FTMs alike, about the kinds of men or masculine beings that we wish to become and lay claim to: alternative masculinities, ultimately, will fail to change existing gender hierarchies to the extent to which they fail to be feminist, antiracist, and queer” (1998: 173). As part of my desire not to segregate different forms of masculinity (for example, female masculinity, transmasculinity, male-assigned-at-birth men’s masculinity), I continue this discussion of alternative/incoherent masculinities in the next Chapter.

Any masculine person can create an alternative, queer, or incoherent masculinity. Further, alternative masculinities are not homogenous. This is useful, as each of us will articulate our form of alternative masculinity differently, but still in relationship to each other and the wider social context. While some people, like Travis, may identify as queer in regards to their sexuality and their gender, creating an alternative masculinity in keeping with a politics of incoherence does not require any such identifications. It requires instead a commitment to combat homophobia and to embody and advocate queer positivity. Travis’ notion of a queer aesthetic is an example of the flexibility and strength of a politics of incoherence that travels beyond specific communities or identity categories.

One form of alternative masculinity that I am personally familiar with is genderqueer masculinity. Like queer, genderqueer is a flexible concept with no fixed definition. It is experienced differently depending on one’s cultural, historical, and geographical context. In discussing what genderqueer means, Finn and I explore the supposed difference between real and pretend, and I remark that “that’s where the genderqueer stuff often gets put by other people. That it’s just play, just pretend” (13). Finn responds with the following comment:

Play is constructed as much as reality is. The rules we put on reality, or basically the difference between reality and play is that play isn’t constrained by the rules of reality. It’s made up of different rules. And I think that that is true of a lot of
the genderqueer stuff that comes through. It’s just people making up different rules and doing it different ways. And yeah I think that’s great.

(13)

The creation of genderqueer masculinity, according to this conversation, relies on the construction of new rules, variations on the hegemonic norms of masculinity. What might the norms of genderqueer masculinity be? This question addresses the danger of reifying new norms, especially if this reification parallels the violence of the old norms. We must not replace old norms with new norms and call it a revolution. In an email conversation after the interview Finn describes more specifically how he perceives genderqueerness:

I see it as a space and self proclamation that promotes self expression of gender which is not confined by heteronormative ideas about binary gender, but rather enables you to embrace all aspects of your gendered self simultaneously without feeling any sense of lack or failure to conform.

(11 January 2011)

In reflecting on Finn’s idea that genderqueer can be “a space” as well as a “self proclamation” I wonder if this could help counteract the dangers of reifying new norms because a space of genderqueerness can grow and change over time, rather than remain static. I also refer to Halberstam’s comment that alternative masculinities, including genderqueer masculinities, will fail if they do not address the intersections of power and privilege that manifest as racism, sexism, and queerphobia. In constructing alternative masculinities, we must endeavour not only to remain critical of hegemonic masculinities, but also to maintain a Butlerian critical and transformative relationship to our own alternative masculinities. I return to this point after briefly exploring narratives of alternative masculinity from Travis as a “geeky male” (11) and a “fag” (2), and narratives of disclosure, or being out as trans, from Dylan and Eric.

54 I narrate my own experience of genderqueerness in more detail in Chapter Three.
ii. Travis: Geek and Fag!

Travis describes creating an alternative or queer masculinity as being a man “in a way that doesn’t fit the hegemonic norms” (2). He compares himself to other men that he knows and identifies himself as embodying “a different kind of masculinity” (10). In comparison to the hegemonic norm of New Zealand masculinity, which is “a southern man, stereotypical kind of thing is farmers don’t cry, tough as guts, play rugby, you know, drink Speights, sort of thing” (10), he says:

I’m not particularly interested in sports, I do enjoy drinking beer but it will be some sort of what they’d call “wanky” pilsner beer, which I like! You know. I guess the kind of masculinity that I adopt is geeky male.

(10-11)

I ask Travis if he feels there is a place for that, for him as a geeky male, in New Zealand, and more specifically in his own social circles and he responds:

Of course! Yeah, I feel very lucky to have, to be surrounded by men who I use as role models – ‘it’s okay to have an alternative masculinity’ and you know that can be celebrated and seen as real and accepted.

(11)

Harking back to masculinity studies and Connell and Messerschmidt’s assertion that plurality and hierarchy are two of the most important aspects of the concept of masculinity, Travis demonstrates his awareness that his own masculinity is not hegemonic (he purposefully constructs his masculinity as counter-hegemonic) and is probably lower on the hierarchy in wider white-dominated society than masculinities that involve playing sport and drinking non-wanky beer (846). But Travis also feels that he is “seen as real and accepted” by the men around him who are both role models and peer support for his alternative masculinity (11). During the interview we discuss how,
for both of us, these role models for alternative masculinity are sometimes men, or male-identified people, and sometimes women, or gender variant people (11).

The creation of alternative masculinities relies on community support, in part because being “seen as real and accepted” (as Travis puts it) is crucial for our wellbeing as social creatures, and partly because resisting the pressure to conform to hegemonic expectations of masculinity is easier with support from other people. In my experience, community support for alternative masculinities is not restricted to masculine-identified people. Some of the strongest support I receive as a transmasculine person comes from friends who are lesbians or queer women. Similarly, we need role models for alternative masculinities, but these role models can be anyone who embodies any form of masculinity, whether it is a butch woman or a genderqueer boy. Homosocial support, meaning in this case, support between masculine-identified people, is one part of this community effort. Homosociality is often inflected with homoeroticism within transmasculine communities, and the next example of queering transmasculinity is Travis’ identification as a fag and his description of being attracted to people in a “homoerotic way” (2).

A word like “fag” has political ramifications of reclamation, like “queer” or “dyke.” Travis says, “Yeah I guess fag becomes a word that I’ve adopted recently as a similar empowerment kind of thing of doing masculinity in a different way” (2). I read his “doing masculinity in a different way” as configuring himself as a masculine person through his own ethical practices of masculinity without relying on homophobia, sexism or racism. He is empowered by his reclamation of a word that has a long painful history, and is still in current use as a derogatory term. This is strategic use of language, as previously mentioned in relation to Spade’s observation that for him, “the use of any word for myself – lesbian, transperson, transgender butch, boy, mister, FTM fag, butch – has been/will always be strategic” (2006: 322). Fag as a strategic term, for Travis, has multiple layers: it situates himself as a male person, “or centred on the masculine side of things” (2), situates his desire within a homoerotic context where he, as a masculine being, desires other masculine beings, and in his use of the term fag for himself, I
suggest that Travis effectively queers the meaning of the word fag because he opens it up, destabilizes it, enables multiple interpretations.

Later in the interview, Travis comments, “I’d like to be able to use language but quite often I find that language ends up using me,” and “if you’re trying to address complicated ideas, in terms of being multiple things at once...or shifting positions” then it is difficult to use language “in a way that serves your purpose” (8). Gayle Salamon attests to this notion that language “ends up using me,” as Travis observes (8): “we find ourselves named and identified prior to any deciding on our part,” and, furthermore, “those labels can prove so resistant to our own strategies of revision and recuperation” (Salamon 2005: 271). In claiming “fag” and “geek” as labels for himself, Travis is aware that his relationship with language is not simple; it is an ongoing intersubjective process. Salamon notes that “Even my ‘own’ identity, in all its particularity, depends on the names I am called, the ways that I am recognized by others,” (2005: 271). A politics of incoherence must remain attuned to the intersubjective relationship between subjects and language, as I discuss in Chapter Five.

Travis is keenly aware of his frustration with language, in particular with “the fixedness of language” where “if we say we’re one thing then that means we can’t be another,” and he cites pronouns as “a prime example of that” (8). Language, according to Travis, is sometimes incapable of addressing the multiplicity or complexity of our existence. Nevertheless, Travis acknowledges that language can also be empowering and his strategic use of the words “fag” and “homoerotic” are examples of this possibility, even as he notes that the words are likely to use him as much as he uses them.

Travis explains, “At the moment I feel like I’m in a place where it’s quite exciting and interesting for me to use the word fag in a way that kind of says, ‘Hey I’m a guy, or centred on the masculine side of things, and attracted to guy-people’ in a sort of homoerotic way” (2). Travis adopts the term homoerotic, which is usually seen to signify homosexual eroticism between men, and uses it in combination with his more flexible definition of “guy-people” and his description of himself as both “a guy” and someone “centred on the masculine side of things” (2). As with his use of the word fag,
I interpret this as queering homoeroticism, because instead of signifying a binary notion of hetero versus homo and male versus female, Travis allows for ambiguity in both his own masculine identity and those of people who he is erotically attracted to.

Travis elaborates further on the connection between reclaimed words like dyke and fag: “It also feels like it is empowering in the same way that dyke is, in that it's a reclaimed word that is often used by others pejoratively, and I can adopt as a positive signifier of my identity” (2). Instead of allowing the homophobic use of the word fag to determine the value or meaning of the word, Travis insists that he has the power (as part of a queer community where others are doing the same) to subvert that meaning and rework it as positive, as something he is proud to call himself, “there's a similar strength in both of those terms in the subversiveness that they imply - that I can claim Dyke or Fag as a positive part of my identity, that I can be a man or a woman in a way that doesn't fit within hegemonic norms” (2). Masculinity as a cultural construct is embedded within discourses of sexuality and gender, so it follows that queering hegemonic masculinity involves also queering binary sexuality and gender. As Travis notes, “language constantly changes,” and his subversive use of words such as fag and queer, and historically, dyke, is part of “that constant defining and redefining” (9). That redefining is also caught in matrices of power, which Travis is also aware of: “quite often comes to the point of whoever has the most power, gets to define what the word means” (9). 55 Travis’ use of words like fag, queer, and homoerotic in relation to his own shifting identity and desire is a strategy of resistance that destabilizes the very terms he employs while still relying on them to communicate meaning to others in the social world.

In his identification as a fag and in coding his desire, as someone “centred on the masculine side of things” for “guy-people” as homoerotic, Travis effectively queers his own embodied masculinity and challenges hegemonic expectations about masculinity.

55 Travis also highlights inequalities in use of language in his comment that people who are different, who do not fit the dominant definitions of categories, have to justify themselves in ways that others do not: “I guess where most people, if they fit within the power – the same definition that the power model assigns to you - then they don’t have to go through that justification and explanation phase. Whereas I feel like I constantly do, in terms of getting people up to speed with the idea of what trans identity actually is” (9). Redefining terms is useful, but for maximum effect, it requires a collective understanding that other people can “get people up to speed” with new concepts or language so that people who are different or members of minorities are not constantly educating everyone else or justifying themselves.
and about the correlations between sex, gender and sexuality. In relation to his alternative and queer masculinity, as a geek and a fag, Travis and I discuss the need for community support. Being incoherent as a masculine person is not sustainable when maintained only on an individual level. Paradoxically, we need other people for whom our incoherence is coherent, by whom we are “seen as real and accepted” (11).

Similarly, creating alternative or incoherent masculinities relies on networks of people who may or may not identify as masculine or male. Sustaining counter-hegemonic gender identities/presentations/politics (whether masculine, feminine, genderqueer or whatever) relies on connections between diverse groups of people. Transmasculine people, then, must travel between different communities, different spaces, different worlds. This travelling between different spaces prompts the issue of disclosure: in some spaces I may be known as trans, in some spaces I may be known only as a boy, in some spaces I may be known only as a butch or genderqueer person who was born female. How can I navigate disclosure as part of a politics of incoherence?

iii. Disclosure: Does Being Openly Trans Queer Masculinity?

The answer to this question is context dependent; it is not a simple yes or no. My being known as trans will in some cases queer my masculinity (causing the other person to question their own assumptions about what it means to be masculine, or the connections between bodies and identities) and will in other cases put me at risk of personal harm or discrimination. For some transmasculine people, who do not identify as queer, disclosing that they are trans will not necessarily be linked, by themselves or the people around them, to any kind of queerness.

Regardless of whether it is explicitly linked to a queer agenda, being trans/transgender/transsexual/genderqueer challenges traditional ideas of what it means to be a man, for example, it challenges the assumption that all men or male people have certain chromosomes/hormones/genitalia and are assigned male at birth.
Eric felt that his moving back and forth between being out as trans or not is a way of queering masculinity:

Since I’ve become a transman this is my way of being queer I guess: sometimes I sway between being really comfortable about being out as trans, to really, kind of invisible, because people see me as a regular guy.

(1)

It is the movement back and forth, and the simultaneous existence as a transguy and a “regular guy” that characterizes the queering of Eric’s identity as a masculine person. Queering problematizes the boundaries of being “in” or “out” and breaks down the categories of trans and non-trans men.” Eric can be both a regular guy and a transguy, sometimes both at the same time, sometimes one or the other.

Dylan mentions that when people know he is trans, they are sometimes less likely to see him as male or use male pronouns:

The only times when people tend to get the pronouns wrong are either on the phone sometimes coz my voice isn’t that deep or in some situations where they’ve met me, they don’t know me particularly well, they know I’m trans, and something has gone on in their head where they’ve suddenly got these pictures of two people, and they flip between them.

(3)

One picture is Dylan as male, and one picture is Dylan as trans. The latter is incompatible, in their mind, with being a man. Hence, they flip back and forth between “he” and “she.” (Note: queering masculinity does not require accepting incorrect pronouns. Any person has the right to expect that people will use the correct pronouns for them in a respectful manner.) In this case, the queering of Dylan’s masculinity due to his being trans is unintentional, and results in something that is potentially damaging to his sense of himself. Queering gender is multi-faceted work that is likely to result in
both desirable and undesirable experiences. In terms of masculinities as hierarchical, transmasculinity is often lower on the ladder, and hence, disclosing my status as trans is not always useful. In some cases, when people are unaware that transguys exist, identifying as trans effectively erases my masculinity, because people struggle to understand how I can be born female yet identify as masculine, or as a boy. This is similar to Dylan’s experience where someone is confused about whether to call him “he” or “she” because of his trans status.

iv. Synthesis: Power, Privilege and Community Support

In addition to being critical of hegemonic norms, I propose that transmasculine people (and others) must maintain a Butlerian critical and transformative relationship to the norms we create as part of our alternative masculinities. Alternative or incoherent masculinities must still be accountable to racism, sexism, and so forth, as Halberstam advises: “I suggest we think carefully, butches and FTMs alike, about the kinds of men or masculine beings that we wish to become and lay claim to: alternative masculinities, ultimately, will fail to change existing gender hierarchies to the extent to which they fail to be feminist, antiracist, and queer” (1998: 173). In Chapter Three I described a practice of anti-racism in particular, in this Chapter I have focused on queering masculinity (this extends into Chapter Five regarding butch masculinities), and in Chapter Six I consider the relationship between feminism and transmasculinity.

Practicing incoherent transmasculinity requires awareness of power and privilege: I must talk about my specific location, my specific history, and recognize my privilege while refusing to trade on it in social situations where power negotiations (in the form of competitive models of masculinity where I move further up the hierarchy by asserting my superiority) require me to stay invisibly raced as a white person and assert the inferiority of the racial/ethnic other. I must also be aware of the privilege accorded to me when I am read as male and I must actively counteract or make visible this

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56 As I mentioned in Chapter Three, see Erin Davis (2008) for a thorough discussion about how incoherence can cause disruption to trans lives rather than disruption to binary systems of sex/gender.
privilege however I can, for example, by advocating anti-sexism in my interactions with other masculine people. I refuse to articulate my masculinity through the matrix of hegemonic intelligibility. I claim that my masculinity is more valuable, rather than less, because of my commitment to pro-queer anti-racist anti-sexist social change.

Looking at Travis, Eric, Finn and Dylan’s narratives of queering masculinity it is also clear that maintaining alternative masculinities (or any other form of counter-hegemonic gender presentation or politics) depends on community support. We need role models and peer support for alternative masculinities, from a wide range of intersectional identities. Queering masculinity is a political act; it is undertaken by groups of people, each from their own specific perspective and as part of a wider collective. I need my incoherence to be coherent to some people: I need to have support from people who understand why I am incoherent or how I employ this strategy of incoherence. Similarly, when Travis identifies as a geek and a fag, he needs other people who understand, support and reflect this back to him. Collective movements also stand a better chance of redefining language effectively within a wider social context.

“I would like to use language but quite often I find that language ends up using me,” says Travis, and I suggest that in addition to recognising the intersubjective nature of language and identity, we must deepen this understanding to also maintain awareness of power dynamics. Power, language and identity are connected: People with less power are less able to redefine language and are therefore more likely to find their lives constrained by the misunderstandings of the people around them and by the institutionalized frameworks of knowledge and language. Travis: “So when I say, ‘I’m a boy,’ the people, the power-structures that are existing in society can be like, ‘No you’re not, justify yourself, explain yourself!’” (9). These power dynamics operate on all of the multiple levels of our identities, so for Pakeha transguys such as myself and those I interviewed, we are accorded the privilege of whiteness and are not constantly asked to “explain” or “justify” ourselves in relation to our race or ethnicity. Transmasculine communities and academic circles must remain vigilant about privilege and power. Travis asserts,
And it seems fairly obvious what the people in power are defining any particular thing when you start looking at those huge barriers to entry that exist within medical and legal systems for trans people. Both of these systems literally define who it is that you are in order to access them; to access testosterone, to access surgeries, to access legal recognition of being male. The medical system says you have to have this kind of medical condition, or at least jump through these hoops (psych assessment, doctor appointment, counselling, endo etc.), before they'll ‘allow’ you to access tools to help you be seen as yourself/be yourself.

Access to medical and legal services remains one of the most crucial aspects of trans politics and advocacy in New Zealand and other similar postcolonial white-dominated societies. The issue of access is experienced differently depending on one’s intersectional identity or position in society. Being vigilant about privilege and power involves recognising that while I, as a white middle class gender variant person, experience a lack of access to some degree, others who are not white or middle class will probably experience more of a lack (or actual obstruction) by institutionalized overlaps between sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia within law or medicine.

Disclosure is a difficult issue that also highlights the multiplicity of power, and the need to be specific about different situations. I may queer my masculinity sometimes by disclosing that I am trans, or transmasculine. But as Eric noted, it is more accurate to say that moving back and forth, and simultaneously occupying both the position of transguy and “regular guy” is queering masculinity, or identity more widely. This also constitutes strategic use of language, as we challenge and redefine what it means to be a transguy and a regular guy.

The next Chapter addresses butchness as queering masculinity, and this relates to another key aspect of incoherent masculinities: we must appreciate alternative masculinities from all embodied perspectives and not segregate female and male masculinities or devalue any particular embodiment of masculinity. In an academic context, female masculinities, transmasculinities, and other masculinities must similarly
not be segregated from each other or from femininities, femme identities and knowledges, or genderqueer perspectives. On personal, community, and academic levels, all of our configurations of gender are practiced within a wider social context of meaning-making and a politics of incoherence relies on a diverse network of support and a paradoxical commitment to collective coherence and incoherence: to practice incoherence and support other people for whom our incoherence is coherent.
Chapter Five Butchness and Transmasculinity: Incoherent Coalitions of Queer Masculinity and Desire

Fig 5.1 “We’ve Got Options”
Chapter Five
Butchness and Transmasculinity: Incoherent Coalitions of Queer Masculinity and Desire

Introduction: Butch as Queering Masculinity

1. Relationships, Borderwars, and Coalitions
2. Part Two: Embodiment, Desire, and Incoherence

Introduction: Butch as queering masculinity. 57

Transmasculine people, whether butch-identified, trans-identified, male-identified or genderqueer-identified, are in a somewhat unique position in relation to their masculinity, embodiment, and life history. When I ask Eric, “What does trans mean for you?” He says, “Sometimes it reminds me that I have a really unique perspective on the world, and that I can see masculinity in a way no other man can” (1). Similarly, Travis describes himself as “someone who is in a unique position of having experienced both living as a woman and living as a man” (6). He elaborates:

I feel like as a transman I’m in a unique position to be aware of my experiences as a woman, but also be able to sit in the camp of men. And of course this is all very complicated... as I said before I don’t think that there’s two big separate camps that never join or merge, but I feel like I’m lucky enough to be sitting in that merged position where I can say, I’m no longer a woman in an uncomplicated way, and I’m not a man in an uncomplicated way either. But as someone who is shifting towards sitting in the man camp, doing the, outwardly

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57 As part of respecting the diversity of butch identities, I resist conflating butch with lesbian, or using female pronouns for all butch people, because some butch people identify as women and some do not. Similarly, though the public world has a tendency to read transmasculine and butch embodiments as the same thing (whether as a lesbian or as a man or as an abject human being), I am mindful that many transmasculine people do not identify as butch and many butch people do not identify as transmasculine. Also, every person will have a different experience of these communities and I do not attempt to paint a coherent or complete picture. I simply speak from my experience. I also reflect on recent scholarship and material from my interviews.
presenting as male, then I have a duty to – I don’t know – not be part of the system that perpetuates the patriarchy, essentially.

While neither Eric nor Travis identify as butch, the position in which they describe themselves could also be occupied by a female-born butch-identified person. I chose to interview only people who identified as transguys, and only four of them. When I speak about butchness, I speak from my own perspective as a butch trannyboy, and I also refer to comments made by my interviewees about their relationship with the category butch and with lesbian communities, but I recognize that I did not seek interviews with butch-identified people. I refer to recent scholarship, such as Gayle Salamon (2010), regarding the relationship between lesbian, butch, and trans communities, but I do not offer any personal narratives of butchness except my own.

I acknowledge the specificity of butch identities and transmasculine identities but I focus on their common ground. Following C. Jacob Hale, I suggest that we move away from “border wars” towards coalitional politics (Hale 1998). First, I discuss butch as another way of queering masculinity. I follow Nico Dacumos (2006) and Logan Gutierrez-Mock (2006) in their explorations of butch and trans identities/communities at the intersections of race, class, sexuality and gender.

In earlier sections I describe my version of “genderqueer” with reference to the work of Nico Dacumos, “flaming queer radical polysexual two-spirit female-bodied middle-class multiracial bottom who always ends up topping anyway Filipin@/Chican@ antimusogynist transgender butch fag” (2006: 22) and Logan Gutierrez-Mock, a “faggy queer boy who paints his nails pink” (2006: 234). Gutierrez-Mock describes himself as creating “an identity that embraces my female past while insisting on my biracial transgender present: queer/mestizo/trans machismo” (2006: 235). In this discussion of butch identity I return to their work while aiming not to repeat or summarize my previous engagement with it.
Dacumos highlights the significance of race and class in relation to butch identities, and suggests that contrary to the supposed trendiness of transmale identities, butchness “as understood by academics and mainstream gay and lesbian communities, only draws interest when anthropologized or relegated to the past, and cast as a precursor to transgenderism” (2006: 30). Butchness is not a precursor to transness, just as genderqueerness is not a precursor to transness (see Chapter Three). Some people identify as butch, some as transmasculine, and some as both butch and transmasculine. For example, Judith Halberstam has described her work as an attempt to create a space for the “transgender butch” (1998). Sometimes the only difference between a butch and an FTM (or transmasculine person), is “personal intention,” as Dacumos observes (2006: 35).

Dacumos asks, “Am I a transgender butch? I don’t know,” and asserts, “I will continue to search for alliances with those who foreground the concerns of femmes and feminine-identified people while also creating new options for enacting masculinities” (2006: 29). Dacumos is more interested in foregrounding the importance of femmes and feminine-identified people than in defending his claims to butchhood and transmasculinity. His masculinity is supportive of (and receives support from) femmes and feminine-identified people; this is connected, for him, to being a butch person of colour (2006: 26). Dacumos lists Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, the Combahee River Collective and bell hooks as women of colour writers who taught him to not only “love and honour the women in my life,” but also that “liberation for all peoples depends upon close attention to the needs, desires, and issues of women of colour” (2006: 26). Trans communities, especially white middle-class trans communities, need to recognise how much we have learnt, and stand to learn, from butch people, femme people, and people of colour.

I follow Dacumos’ lead as he navigates “the violence of masculinities enacted by butch and trans people,” in a landscape like Anzaldúa’s borderlands (2006: 34). Of the supposed divide between trans and butch, Dacumos writes, “Never mind that the line between the two seems as tenuous as the barbed wire fence that juts out into the Pacific Ocean at the U.S-Mexico border: Its vain attempt to demarcate the two countries will inevitably fall to the steady flow of waves slamming back and forth across its rotting
posts” (2006: 34). Highlighting the political stakes of borderzones and border-crossing, Dacumos reminds us that artificially imposed barriers, whether imposed upon a landscape of gender, race or nation, are politically motivated, socially constructed, and vulnerable to change.

This Chapter is divided into two halves: first I consider connections between butchness and transmasculinity, concluding that if we value our relationships and shared ethics then we can forge useful coalitions. In the second half I explore embodiment and desire as crucial themes in the incoherent relationship between butchness and transmasculinity.
1. Relationships, Borderwars, and Coalitions

   a. Borderwars: Portrayals of Butch and Trans Identities as Oppositional
      i. Narrative: My Experience of Butchness
      ii. Narrative: My Experience of “Borderwars”

   b. Narrative: Dylan and Visibility of Options

   c. A Comparison Between Narratives: Dylan and Myself

   d. Synthesis: Incoherent Relationship, Shared Values, Coalitional Politics

   a. Borderwars: Portrayals of Butch and Trans Identities as Oppositional

At the end of the millennium, Hale and Halberstam produced seminal works on the “borderwars” between FTMs and butches in the United States (Hale 1998, Halberstam 1998, Hale and Halberstam 1998). Halberstam begins her discussion: “As the visibility of a transsexual community grows at the end of the twentieth century in the United States and as female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) become increasingly visible in that community, questions about the viability of queer female butch identities become crucial and unavoidable” (287). Regarding the issue of transmasculine visibility, I see a parallel between the late-1990s in the United States and contemporary trans, queer and lesbian politics here in New Zealand. However, while I note the importance of Hale and Halberstam’s work, I focus on current scholarship by Gayle Salamon (2010) because it relates more easily to my New Zealand context. I also explore interview material and my personal narratives, in order to establish a more specific New Zealand perspective.

The most significant aspect of both Hale and Halberstam’s work for my project is the emphasis on coalitional politics. Halberstam: “identity politics must give way to some form of coalition if a political movement is to be successful” (1998b: 301). Hale: “we can best establish demilitarized zones by forging alliances and loyalties – personal, intellectual, and political – with people whose values we share, who respect our
specificities and we theirs, across the gendered and other identity-based categories of social ontology” (1998: 340). As Hale points out, the demilitarization of borderzones between butch and FTM is a crucial step towards crafting inclusive, effective (and incoherent) political movements. Halberstam emphasizes that “not all models of masculinity are equal” and we must “pay careful attention to the functions of homophobia and sexism in particular within the new masculinities” (1998b: 306). (See Chapter Four for more on homophobia/queering masculinities.) Also, there is no single best strategy for combating sexism, racism and homophobia, as Hale observes: “We should be highly suspicious of our ability to make predictions about the (one and only) best means of resistance in a highly complex, continually shifting set of overlapping and competing political, economic, legal, medical, psychotherapeutic, and technological discursive/material fields” (1998: 335). I refrain from positioning my politics of incoherence as the best strategy of resistance, arguing instead that it is one possible model, one that works within my own context. It may or may not be adaptable to other contexts.

In more recent scholarship, Salamon examines media hype in the United States about borderwars between butches and transguys/FTMs (2010). She uses the example of an article from The New York Times, which valorizes butchness and denigrates transness, “whereas previously, before the current trans debates, it was butchness and butches themselves who were castigated for these same reasons” (2010: 109). “The line has moved,” declares Salamon, “transmen are now the limit case of masculinity, as opposed to butches, who are now held up as a lesbian ideal” (2010: 109).58 This has a violent effect on both trans and butch identities: butch women and people are required to adhere to a certain code of butchness, including identifying with their female bodies and disidentifying with (trans)masculinity; transguys/FTMs/transmasculine people are

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58 Salamon notes that Halberstam has criticized this tendency to “assign gender deviance only to transsexual bodies and gender normativity to all other bodies” (Salamon 2010: 109, Halberstam 1998: 153). Transmasculinity becomes the site for masculine gender deviance, and by comparison butch lesbianism, cleansed of that same masculine deviance, becomes gender normative. Salamon continues: “Through that containment,” the lesbian and gay community “are able to present themselves to the public as ever more similar to heterosexuals, and thus safer” (2010: 106). Salamon (2010) cites Stryker and Halberstam as two theorists who aim to complicate this picture. Both Stryker and Halberstam discern that this picture relates to medical pathologisation: being lesbian, gay or bisexual is no longer officially included in the DSM IV, but gender dysphoria or “Gender Identity Disorder” remains officially pathologised.
required to identify with male-masculinity and not with butch-masculinity or lesbian identities.

Salamon notes that in order to distinguish between butch and trans (since the categories must remain distinct if we are to be at war with one another) a butch is positioned as having a vaguely defined “attachment to womanhood” (2010: 108). The lines are drawn in the following fashion: “transmen loathe their breasts, but butches do not. Transmen attack and reject their bodies, but butches celebrate theirs. Transmen want to pass as men in public, while butches want to be recognized as women,” and so on, while Salamon asserts that “if this seems to be a portrait of butchness that is both highly motivated and staggeringly inaccurate, it is no coincidence,” because this is “identical” to the feminist reaction against butch/femme identities in “decades past” (2010: 108). The historical repetition is interesting, but the main point I wish to make is that drawing lines between butch and trans is, as Dacumos revealed, ineffective. This does not remove the possibility that butch and trans are distinctive identities, but it does suggest a more complex back-and-forth relation, rather than a simple dichotomization.

The article from *The New York Times* (2006), regarded by Salamon as exemplary of the way that the popular press has set up transmen and butch lesbians as opposing forces who are at war with each other: “The relation between lesbian and trans communities is described as an all-out war, a ‘conflict’ that ‘has raged at some women’s colleges.’ The parties to this war, the article asserts, are intractably divided” (Salamon 2010: 105). Lesbian soap opera *The L Word* provides more fodder for online diatribes in both official “press” and personal blogs. Salamon suggests that the soap opera itself presents a story of lesbian communities under threat. Max is introduced as a transman character, and “it soon becomes clear that the story is not about transmen at all, but is instead a story about the response of angry lesbians to the peril that transmen represent to their communities” (2010: 106). A blogger cited by *The New York Times* calls for the death of the FTM character Max: preferably, death by “testosterone overdose” (Salamon 2010: 107). *The New York Times* implies, Salamon argues, that “the lesbian anger that leads to online murderousness is in some way justified,” that it is “a communitywide
strategy of self-defense in response to the threat that transmen pose to the categories of woman, lesbian, and butch (2010: 107).

Salamon alleges that lurking behind the “rhetoric of war” and self-defense in the New York Times article lies “the baseless but pervasive suspicion that transpeople are dangerous, and dangerous in a way that violates women in particular” (2010: 107). This is an old argument going back to Janice Raymond (1979). Editors Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle reproduce part of Raymond’s book in The Transgender Studies Reader (2006), and they preface it by observing that Raymond’s work “did not invent anti-transsexual prejudice, but it did more to justify and perpetuate it than perhaps any other book ever written” (Stryker and Whittle 2006: 131). Raymond specifically attacks transwomen, rather than transmen. She asserts that all MTF transsexuals are by definition rapists because they “violate women’s bodies by taking on the artificial female organs” (Raymond 2006: 141).

In her discussion of transmasculinity, Salamon contends that the suspicion that transpeople are dangerous “becomes transmogrified into fantasies of trans predation, where transpeople are compared to rapists or claimed to embody a threat, sometimes particular and sometimes unspecified, to nontrans women” (2010: 107). It is interesting that this same threat of violence, and specifically sexual violence, is recycled. First it was used to attack transwomen at a time when they were the more visible trans population, and now it is used to attack transmen at a time when we are (arguably) gaining mainstream visibility (albeit a lot of it misinformed or ill-intentioned). While the first round of hate against transwomen emanated from (some not all) second wave lesbian feminists and not from “dominant culture,” perhaps the pervasiveness of arguments about gender deviance as sexually violent/threatening says as much about the dominant culture’s obsession with simultaneously “protecting” and “violating” women (because women must be violable in order to need paternalistic protecting), as it does about gender deviance being dangerous and therefore punishable.
i. Narrative: My Experience of Butchness

The word butch comes to me roughened around the edges from centuries of hardship, and I cradle it gently in my queer boy hand.

I have only recently, in the last few months, begun to feel butch and identify as a butch boy. In March 2010, when I conducted interviews, I had a conversation with Eric about how he “tried [his] hardest to become a butch lesbian,” but that he felt he was “a pretty bad one” (7). I responded, laughing: “Yeah I’d be really terrible at being butch. That’s not gonna work!” (7). At the time, I genuinely felt like a femme boy. I had been perceived as a feminine person my whole life. I also felt some pressure as a transguy to disavow any butchness, because I saw butch identity and embodiment as associated more with femaleness than maleness. While I treasured my historical links with femaleness, I associated my more recent self with maleness. Finn said, “I think butch is still part of a feminine continuum” (4). I wanted to be on a masculine continuum instead.

More recently, I have thought harder about what Finn may have meant and how these continuums could be damaging for butch people who, like me, may want to be part of a masculine continuum. I see Finn’s comment as referring to the historical association of butch identity with women or lesbians and hence with female people, not male people. This is a commonly held understanding, and is grounded in various narratives and experiences of lesbian/dyke/women/queer communities. However, the notion of two separate continuums, like the binary sex/gender system upon which it is based, fails to address butch and transmasculine diversity. (I do not suggest that Finn posited separate continuums, this is my extension of our discussion.) It particularly fails to take into account the complexity of butch identities, embodiments and communities.

Creating a masculine continuum or a feminine continuum, based on binary male or female sex/gender, also fails to fundamentally question what these concepts mean. What do I mean by “feminine” and “masculine”? In this model, they appear to be simple extensions of female and male: if one is born male or identifies as such, one operates on
a masculine continuum, and if one is born female or identifies as such, one operates on a feminine continuum. Since, as I discussed in Chapters One and Four, trans theory (and masculinity studies) must question the automatic linking of male-masculine-man, we must also reject continuums that appear to make more space (a continuum, as a line, seems more spacious than a category, as a box) for gender diversity but ultimately re-inscribe the same binary “either/or” logic.

Separate continuums for male or masculine people and female or feminine people also functions to problematically segregate butch and trans identities/embodiments. Segregating different categories of masculinity also plays into the hegemonic hierarchical model of gender, where “normative white male” is the pinnacle of the power pyramid. According to this hierarchy, transmasculinity (which is perceived as a move from the female/feminine to the male/masculine continuum) receives more social power than butchness (which is stuck on the female/feminine continuum).

Even if we create a new continuum that includes both butch and FTM, Halberstam stresses that such a model would have “no interpretive power” (1998b: 294). She offers the following as an example of a failed masculine continuum:

ANDROGYNY – SOFT BUTCH – BUTCH – STONE BUTCH – //TRANSGENDER BUTCH – FTM
NOT MASCULINE------------------------------------------VERY MASCULINE

This continuum, which does not (overtly) rely on binary gender, still sets up an untenable linear relationship between “androgyne” at one end and “FTM” at the other, with “butch” somewhere in the middle. (It also echoes binary gender by only including terms that connote female-assigned-at-birth status. A non-binary continuum would not be so restrictive.) A linear account of masculinity like this one, which again fails to question what masculinity is (or how it functions), presumes that butch embodiment is a less masculine version of manhood than FTM embodiment, which is exactly what Halberstam is critiquing.

Assuming that FTMs are “more masculine” and butches are “less masculine” is homogenizing, divisive, and ignorant of both the interventions of queer theorists who
decouple masculinity and maleness and the lived experience of butches and transmasculine people.

My own experience as femme boy who becomes transmasculine person who becomes butch boy (and identifies throughout as genderqueer) similarly undermines the simplicity of categories such as “male” and “masculine.” In January 2011 I wrote a small piece for a zine about transmasculinity being produced in Melbourne, in which I charted the shift:

My body, before the extra testosterone, was a slender, traditionally attractive white-girl figure. Butch people were high on my erotic list of hotness, but I didn’t identify as such myself. When I started identifying as trans (usually without the qualifier “man”) I heard and read a lot about so-called ‘border wars’ between butch women and transmen. At the time, I saw myself as straddling the female-male divide, being ambiguously alluring. Now, I straddle both divides: boy and girl, butch and trans. I prefer male pronouns, and I would rather that the general public treat me as male instead of female. But I’m actively working alongside many others to create a world where those aren’t the only two options. And in my private or intimate worlds, I love being a genderqueer butch person, or butch trannyboy. I feel, more than ever before, a strong sense of alignment with my embodiment and myself. Like I’m living out to the edges of my skin. Feminine butch boy. Masculine trannyqueer. Me.

(January 2011)

I do not know how often people perceive me as male or as a butch dyke or lesbian, though I do notice when I get called “son” at the petrol station or “lady” in a cafe. I have never identified as a lesbian, though I did enjoy being a dyke, and I enjoy now being a butch. Being butch for me is very much about my embodiment: I feel stronger, heavier, like I take up more space and can be more direct in my actions and communications. I recognize that for many people, those same feelings would not result in any identification with butchness. I wager that a large part of my identification is because I
choose role models for masculinity who are not male. In my interview with Eric, I said that for me,

Part of having a feminist politics as a trans person, a transguy, is knowing that some of the role models for your masculinity aren’t men. So like you know, understanding having butch role models, and having all these kinds of ways of being that kind of, that you aspire to, that are not specifically rooted in biological maleness being equal to masculinity. And I really love that.

(3)

Being strong or heavy or taking up space or communicating and acting in a more direct fashion is not inherently masculine or butch, but it is part of the dominant social construction of masculinity. Since I am impacted by (and negotiating with) these norms, it is also part of my own personal experience of masculinity. However, these same feelings may just as easily be about being more comfortable in my own skin or being (in some situations) more confident as a person, a shift which is enabled by the visibility of my queer masculinity in my embodiment and presentation.

Affirming my own butch identity is part of a link with my female history and my continued relationships with queer identified women.59 The idea that I was a girl until sometime in my early twenties is not uncomfortable for me. What butchness means (just as what masculinity means or what femininity means) will differ according to each person and their social situation. Speaking from my own experience, I feel kinship with Anzaldúa’s concept of la mestiza and Hale’s notion of genderqueer borderzone dweller.

Like Logan Gutierezz-Mock, who cites Anzaldúa’s concept of “la mestiza,” (Gutierezz-Mock 2006: 232) I feel I am mixed-gender, with a bit of butchness, a bit of boyness, a bit of queerness, and a proud history as a girl before I became this queer butch boy.

59 Dacumos describes how “sometimes I lie my ass off for the tiniest taste of community. I let my family and some radical straight people of colour call me by my given name in the interest of feeding our tenuous connection. I remain ‘she’ amongst butches of colour to hang on to the one community that ever felt kinda good to belong to” (2006: 23). I relate to this statement, and it speaks volumes about the situation many people find themselves in. Perhaps part of a politics of incoherence is embracing the power of this perspective, counteracting the possibility of fragmentation and insisting on our right to call ourselves and be called by others whatever is most appropriate in that situation.
Perhaps I am comfortable with this butchness as a connection to female history because I do not want to lose my history or become assimilated as just a white boy or male.

What will I do if I begin to be perceived merely as a white male? I propose that this “assimilation” is a process that I can and will interrupt in my speech, actions, embodiment and presentation. According to Hale, some borderzone residents “need to resist definitions that indiscriminately erase our specificities in order that we may carve out social space in which to invent new discursive tools; with these implements we can build fully embodied selves and reinsert ourselves more fully into a restructured social ontology” (336). I resist being seen as a transsexual for this reason, or a man, though I enjoy the related concepts of genderqueer, transmasculine person, and trans boy. This thesis is part of my attempt to carve out social space and invent new tools (or reiterate/extend the importance of other people’s new tools) for both speaking as a gender diverse person and restructuring the social world in which I dwell.

ii. Narrative: My Experience of “Borderwars”

There are some similarities between my experience and the narratives of conflict that Salamon finds in the U.S media. I am aiming not to determine which context is more or less oppressive, but rather to tell my particular story from this particular location. My experience of the New Zealand context, in terms of media and queer/trans communities, does not reflect the extremity of the rhetoric in the North American context. Having said that, I read an article recently that caused a minor furore amongst the trans and queer communities I live in because it suggested that being trans, and specifically being a transman, is becoming “trendy” and young “girls” may choose to transition because of this cultural fashion.60 It also discounted (or perhaps highlighted)
the difficulty that genderqueer and differently gendered people face because it positioned “true” transpeople as different and superior to those who just want to modify their bodies or become “androgy nous.”

The blogger, Un-pc lesbian, writes about how some websites providing information about transmasculinity and transition have become quite popular. (She measures this by how regularly the websites are updated.) Un-pc lesbian tries to distinguish between FTM as something fashionable, and FTM as something meaningful: “These images and updates for me just keep pointing to the concept that FtM is the new fashion, the flavour of the month. This irritates me on one level as it completely debases the struggle, the emotional and mental turmoil of those who are genuinely trans, those who have suffered the anguish of extreme gender dysphoria all their lives.” Within this paradigm, the genuine transguy must suffer extreme gender dysphoria, and identify/be diagnosed with “Gender Identity Disorder.” Un-pc lesbian criticizes people who take testosterone at a low dose or assert their right to change their mind or stop hormone treatment: “Surely if you are prescribed T to correct GID you would take it for life, as being perceived as and seeing yourself as male is the remedy for the disorder? Again, this gender fashion totally devalues the experience of those who are truly transgender” (italics mine).

This rhetoric of the “true” transsexual goes back to Harry Benjamin.61 It is steeped in problematic medical models of trans identities: the doctor must determine whether this person is a “true” transsexual or not because they could just be homosexual or delusional.62 While I do not deny that some transpeople genuinely feel that they have a gender disorder, I do resist the idea that a doctor has the authority to determine whether or not I am the person that I say I am. I believe that we, as transpeople, are the authority on our own embodiments, experiences and identities, though we may choose to avail


62 Genderqueer people, like bisexual people, are often targeted as not really knowing what they want, or needing to choose a side, or being confused, or just playing with the serious business of gender and sexuality.
ourselves of medical technologies and therefore need to interact with medical professionals.63

b. Narrative: Dylan and Visibility of Options

Halberstam points out that it is the increasing visibility of FTM or transguys/transmasculine people that prompts the debates about butch, lesbian, and trans communities (1998b: 287). Interviewee Dylan reflects on his recent experience in Sydney, Australia, in comparison to New Zealand. In New Zealand, Dylan perceives transguys to be relatively invisible, or at least, less visible, so for example, if he was out with his female partner in queer spaces people would be likely to assume they were a straight couple when in fact they both identify as queer (13). Dylan mentions that transguys are more visible in other places, “in other small enclaves in some main cities of the States, for example, probably the same in London” (13). With visibility, says Dylan, comes the rhetoric of transmasculine embodiment or identity becoming trendy:

What I noticed this last time being in Sydney at Mardi Gras is it’s starting to exist there [the visibility]. So the same debates that used to happen around ‘that people are transitioning because it’s a trend, FTM are transitioning because it’s a trendy thing to do,’ that people talked about in the States, they’re now talking about in Sydney. Whereas I think people probably predominantly wouldn’t say that in New Zealand.

My interview with Dylan took place in March 2010, and by 29 November 2010, the lesbian blogger’s article had appeared discussing that very issue. However, it is still fair to say that most people do not think being a transguy is trendy in New Zealand because most people are not aware that transguys exist. This invisibility is a barrier for transguys

63 See Talia Bettcher (2009) for an excellent discussion of “first person authority” as an ethical principle that enables respect for the self-identifications of transpeople. I have written elsewhere about Bettcher’s “first person authority” as a useful tool for trans theorists or researchers engaging with trans communities. See Macdonald (forthcoming).
who are not aware that transitioning to become male is an option, as both Dylan and Finn attest. Dylan: “Because you can’t be something till you know it exists” (13). Finn: “then about 2002 I discovered that transguys existed, which was kind of helpful! I kind of knew, like I’d known a transwoman before that - I’d never clicked that you could do it the other way” (20).

A certain amount of visibility is necessary before an identity can become trendy. Achieving such a level of visibility, which may prompt discussions about how “being FTM is just a fashion,” is in many ways quite positive because more people will realise that it is possible, if they wish, to transition towards maleness. In the context of my experience and those of my interviewees, rhetoric about transmasculinity being trendy does not seem to have the undercurrent of violence that Salamon describes, and I wager that this is due to the difference in both size and cultural systems of the populations in North America and New Zealand.

Dylan suggests that the best thing is “being visible about all the options,” which I read as a call for role models and support for all kinds of gender questioning youth and adults: butch people, transguys, transgirls, lesbians, dykes, fags, genderqueers and so on (14). As Dylan observes, people “want to feel part of a community and want to feel they belong,” which can result in either people not choosing to transition because they do not want to lose their community, or in people choosing to transition knowing that they will still have a community (13-14). It seems unlikely, given how strenuous gender transition usually is, that people would choose to transition specifically in order to gain access to a particular “trendy” community.

c. A Comparison between Narratives: Dylan and Myself

Dylan and I compare notes on moving from our dyke identities to our transmasculine identities, and we notice there is a shift that may result from generational factors. Though there are less than ten years between when we began our transitions, in terms of
our age, the difference is closer to twenty years. Dylan comments that he “lost [his] whole community to transition” and felt “huge peer pressure not to transition” (14), whereas I have not felt that peer pressure from my dyke/lesbian/queer friends. I remark, gratefully:

A lot of my friends who would say that they were lesbians or dykes or queer women have been amazing. Have been really like, “of course, I understand that you don’t want to be in women-only spaces, and you don’t want to go to a lesbian ball, for example, or something like that, but you are positioned differently than someone who was born male or you are positioned differently because I know you and because I love you and because you are a part of my community even if you’ve shifted and are also linked to this other community.”

(14)

Dylan sees “potential for change” in what I describe, and he hopes that with more dialogue and openness, transmen and lesbians can avoid stereotyping each other (15). Dylan contends that these stereotypes, particularly when fuelled by the media, keep transmen and lesbians from becoming allies and working together. He declares:

Yeah and there are also pockets of where there is an openness and I’d love it if the politics caught up with the pockets of people actually, like you said, getting to know someone and realising that it’s not a huge challenge to their very clear identity as a lesbian or a dyke, that someone else who was on that journey with them for a long time who they assumed was the same as them, has now said actually I’m not the same. Because if we didn’t see it as such an affront to each other’s identities, or challenge or threat, then we’d avoid the stereotyping of each other.

(15)

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64 I know that other transmasculine people will have a range of experiences, and I do not claim to represent “the new generation,” but I am comforted to know that the violent opposition between lesbians and transguys, especially butch lesbians and transguys, is not inevitable.
Part of this “affront” that Dylan describes, which is experienced on both sides of the supposed border wars, is tied up with self-identification. Some transguys do not want to be seen as butches, and some butches do not want to be seen as transguys: a forceful distancing of one’s self from the “other” is understandable when the wider public world constantly conflates butchness with transmasculinity. No one wants their self-identifications disregarded. Our identities, while overlapping in complex ways, are not homogenous.

d. Synthesis: Incoherent Relationship, Shared Values, Coalitional Politics

The relationship between butchness and transmasculinity could be called incoherent. This incoherence can be used strategically, as we stand alongside each other and insist on our right to be ourselves, in our differences and similarities, borders and overlaps. Instead of trying to distinguish between transmen and butches by categorizing or creating definitions for what it means in any given context to be transmasculine or butch, I suggest that we embrace the incoherence as a useful part of these relationships. This incoherence is useful because it respects self-identification. Hale points to “self-identification” as the linchpin of identity: “self-identification as butch or ftm is the only characteristic that distinguishes some butches from some ftms” (1998: 325). Borders cannot be imposed externally (for example, “butch women are comfortable with their bodies and transmen are uncomfortable with their bodies”) because this self-identification emerges from within the self, in relation to the other. There are no strict borders or distinctions between categories. As a butch boy person, I am heartened by Hale’s comment that “indeed, in some cases there may be no distinction at all, since some people self-identify as both butch and ftm” (1998: 322).

Queering masculinity, whether from a butch, lesbian, dyke, boy, man, genderqueer, transmasculine or other perspective, can produce purposefully incoherent masculinity. This incoherent masculinity is produced differently by different embodied subjects in different locations. As Hale notes, “different border zone denizens, are, of course,
differently located: not only do we exist in the areas of overlap of different gender categories but we also differ in our placement in those areas of overlap” (336). Different locations results in different experiences of privilege, for example, being a white/Pakeha genderqueer, I experience white privilege. (See Chapter Four, specifically the final section, “Power, Privilege, and Community Support” for elaboration.)

Instead of focusing on rhetoric of battles, warfare or borderzones, I prefer to consider the productive tensions and overlaps between our communities, without eliding the differences. Specificity is necessary, “only by speaking quite specifically about those located elements of our dislocatedness can we who dwell in border zones speak at all” (Hale 1998: 336). We can support each other to speak, without assuming that we can speak for each other, without assuming that we experience our dislocatedness in similar ways, without assuming that someone who is butch is automatically female or that someone who is transmasculine is automatically male. We can not only queer hegemonic masculinity but also queer the relationships between these discursive positions of butch, man, woman, transguy, genderqueer. These queer relationships of incoherence are not undermined by our specificity or by our incoherence, they are instead strengthened by our commitment to support each other as different people, different communities, with significant and powerful overlaps.

Dacumos describes how one of his friends dubbed him “the last unicorn” because “she has watched so many butches she knows become transmen” (2006: 34-5). Dylan, in our interview, described a similar situation in Sydney (13). As I have argued, a positive aspect of this discourse is that FTMs are achieving some level of visibility. Salamon offers another consideration: “hand-wringing about the death of ‘real’ butchness, mourning the end of its era or grieving over the loss of butches has been a constant accompaniment to butchness itself” (109). Her argument is that “butchness as a style of queer masculinity is in part constructed by the model of nostalgic where-have-they-all-gone scarcity” (2010: 109).

I cannot catalogue the “styles” of queer masculinity embodied by butches and transmasculine people, and I do not know if Salamon’s observation would hold true for
butchness in a New Zealand context. I turn instead to Hale’s suggestion that we can create alliances or coalitions across the different communities of queer masculinity, or indeed, across any identity-based communities.

The basis for such a coalition, Hale argues, can be shared values or ethics, rather than shared identities: “we can best establish demilitarized zones by forging alliances and loyalties – personal, intellectual, and political – with people whose values we share, who respect our specificities and we theirs, across the gendered and other identity-based categories of social ontology” (1998: 340). By valuing relationships, instead of policing or defending borders, we can bridge gaps between communities without erasing or ignoring differences and specificities. If these relationships are based on shared values, shared ethical commitments, for example, to anti-racism or feminism/anti-sexism or pro-queer social change, then they can become the basis for a powerful coalition of movements that enables us to engage a number of issues from a number of different perspectives, while not losing our cohesion as people in relationships with other people. We can support each other to do this work. Incoherent relationships, as a strengthening strategy, enables cohesive, coherent movements for socio-political change.
2. Embodiment, Desire, and Incoherence

   a. Queer Desire and Communities
   b. Narratives: Embodied Masculinity
   c. Synthesis: Circles of Incoherent Embodied Desire

   In the first half of this Chapter, I reflected on the relationship between butchness and transmasculinity, and recommended that we appreciate the incoherence of this relationship. Further, inspired by Hale (1998, 2009), I suggested that we concentrate on shared ethics as a basis for coalitional politics. In this second half, I ask how embodiment and desire could be part of the incoherent relationship between butchness and transmasculinity. I consider the idea that we “make our bodies our selves” as Kim
Q. Hall explains (2009), in relation to a wider intersubjective world that includes others who are both similar and different to us. Speaking from a queer community perspective, Hall asserts that desire is a crucial component of our intersubjective relationships, and therefore a vital part of how we understand (or “make”) our embodied identities.

In Chapter Four, Queering (Trans)Masculinity, I cite Connell and Messerschmidt, who call for “a more sophisticated treatment of embodiment” in masculinity studies (2005: 185). I also suggest that embodiment is a relevant point of cross-pollination between trans theory and masculinity studies. A full explication of how embodiment can be re- visioned through queer transmasculinity is outside the scope of this thesis, but in this section I chart some of the critical issues in this area, including relationships between self and body, the creation of queer transmasculine embodiment in the context of queer communities, and the undervaluing of body-knowledge.

I draw further upon Connell and Messerschmidt, who argue that bodies generate social practice:

> The common scientific reading of bodies as objects of a process of social construction is now widely considered to be inaccurate. Bodies are involved more actively, more intimately, and more intricately in social processes than theory has usually allowed. Bodies participate in social action by delineating courses of social conduct – the body is a participant in generating social practice. It is important not only that masculinities be understood as embodied but also that the interweaving of embodiment and social context be addressed.

> (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 851)

My understanding of social constructionism is compatible with a more complex account of bodies, attuned to the intricacies of embodiment as an ongoing intersubjective process of identity within a social context. The narratives of embodied masculinity described by my interviewees signal some of these complexities: gender transition as informed by an embodied sense of self (rather than a rational or mental assessment of self or body); the concept of body-knowledge; attending to the incoherent relationship
between body and self over time; connection and disconnection from bodies; intersubjective relationships and the links between embodied self, social context, and knowledge of possibilities.

Queer cript feminist Kim Q. Hall emphasizes the overlaps between feminist theory, queer/trans theory, and disability studies, providing useful tools for my exploration of transmasculinity narratives from interviews (Hall 2009). In my view, Hall’s work is an example of the more sophisticated queer and trans theorizing that Connell and Messerschmidt call for in relation to masculinity studies. Hall focuses on transmasculine embodiment, particularly on the queerness of transmasculine breasted experience. Hall proposes that Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* provide a queer feminist model for “thinking about bodies, embodiments, and identities that troubles and crosses the boundary of binary gender, as well as about the creative possibilities of queer spaces that are essential for the emergence of unruly bodies” (2009: 122).

Hall’s queer feminist framework, heavily influenced by cript theory/disability studies, includes the following crucial points: we make our bodies our selves, and the process of making my body my self always occurs in a social context, which is why queer spaces can be useful in enabling trans or queer embodiments to flourish. Hall says, “instead of focusing on how our bodies are our selves, I consider how we make our bodies our selves and, in the process, move toward a more inclusive and transformative feminist politics of the body” (2009: 123). Considering Audre Lorde and her documented experience of breast cancer, Hall suggests that queer desire and queer communities provide possibilities for transformative embodiments and politics: “to the extent that an erotic community of women played a significant role in Lorde’s decision not to wear a prosthesis, Lorde’s decision is rooted in queer desire” (2009: 131). This queer desire plays out in intersubjective relationships, or communities of recognition: “We make our bodies our selves in the context of communities of support and recognition; because our participation in those communities changes us, it also changes our bodies, even what dominant culture assumes to be an unchanging, biological fact about our bodies – our sex” (2009: 131).
The suggestion that we undertake a constant process of making our bodies our selves correlates with the concept of transition, as I understand it. My transition is the constant process of making my body myself, or bringing my body and identity into ever-shifting alignment. As illustrated by excerpts from Finn and Eric, my interviewees had complex narratives about making their bodies their selves, and how their transition demonstrates the intertwining of embodiment and identity.

b. Narratives: Embodied Masculinity

Finn talks about how his masculinity “is very much about [his] body” (4). His transition is informed by his sense of embodied masculinity:

I decided that my masculinity was probably the most valuable part of that that I needed to hold onto. I couldn’t change that I needed to do my body in that particular way. That was probably the constant. And it had been such a long journey that I needed to actually hold onto that, and invest in that. Which informed my decision to transition and go on hormones and do chest surgery and stuff. Not because I innately felt like a man or anything but actually, I needed to be able to do masculinity in terms of masculinity. In terms of how I understand it and how it allows people to see and understand me.

(20)

I want to consider Finn’s statement: “I couldn’t change that I needed to do my body in that particular way” (20). His transition towards a more male embodiment is informed by this feeling in his body that he needs to “do” masculine embodiment. Finn highlights his agency as a subject who “does” his body or performs his identity, performs his embodiment, and simultaneously reveals that he “couldn’t change” this need to “do” his body. His performance of gender is constrained not only by external norms but also by his own embodied sense of self. At another point in the interview Finn remarks, “I think

See also “Trans-Terminologies” for more discussion of the complex process of “transition.”
for me probably I would say my body very much informed my understanding of gender, or my experience of gender. I don’t always feel like I had a lot of control over that” (5). Finn does not articulate a sense of himself as always having been male and needing to bring his body into alignment with his internal self, which is a common (and sometimes essentialist) narrative that some transmen reportedly relate to.66

Finn’s identity is informed by his body, and in the course of the interview we both agree that our language lacks adequate terms or frameworks for this kind of bodily experience. Part of this is due to a presumed separation of body and mind, or identity and embodiment. “I think this is actually a problem in language,” Finn observes, “I don’t think we have any kind of concept for how a body can change without your mind having control over that. And I think, I mean puberty would be a perfect example of actually your body’s changing and you’re not in control of it. And it’s actually a really central experience for a lot of people, you know?” (5). Finn points out that transmasculine people are not alone in experiencing this ambiguity between embodiment and self through a process of embodied change or transition.

In our conversation, we touch on the concept of “body-knowledge” as a way of enriching our language or understanding of an embodied self. Finn is frustrated because “I don’t think our bodily experiences are actually valued, that highly. I think our conformity, you know the pressure to have your body conform to particular notions of whether it be, you know, gender or beauty or anything else that’s kind of built on bodies, is pretty huge. But I don’t think our actual bodily experiences are talked about very well” (5). How can we talk about our bodies/embodiments without separating body and mind? Furthermore, how can we seek to value our embodied experiences, our body-knowledge? Can body-knowledge be explored through language or is it something that might be more fruitfully explored through physical mediums such as dance? Finn and I come to no firm conclusions, but we agree that the complex relationships of embodiment are difficult to talk about with our current framework.

66 For example, Henry Rubin, a non-trans sociologist, reports these kind of essentialist narratives of identity from his interview participants (2003). Other trans theorists, such as transsexual activist Jamison Green, describe their experience of gender/manhood, and transition, in a mixture of essentialist and constructivist language (2001, 2004).
Does the experience of transitioning shed any light on this difficulty? Dylan’s account echoes some of Finn’s observations about the importance of embodiment in his transition. Dylan describes his journey of transitioning as “the many years that it took for me to understand that trans people existed, and then transmen in particular, and then that it was an option for me, and then allowing myself to take that option, which was a long process” (4). He notes that this process involved shifting from the belief that “bodies shouldn’t matter so much” to learning that “on a fundamental level, bodies do matter” (4). We are not accustomed to listening to our bodies and attending to that relationship between body and self.

Dylan and I discuss our motivations for undertaking physical transitions, and Dylan says it was a matter of being fully himself, as an embodied person:

> I didn’t transition because that’s the only way I could do certain things, you know that I had to be a man to do these things. Anything that I’ve chosen to do in my life, pretty much, I can’t think of anything that I couldn’t have done. Anything I could have done before transitioning, the only thing I couldn’t do was be myself. You know be fully myself. And what was integral to that for me, not for every trans person but for me, to be fully embodied in myself required physically transitioning. And I didn’t even know how much it would.

(4)

The physical aspects of Dylan’s transition, such as taking testosterone and getting chest reconstruction surgery, cannot be easily separated from the context of Dylan’s embodied masculinity and sense of himself. For some transpeople, a physical transition may not involve medical technologies, and for others, the term “physical transition” may be meaningless. But focusing on these individual narratives without generalizing to “all transpeople” or even “all transmasculine people” demonstrates the layers of embodiment and identity. How is it that Dylan could not be fully himself without transition? It is dangerous to oversimplify this narrative to imply that before transition, someone like Dylan may be disconnected from their body and afterwards they are
connected with their body. This repeats the dichotomization of body and mind that plagues discussions of embodiment and identity. Part of the problematizing of this dichotomization lies in the “process” or journey aspect of transition, and that Dylan began his journey without knowing what it would involve exactly or how he would feel about it:

Yes when I started I didn’t know how much physical change was important for me to feel in my body, and for me to feel this was me. But the process of going on hormones, living as a guy, all of that stuff, you know just clarified it. You know I caught up with myself. Through that process.

(4-5)

The notion of catching up with oneself is interesting. Dylan caught up with himself “through that process” of transitioning (4-5). This process is not simply medical or physical, and Dylan’s phrase “living as a guy” covers a huge amount of social, political, personal, spiritual, physical and intersubjective experience in a few brief words (4-5). Dylan does not separate himself from his pre-transition self, but he charts a shift over time: in order to “feel this was me” he undertook a process of transition through which his identity was “clarified” (4-5). Clearly this indicates the significance of embodiment in regards to a sense of self, which can change over time, and also points to our inability to determine how we will respond to such an experience prior to that experience. How can we talk about catching up with ourselves in a way that does not distance us from our past selves or reinforce dichotomies of being connected or disconnected?

In relation to body-knowledge, Dylan and I discuss body-memory, and how this might relate to his experiencing himself as male despite having a body that others would categorize as female (32). This body-memory manifests in a number of ways. We discuss two: being “triggered” by incorrect pronouns or being perceived as the wrong

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67 Elsewhere in the interview Dylan reflects on his ambiguous relationship to connection and disconnection, noting that while he did at times feel disconnected or less connected before transition, he was still comfortable with his embodied self and with interactions with partners and friends (32). This contrasts with an earlier statement: “But I know that before I transitioned there was a sense of total separateness from my body that’s not there anymore. That’s great” (24). His contradictory or contrasting reflections counteracted the possibility of interpreting his narratives as dichotomous in any way.
gender, and having or not having a penis. Dylan relates a recent experience of being on an aeroplane and being unsure if the flight attendant referred to him as “ma’am” or “man” (4). Dylan links this triggering caused by incorrect gendering to body-memory: he says the experience of incorrect gendering has a physical effect for him (4). How can we talk about body-memory and the complex interweaving of emotional and physical wellbeing? In relation to genitalia, how can we reframe embodiment to take into account the fact that many transmen have cocks despite not conforming to the standard medical model of penis-bearing body? Because genitalia is such a complicated aspect of trans experience and politics I do not explore it here, but it is worth considering in relation to all of these questions about embodiment, self, and who is able to determine what a body means.

The final narrative I want to examine is Dylan’s experience of drag performance:

I also remember when I started doing drag performance and there was this sense of looking in the mirror when I had facial hair on my face and there was a sense of, just before I’d go on stage, I’d stare at myself in the mirror. And people might have thought it was this really vain thing. But it was actually almost like I was going into myself. In a way that not looking at a male face, I couldn’t do. There was a way of going inside that happened when I looked at myself with facial hair on. It was only something very small, a little goatee or something, that kind of, it’s like it joined the dots. I was looking into myself and all the bits joined up and I became a circle of energy that somehow was blocked before. (30)

Dylan’s experience echoes my own: the queer space of drag performance opens the possibility of performing masculinity in a way that is valued and supported. When he sees himself with facial hair, as an embodied male person, Dylan says, “it’s like it joined the dots” (30). This performance of masculinity is not an external parody, but a transformative experience of embodying oneself as one feels one is or should be, in a way that connects one to one’s self. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler infamously uses drag performance to illustrate the fictive nature of gender. Dylan’s narrative suggests a
deepening of that fiction, a complicating of the layers of embodiment, change, self, and performance.\textsuperscript{68}

Dylan’s narrative demonstrates the complexities of performative gender, and the possibilities of embodied identity shifting according to context and action. Dylan recognises himself as male during (or before) those performances (30). When that happens, Dylan feels that he becomes a “circle of energy” (30). He connects the dots, becomes more fully himself, empowered through this embodied experience of masculinity (30). The public aspect of this performance, the fact that there is an audience watching Dylan perform his masculinity (or a version of it), is also relevant.

I want to suggest that this situation parallels the intersubjective nature of social existence. We need people to interact with as we “make our bodies our selves” (Hall 2009: 131). Hall quotes Henry Rubin as proposing that for transmen, body modification is an attempt to achieve “intersubjective recognition” (Hall 2009: 131, Rubin 2003: 173). I share Hall’s suspicion about other aspects of Rubin’s framework\textsuperscript{69} but appreciate that “Rubin’s principle of intersubjective recognition is useful for a queer crip feminist perspective on identity, breasted experience, and breast surgery” (Hall 2009: 131). I expand this focus from breasted experience to the embodied experience of transmasculinity as a whole. My experience of participating in drag king events, like Dylan’s, is an experience of intersubjective recognition: the masculinity that was invisible to other people (to an extent) becomes visible and valued.

c. Synthesis: Circles of Incoherence, Embodiment, and Desire

Hall’s notion of “making” our bodies our selves is a critical tool for trans theorists such as myself. Building on Lorde’s retelling of her experience of a changing embodied self,
Hall emphasizes community, specifically, queer community, as creating spaces “of queer recognition – the recognition of the selves, bodies, relationships, and families we choose, not those into which we were born” (2009: 132). This recognition is fuelled by desire, according to Hall. In the context of my own work, this could mean that desire for other incoherent bodies affirms my own embodied incoherence, which thereby transforms into an experience of coherence: my embodiment is held, understood, supported, nourished, seen, valued. “Lorde’s ‘rage to live,’” concludes Hall, “is fuelled by her desire for and experiences with queer bodies and spaces in which recognition is not contingent upon conformity to gender binary norms and medical models” (2009: 132). By affirming others’ incoherence and my own through a queer practice of desire and recognition, I am resisting the systematic pressure to conform, to make sense, to fit into the binary medical models of sex/gender/race/ability/etc.

We need queer spaces in which to experience this embodied exchange of desire and incoherence. Lorde’s desire, according to Hall, is “desire for spaces in which subjects are able to achieve intersubjective recognition through an ongoing life project of deconstructing and reconstructing (of grappling with) identities and embodiments, of grappling with unknowns and queer possibilities” (2009: 132).

As Dylan observed, and Butler made famous, “bodies matter.” A politics of incoherence relies on our commitment to the complexities of embodied social existence. We need to develop new ways of approaching embodiment, without descending into biological determinism or the politically motivated science of sexing/categorizing bodies. We need a language that takes into account the nuances of butch identity and embodiment without seeking to categorize or segregate all butch people from all transmale people. How can we make sense of Finns comment: “I think for me probably I would say my body very much informed my understanding of gender, or my experience of gender. I don’t always feel like I had a lot of control over that”? (5) How can we relinquish notions of “control” in relation to our bodies and accept that our embodiment contains more than a body (as vehicle for a self) and a mind (as self)? Does it help to theorize this relationship of embodiment as incoherent, in the productive sense of incoherent, as I have previously used it to describe the relationship between butch and trans identities?
How can we develop language more capable of addressing body-knowledge? Finn mentions puberty as a “perfect example” of how our bodies change without our control (5). Most people experience puberty. So why do we not have more adequate language? I do not answer these questions. They illustrate some of the difficulties me and my interviewees experienced when trying to elaborate on our experiences of transition or embodiment.

Hall demonstrates the need for queer spaces that enable consideration, questioning, and performance of embodiments that are (to whatever extent) non-normative. Within queer spaces or communities, different norms of recognition prevail, and people such as Dylan and myself experience transformative moments during which our embodied masculinities are positively valued by those around us. How can we extend this positive valuing to other spaces, spaces that are not specifically queer?

As part of a politics of incoherence, we need to move away from a hierarchy of masculinities (there is no monolithic hierarchy but there is still a dominant competitive system of masculinity in pakeha New Zealand) and begin to value all embodied expressions of masculinity. This is particularly relevant to genderqueer or butch masculinities, which are often less valued than transmasculinities, especially if the transmasculine person is perceived as a normatively gendered male (even if they do not identify as such). Of his own desire to be recognized as male-masculine rather than female-masculine Finn says, “I needed it to be positively valued, not negatively valued. As a guy, your masculinity is positively valued, as female it’s not. And I needed people to see it and value it and for me to feel good about it” (20). Finn does not position butchness as less valuable than transmale-ness in his own philosophy, but rather highlights the dominant social norm or assumption that masculinity is valued when it is hegemonic, and hegemonic masculinity is always attached to male bodies.

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70 One answer might be because within the unitary sex-gender system it is assumed that any individual will know in advance of puberty what his or her body will do and therefore the only language needed is the language that explains that linear path. But clearly, we can no longer assume that if someone is assigned male at birth then they will want to go through male puberty and become a man. Or that someone who is assigned female at birth will want to go through female puberty and become a woman. (I do not address the issue of trans youth or children in this work as it has become a political debate that would require its own thesis project.)
Hale asserts that we must consider power relations, especially when undergoing any “definitional boundary marking” between butch and trans: “Whose power and privilege are increased, whose diminished, and how does this fit into hegemonic power structures, reproducing them or loosening them?” (1998: 333). A politics of incoherence seeks to loosen the hold of hegemonic power structures and create space for more possibilities of embodiment.

By valuing incoherent masculinity, or masculinity that is attached to all kinds of bodies, we are engaging with hegemonic power structures while also resisting that urge to comply. By remaining critical of norms and creating more space for non-hegemonic embodied expressions of gender we are aiming to re-distribute power and enable further resistance. Desire for, and desire from, other queer or incoherent embodied subjects is crucial for the construction of communities that nurture this resistance. As I make my (trans)body my (queer)self, I crave the recognition of other queer and trans folks. I imagine a massive network of joining the dots, within which we become multiple circles of energy that overlay each other in an incoherent pattern of desire.
Chapter Six Narratives of Feminism and Transmasculinity in New Zealand

Fig 6.1 “Resistance”
Chapter Six
Narratives of Feminism and Transmasculinity in New Zealand

**Introduction**

1. Embody and Advocate: Identifying *With* does not Necessitate Identifying *As*
2. Narratives: Travis and Finn
3. Sons of the Movement?
4. Narratives: Dylan and Eric
5. Subsuming Our Struggle?
6. Coalitional Politics of Incoherence

*There has been no other movement for social justice in our society that has been as self-critical as the feminist movement. Feminist willingness to change direction when needed has been a major source of strength and vitality in feminist struggle. That internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation. Just as our lives are not fixed or static but always changing, our theory must remain fluid, open, responsive to new information.*

*(bell hooks 2000: xiii)*

**Introduction**

I have been arguing that (trans)masculine people can practice incoherent masculinity. I have framed this in two different ways: as articulating one’s masculinity without buying into racism, sexism, homo/queerphobia, able-ism and so on, and as practicing one’s masculinity *in resistance to* racism, sexism, homo/queerphobia, able-ism and so on. The first framing is a kind of refusal, and entails being critical of what I will refer to as –isms and –phobias. The second framing, being *in resistance to* those –isms and –phobias, is more active and transformative. I have also argued that when adopting these incoherent masculinities, we must remain vigilant about counteracting new hierarchies.
of masculinity: we must maintain what Butler (2004) calls a “critical and transformative” relationship to norms, whether these norms are developed as part of incoherent masculinity or as part of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, the two framings (a critical refusal and an active transformation) are brought together in the practice of incoherent masculinity.\textsuperscript{71}

The practice of incoherent masculinity, then, does not require that transmasculine people identify as feminists. However, my concept of incoherence, and my understanding of this critical refusal and active transformation, owe allegiance to feminist struggle and emerge from my engagement with queer, feminist and trans theorists and politics. I identify as a feminist myself, but as the narratives from interviewees reveal, there is no standard relationship between feminism and transmasculinity. In my experience (and Finn’s, as I illustrate below), a relationship with feminist movements and theories enables me to better grapple with what I call the “critical refusal” strategy. This critical refusal requires knowledge of structural inequalities and a wider picture of intersecting –isms and –phobias. Feminist analysis, both historical and contemporary, has emphasized this structural level of oppression. The “active transformation” element is also evident in feminist analysis, and I suggest that coalitional politics (between feminists and trans activists, for example) is one option for actively transforming masculinities with an awareness of context and specificity.

In this Chapter, I concentrate on the relationship between transmasculinity and feminism in New Zealand, from the Pakeha perspectives of myself and my interviewees. Instead of insisting that transmasculine people identify as feminists, I suggest (following bell hooks) that we can embody and advocate feminism. Key questions include: can transmen or transmasculine people be feminists? What kind of feminism might transmasculine people adopt? What are some important aspects of the relationship between transmasculinity and feminism? Is it useful for transmasculine

\textsuperscript{71} In Chapter Three, for example, I used the concepts of a critical refusal and an active transformation to examine what a practice of anti-racism entails, from a white transmasculine perspective.
people to identify as feminists? What kind of politics might emerge (or has emerged) from the cross-pollination of transmasculine communities and feminist communities?

I specifically focus on feminism and transmasculinity rather than feminism and transfemininity. Transwomen, as women, have a different relationship to feminism than transmen, as men. In this thesis I use “transmasculine people” more often than “transmen.” This is a strategic move: broadening the scope from people who identify as men to people who identify as masculine in some way, whether that be butch or trans or genderqueer or something else. In contrast, I have narrowed my scope by excluding discussions of transfemininity. The distinction is particularly relevant to this chapter because people who identify as women/transfeminine and people who identify as men/transmasculine have different relationships and histories with feminist movements. I do not address literature pertaining to the inclusion or exclusion of transwomen or transfemininity from feminism or feminist spaces.

Furthermore, I privilege personal narratives from interviewees about their experiences. Discussion centres on their narratives and gestures to a wider picture of interactions between trans theory and feminist theory (or trans scholars and women’s studies). Gayle Salamon analyses these interactions on an institutional level, arguing that in the United States, women’s studies programs need to incorporate trans studies, and in particular, need to appreciate the experience of people whose genders are non-binary (2009). I refer Salamon’s analysis and to Noble’s notion of transmasculine people as “sons of the

72 I do not use “(trans)masculine” as much in this chapter, because my aim with that term is to address all masculine-identified people, whether they were assigned male or female at birth, whether they identify as trans or not. The (trans) part signals that I speak from my transmasculine perspective about masculinity more generally. But in this chapter I focus on transmasculinity specifically (though that is still a broad category that could include butch or genderqueer trans-identified people, not just transmen). See Trans-terminologies for more information.

73 For an excellent overview of the relationship between transpeople (feminine, masculine and otherwise) and feminism in the U.S, see Talia Bettcher’s Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2009b). For an example of transfeminism, as a movement for transwomen who are feminists, see Emi Koyama’s Transfeminist Manifesto (2003). For a recent discussion of overlaps between trans movements and feminist movements, see Krista Scott-Dixon’s Trans/Formering Feminisms: Transfeminist Voices Speak Out (2006).
feminist movement” (2006), but I retain a New Zealand focus by foregrounding the experiences of my interviewees and myself.

1. Embody and Advocate: Identifying With does not Necessitate Identifying As

Finn connects transmasculinity, lesbianism, and feminism:

There are a lot of guys who have come out of feminism, who have really struggled with that negotiating, going from a lesbian identity to kind of being able to embrace masculinity from a male perspective. But still from a feminist perspective. Which has been really interesting, but I think has been... I think that’s actually changed the trans movement and trans communities a lot as well. (8)

My experience of queer trans communities, populated by transguys and other queer masculine-identified people, reflects this ongoing negotiation. Some people have painful experiences involving exclusion or expulsion from feminist or lesbian communities, some have more positive interactions, and I do not claim to represent the typical experience in either my own narratives or the stories from interviewees.74

On a wider community level, Finn and Eric both emphasize the influence of feminism, especially queer feminism, on trans(masculine) movements. Finn suggests that transgender “as a really inclusive category is actually a product of feminism” (8). Eric compared the current trans movement to “the late nineties, when we had those first essays come out around queer politics, you know? It’s sort of similar,” highlighting the overlaps between queer, feminist and trans movements (4).

74 Also I do not presume a monolithic “feminism,” rather, I appreciate that there have been different movements for social change in feminist history, different manifestations of feminism. For the sake of brevity, I sometimes refer to “feminism” as if this signals something coherent, but, like the incoherence of “queer” or “trans,” feminism is multiple and context-specific.
My conversations with Finn, Travis, Dylan and Eric indicated that identifying (or not) with feminism correlates with generational factors. I am interested in the emergence of transmasculine people who identify with feminism while no longer identifying as female, and also in the nuanced relationships some transguys have with feminism when they do not espouse a feminist identity but do practice feminist principles or politics. I specifically use the words “embody and advocate” instead of “identify with” because as bell hooks reminds me, we can advocate feminism without identifying as a feminist (hooks 2004). Hale also pinpoints this issue: “Identifying as and identifying with, while closely related, are not identical” (1998: 330). For example, “I identify with leather dykes – as a result of historical ties, continuing friendship circles, and some affinities of sensibility and value – but I no longer identify as a leather dyke” (1998: 330).

Four interviews is insufficient to make any claims about whether transmasculine people in New Zealand currently identify or should identify as feminists, or whether they are more likely to instead identify with feminist politics. I explore some of the narratives that my interviewees describe, particularly paying attention to generational differences, and suggest that as individual stories these relate to wider questions about transmasculinity and feminism.

Travis and Finn, young transguys in their mid-twenties, both identify as feminists. I am also in their age group, and similarly identify as feminist. Dylan and Eric had different narratives. Eric is in his early-mid thirties, Dylan his mid forties. Both were and are active advocates of feminist politics, though Eric questions his right to claim the label “feminist” and Dylan discusses his reluctance to subsume his politics under the broader umbrella of feminism. I explore Travis and Finn’s narratives first, followed by Dylan and Eric’s, and conclude with a call for a coalitional politics of incoherence.
2. Narratives: Travis and Finn

Travis states: “I would definitely consider myself a feminist. And I guess my relationship with feminism has, like my identity, shifted and grown, as has my understanding of what feminism means to me. And what type – for want of a better word – of feminist I am” (4). Finn comments: “So in terms of myself, in terms of being trans – I mean feminism was very much a way of me being able to maybe, kind of break up my own assumptions about gender? Break them down. And create something new from that. I suppose it gave me the tools to do that” (2-3). Finn’s description of how feminism enabled him to “break down” his assumptions about gender resembles the critical refusal strategy I mentioned earlier. From this critical engagement Finn was/is able to “create something new from that,” which I propose is his active transformation of gender and masculinity.

Both Travis and Finn articulate what feminism means to them, emphasizing that their interpretations of feminism have changed over time.

Travis elaborates:

The feminism I am drawn to addresses those class issues, addresses those racial issues, and cultural issues, that feel really important in terms of the central tenet being that ‘we are all created equally and therefore should be treated equally and there are systems in place that actively seek to counteract that’ and that, you know, it’s our obligation as people to fight against that and be aware of that. (5)

Travis argues for a feminist politics that addresses the multiplicities of subjectivity while maintaining a common understanding that we should all be treated equally and that we need to counteract the heteronormative white supremacist capitalist structures that actively deny this equality. Though he understands the separatist perspective, Travis specifically disagrees with this version of feminism because “that feels too simplistic in a ‘men are different from women’ way, but also it feels destructive in terms of what the movement, for me, is trying to do. Which is talking about equality and
people as people” (5). A coalitional approach, which I see as compatible with Travis’ version of feminist politics, takes difference into account while also arguing for equality.

Finn confirms that he is “very aware that there’s lots of different feminisms” and that this is important because it “opens up the possibility that you can think of gender in lots of different ways. And you can construct it in different ways” (1). For Finn, “feminism is really about thinking about gender differently and doing it differently” (1). He acknowledges that some feminism(s) can be exclusive, that he “certainly sees their limitations” (1). In order to survive, feminism has had to adapt: “they’ve needed to incorporate new ideas and new people” (1). If we are in the third wave of feminism currently, I would argue that for queer feminism to survive, it must acknowledge and incorporate transpeople of all kinds.

In my day to day existence, I experience a shift towards trans-inclusivity from feminist and queer women communities and movements. In conversation with Dylan I remark:

Yeah I think there’s a feeling I have of being on this little overlapping cuspy edge of third wave feminism and some kind of queer movement and some kind of trans movement. And those three things feel like sometimes they exist in tension and grief with each other. And sometimes it’s a beautiful meshing and overlapping. And it just depends what the issue is and who’s talking.

(11)

This thesis is written on that “little overlapping cuspy edge” (11). I emphasize the range of relationships between trans movements and feminist movements (and also queer movements). A tense relationship may result in as much productive dialogue as a harmonious relationship, and often there are multiple tones within discussion of any specific issue. For example, I have participated in useful debate about the privileges of masculinity and how this relates to feminist politics, but this usefulness sometimes occurs through “beautiful meshing” and sometimes through “tension and grief” (11).
Shifting from personal narrative to discussion of institutional relationships, there is a similar range of responses (tense, grieving, celebratory, joyful etc) from interactions amongst trans, feminist, and queer scholars and their associated departments in universities. Salamon suggests that women’s studies (or feminism) needs trans theory, and that trans theory also needs feminism. In “Transfeminism and The Future of Gender,” Salamon asks “What is the relationship between women’s studies, feminism, and the study of transgenderism and other non-normative genders?” (2010: 95).

Within her context of U.S tertiary education, Salamon suggests that “if it is to reemerge as a vital discipline, women’s studies must become more responsive to emerging genders,” and that “genders beyond the binary of male and female are neither fictive nor futural, but are presently embodied and lived” (95). Women’s studies needs trans studies, without which “it cannot hope to fully assess the present state of gender as it is lived, nor will it be able to imagine many of its possible futures” (96). I agree, and am glad to be housed as a postgrad in a Gender Studies department that encourages trans scholarship.

I also concur with Salamon’s statement that trans studies needs feminism, because “in its current nascent state” trans studies is “often dominated by a liberal individualist notion of subjectivity, in which a postgender subject possesses absolute agency and is able to craft hir gender with perfect felicity” (96). Trans studies needs to draw on feminism’s critique of social structures and Foucauldian/Butlerian approach to power, agency and subjectivity. Finn observes “once you start looking at the feminist movement,” you “begin to see social structures quite differently,” and “not just about gender, but actually about how gender affects lots of other things” (2). For Finn, “feminism as a worldview” is “my basis of being able to provide a critique of those things [social structures]” (2). This structural analysis (or critical refusal) enriches trans theory, experience, and activism.
3. Sons of the Movement?

One of the ways to consider the reciprocal relationship between transmen and feminism is to position us as “sons of the movement.” Noble uses this phrase in the title of his book, *Sons of the Movement: FtMs Risking Incoherence on a Post-Queer Cultural Landscape*, and it resonates with my experience. Travis explores what this notion might mean for him: “‘sons’ for me has a really nice acknowledgement of being born out of something, being born out of a culture of women. And nurtured and embraced and grown up through that, so that I have within, flowing within my blood, this idea of empowerment for women” (6). Travis emphasizes the bodily elements of this phrase, “sons of the movement.” Being born “out of a culture of women,” means, for him, that empowerment for women is a fundamental aspect of his personhood (6). It is not an abstract political ideal: it flows in his blood.

However, not all transmen or transmasculine people identify with or as sons of the feminist movement. I focus next on Dylan and Eric’s narratives, which complicate the assumption that transmen/transmasculine people can or should identify as feminists, while maintaining the possibility of identifying with feminist politics.

4. Narratives: Dylan and Eric

Dylan questions whether being a son of feminism might reduce the scope of his activism, or keep him tied too strongly to the past:

So my initial reaction to ‘sons of the movement’ is that, like the feminist movement, even if it wasn’t an issue around the language, it doesn’t have all the answers for me. And for me I’d rather be someone who’s committed to activism, committed to human rights, that my analysis of things comes partly from my personal journey but probably at least as much from my political journey, and I
like political movements that know about their past and their history but aren’t totally stuck to them either.

For Dylan, the idea that he could be a son of the feminist movement does not “have all the answers” just as the feminist movement itself does not, or did not, in a historical sense, address all of his concerns as a dyke activist or an anti-racist land-rights activist.

Dylan tells me how he used a feminist analysis in his university work but did not identify as a feminist, and that he felt he was “going past it, past its limitations by identifying as a dyke” (10). Dylan also got involved with race politics: “it was a protest against the Springbok tour in 1981 and then 1982 I think was when there was a black women speaking tour that New Zealand University Students Association sponsored” (10). Making coalitions with anti-racism and land-rights movements, Dylan says, was easier as a dyke rather than as a feminist (10). When he began identifying as male, he grieved at the loss of dyke and feminist communities: “I’d spent all my adult life working on dyke stuff and feminist stuff and you know, worked unpaid on lots of it for a long long time and then there was no place in that world for me when I decided to transition” (12).

Earlier I remarked that Dylan and I compared our experiences of coming out of dyke communities and into trans communities, and how much more supported I feel by my lesbian and queer women friends. These generational factors indicate, I hope, that there are more possibilities for transguys and queer masculine people to maintain links with feminist and lesbian communities, and if they want to, to identify as feminists. However, the loss of community that Dylan articulates is a common experience for many transmasculine people, and must be acknowledged as an example of a grief-stricken relationship between feminism or lesbian/dyke communities and transmasculine communities. Previously I mentioned “tension and grief” as one version of the relationship between feminism, queer theory, and trans theory, and this tension and grief has real effects for activism and for personal experience and wellbeing. It is not something I aim to resolve. It is an important aspect to include in this discussion.
Eric similarly does not seek to resolve his own relationship with feminism. He articulates an important question about whether he has the right to identify as feminist, and concludes that he is not sure whether he would call himself a son of the feminist movement:

As a transman, I have made a choice. To take on a masculine role in society and the broader context. Sometimes I wonder, my rights to that previous sort of philosophy of feminism? And I wonder where I sit with that and whether I’m asking too much? I mean I know that within the women’s community there would be lots of women who believed that we could be the sons of the movement, it’s not that, but I just wonder is that my right? You know? Is that my voice? Is that where I sit in this society? You know is that right? That sort of thing. So I’m not sure of that answer yet.

(24)

5. Subsuming Our Struggle?

While I claim my feminist identity, I appreciate Eric asking these questions, and also acknowledge that while I, as a genderqueer transboy, may question my right to feminism (and may experience other people questioning my right to feminism) it is transwomen who have experienced more systematic exclusion from feminist or lesbian feminist communities. I may argue that my female history and trans identity combine to create a potent feminist awareness, and that feminism is about gender (rather than only about women) and other social structures such as race and class, but transwomen, as women, have a more straight-forward argument for inclusion. Yet transwomen have probably experienced more exclusion from feminist and lesbian feminist communities than transmen. Dylan confirms that in his experience, transwomen are sometimes seen as “someone who’s really male, who’s trying to invade female space,” (in the style of Janice Raymond) and he states, “clearly we need to move beyond that” (12). As Dylan
remarks, it is also useful for transpeople to consider our social positions and history: as a transmasculine person I need to learn “how to develop or express your masculinity in a way that doesn’t buy into misogyny,” and similarly transwomen may need to consider “what it means to come from a place of male conditioning, how that informs your sense of yourself as a woman and your views around other women” (12).75

Dylan declares that he “embraced and was doing the politics” of feminism and anti-racism/Maori land rights, from his perspective as a dyke (10). One of the issues he raises is about subsuming his own struggle within other struggles:

So it’s also meant that that journey for me has had a sense of how it’s really important to be strong in your own identity when you’re involved in any coalition and that my personal view is that to become a worker for somebody else’s struggle, and to subsume yours within theirs, is counter-productive at some point. Whether that’s pakeha people’s involvement in indigenous rights, whether it’s men’s involvement in women’s rights, whether it’s someone who’s no longer young’s involvement in supporting youth activism.

While continuing to work for women’s rights, indigenous rights and youth activism, Dylan comments that for him, the idea of being a son of the feminist movement “has a little bit of a connotation of joining someone else’s movement” (11). He appreciates this is about feminism “evolving” but when I suggest that the trans movement could be another strand of the feminist movement, he replies “I guess I don’t wanna be another strand of somebody else’s movement” (11). The insight I gain from Dylan’s comment is

75 This also relates to Talia Bettcher’s concept of BDA: Basic Denial of Authenticity, whereby transmen are seen to be “really women” and transwomen are “really men.” I am also aware that Dylan’s comment about “male conditioning” may need clarification. Some transwomen may have experienced themselves as female their whole lives (and therefore would not be subject to male conditioning in a straightforward way), and similarly, some transmen may have experienced themselves as male. The point is: we have different experiences of privilege depending on how other people perceive us. Even if I had identified as male when I was fifteen, I was perceived as female, and experienced sexism from this perspective. Bettcher’s concepts of BDA and FPA (First Person Authority) are crucial in untangling these issues of perspective and authenticity, though I cannot explore them here. See Bettcher (2009).
that it can be difficult to negotiate trans rights within a larger framework of feminism if this reduces trans rights to just another aspect of feminism, or if it requires transguys like Dylan to join a movement that they support but do not feel part of. If feminist movements and trans movements are to interact productively, we need to ensure (as much as possible) that no one feels silenced or subsumed.

Each interviewee specifies that it depends on what kind of feminism, whose feminism, we are talking about. Finn begins by describing feminism as “a worldview” and “a way of doing social change” (1) and then specifies that his earlier exposure to feminism was the 1970s-80s in New Zealand, “local change,” and his current engagement is with post-structuralist feminism and tensions concerning difference (2). When he encountered “prejudice against masculinity” in second-wave feminism,76 Finn shifted “into more queer politics,” which he sees as “completely compatible with queer [and trans] stuff” (2). Unfortunately post-structuralist queer feminism is, as Finn notes, often regarded as particularly academically or overly political: “I don’t think that analysis, I don’t think that’s reached a more popular culture at all” (2). I do not enter debates about which versions of feminism impact popular culture, but I do agree that post-structuralist queer feminism is compatible with trans politics. Perhaps some of that analysis has bled into popular culture, as this could contribute to the shift towards trans-inclusivity that I have experienced personally and academically. I also suggest that visual art is a useful medium for transferring ideas between academic and popular spaces, which is why I include community-generated art in this thesis.

I discuss the overlaps of feminism and queer movements with Dylan, and the fact that I and other young transmasculine people are identifying as feminists. Dylan declares that “that’s where I think I see a lot of potential for change. And I guess that affects my thing about ‘sons of the movement’ because if it’s an older feminist movement I don’t feel excited about it and its ability to expand, because people are quite comfortable with

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76 Encountering prejudice against masculinity through reading and engaging with second-wave feminism after it passed, rather than during, because Finn “missed” the 1970s-80s feminist movement in NZ by virtue of being born in the 80s. He says he “was always quite gutted that I’d missed it, which was funny ‘cause you know, you’re born into your own time. But I always felt, as I read more and more about it, that that was actually a really exciting time of change in New Zealand” (2).
where they are and don’t have any investment in changing. I’ve tried” (15). The temporality of feminism is important, and Dylan is optimistic about a younger generation of feminists who work alongside trans and queer activists (or are themselves feminist, queer, and trans). Eric similarly describes a resurgence of feminism: “One of my work colleagues often talks about feminism, I feel there’s a sort of resurgence – a strong resurgence of it in my life” (24). Eric has previously “explored the way that I could feel feminism as a part of my life,” and he describes the notion of “sons of the movement” as “quite a romantic thing,” “it’s an idealistic thing” (24). But he still questions whether he can be a feminist after changing his gender and becoming a man (24).

6. Coalitional Politics of Incoherence

As Dylan advises, there is a danger in requiring transpeople to become part of a feminist movement. Instead of subsuming or incorporating trans politics into a feminist movement, could trans activists and feminist activists work alongside each other? Coalitional politics is one answer to the sometimes uneasy relationship of feminism and trans politics. Viewing this relationship as incoherent is somewhat helpful, if incoherence entails accepting that some people will identify as both feminist and trans, some one or the other, and this “uneasy” or incoherent relationship can still produce effective socio-political change through the framework of coalitions.

Different groups have different priorities, but our struggles overlap, and by each working on our own priorities, we will create change from multiple related angles. Dylan: “I’ve always found it hard to have a first and foremost priority. Because it’s felt that in each case, it’s a silencing of another voice in my head. Or a silencing of another part of me. Or a silencing of another politics. So that’s why coalitions work best for me” (11). Some people will be capable of working from multiple angles at any given time while others will enjoy a particular single focus.
Instead of positioning all transguys and transmasculine people as sons of the feminist movement, some of us can be allies or partners in coalitions. We need feminist, queer, and trans politics and movements that allow “crossing-overs” as Dylan puts it, encouraging “people to find the things that are in common, the things that are different, and make peace with all of those” (12). An example Dylan uses is “expanding what an analysis of sex discrimination means” in discrimination legislation internationally (12). If we expand what sex discrimination means, and what gender diversity means, we can work in coalitions from multiple perspectives simultaneously (12).

One of the crucial issues is how we make sense of difference, and whether we can work alongside people who are different to us, who have different priorities. Travis notes that “as a society we look at difference as quite a scary thing” (12). If we are to form coalitions, we need to acknowledge differences without erasing them. This applies to both differences in identity and differences in priorities for social change. I may not share the same priority as someone else, but in many cases, if I support their work (because on a wider level it relates to my own) then we are both stronger. The danger, as Dylan points out, is subsuming one’s struggle within a larger movement, or being pulled in too many directions to maintain effectiveness. This must be balanced by individuals, communities, and organisations on a case by case basis.

Fear of difference, inculcated in social subjects by discursive institutions that maintain the dominance of white hetero-patriarchy by oppressing “minorities,” can be challenged and counteracted. Travis has a mantra of “letting people be who they are, treat people like people,” and he suggests that if we do this,

It breaks down the ideas of class and race and sexual orientation and gender identity, all that scariness and fear that feels like it’s perpetuated by institutions like legal institutions, medical institutions, media institutions, these ideas about mental health, about disabilities, all that sort of stuff plays into it. That if we actually at the base of it start treating people as people then that works to empower and create equality.

(12)
Treating people like people does not require all people to be like me. A politics of incoherence does not rely on homogenous identities and strict policies of inclusion/exclusion. It relies on heterogeneous diversity, awareness of difference. I do not want to “break down” ideas of “class and race and sexual orientation and gender identity” if that means denying their lived, embodied effects and cultural specificity, but I do argue that these dominant categories are not “natural” and that they exist within particular power structures such as those listed by Travis. I argue that Travis seeks to “break down” the fear of difference, not by reducing subjectivity to sameness, but rather by respecting difference and seeking alliances across these constructed categories of identity. A respect for difference is necessary for a politics of incoherence.

On an institutional level, I agree with Salamon that trans theory and feminist theory benefit from mutual inclusion because trans theory benefits from the critical tools of feminism. Tools such as a critical refusal and awareness of intersectionality are particularly useful in order to counteract neo-liberal discourses of individualism, in which gender becomes a non-political, individual, consumer-driven choice (Salamon 2010: 95). Correspondingly, feminism benefits from expanding its purview to trans experiences and politics (Salamon 2010: 96).

On a political level, coalitions enable feminists and trans activists to work alongside each other, supporting active transformations of social categories such as masculinity and femininity, and critically transforming institutions (medical, government, etc) that impact upon all our lives.

On a community and personal level, transguys and queer transmasculine people can choose to identify as feminists or not, but a politics of incoherence requires interaction between feminism(s) and trans movements: this mutually enriching relationship can be formulated as a coalition or alliance wherein neither party lose their priorities and specificities but both gain allies and awareness.
Conclusion: Incoherent Genders and Coalitional Politics

Fig 7.1 “Gender as a Mutant Power”
Conclusion: Incoherent Genders and Coalitional Politics

1. Hale, Halberstam, Hall and Drake: Coalitions in the Borderzones
2. My Experience as Femme: Gendered Incoherence of a Different Flavour
3. Relations of Difference: Femme Incoherence and Anti-Racism as Examples of Coalitional Politics

1. Hale, Halberstam, Hall and Drake: Coalitions in the Borderzones

In the previous Chapter, I described various narratives about the relationship between feminism and transmasculinity and recommended that queer/transmasculine communities and feminist communities form coalitions that will enhance our capabilities for creating social and political change. Beyond noting initially that I write from my Pakeha transmasculine perspective, a perspective that I share with my interviewees, I did not call attention to the fact that I narrated a relationship between white transmasculinity and feminism. I was also vague about what kind of feminism/s I was talking about because I wanted to include all the different feminisms that my interviewees mentioned. In this Conclusion, I re-iterate the need for coalitions between feminist, trans, and queer movements, based on acknowledgements of privilege, power, and the possibilities of shared ethics.

First I trace a path between the preceding chapters, leading to this point. Following this, I briefly describe femme as a form of gendered incoherence. I conclude by referring to my conversation with Sunny Drake about femmes, women of colour, and community support, which also points to future areas for trans and queer research.

In Chapters One, Two and Three, I sought to situate myself as a transmasculine queer person. Outlining a queer social constructionist vision of trans theory, in Chapter One I suggested that as trans/queer theorists, we must write from (and about) our embodied experiences. Chapter Two further developed some methodological concerns, such as the
need for relationships in research (and activism), and the power of creativity as both a methodological tool and a force that sustains us. In Chapter Three, I took my first step into the borderlands of trans and queer theories, taking my cue from bell hooks, Jacob Hale and Gloria Anzaldúa, asking questions like, “How can I speak, as a genderqueer person?” and “How can I position these margins, borderzones, or borderlands as places of strength?”

My goal was to embrace my incoherence while resisting abjection. We borderzone dwellers, as Hale suggests, are unable to “fit ourselves into extant categories without denying, erasing, or otherwise abjecting personally significant parts of ourselves” (2009: 55). Claiming my power as a genderqueer borderzone dweller requires two vital elements: self-awareness of privilege and community support. The (dis)locations from which we speak are community spaces, and these communities are crucial for our survival. In these spaces, my incoherence is legible, valuable, and worthwhile.

Community spaces are not coherent in themselves: they are not homogenous sites of sameness. Relations of difference are fundamental to the borderzones, because so many of us experience marginalization in so many different ways. Chapters Three, Four and Five are linked by the concept of community support and relationships that bridge difference. Maintaining an incoherent masculinity relies on what Kim Q. Hall calls “spaces in which recognition is not contingent upon conformity to gender binary norms and medical models” (2009: 132). Gender binary norms and medical models are predominantly white and (post)colonial, hence, their removal as criteria for recognition is part of creating a space that encourages incoherence across race/ethnicity, gender, and disability. The intersubjective recognition I experience in such spaces enables my incoherence in two overlapping ways: by valuing my incoherence as an active resistance to oppression and by rendering it, to some extent, coherent.

Bridging differences of identity (such as between transmasculine and butch, which is one of the contested areas that I discuss) involves recognising shared commitments to social change. A politics of incoherence requires a commitment to social justice that emerges from my particular (dis)location and extends across identity categories to find
solidarity with others who are different to me, with whom I share ethical and political values. This is what I refer to as coalitional politics.

In Chapter Three, I addressed anti-racism as a necessary part of white incoherent masculinity, as an example of coalitional political struggle. I also recognise that despite my acknowledgement that women of colour feminism informs queer and trans theory, I do not speak to women of colour specifically, or to their particular concerns. Likewise, I have argued (in Chapter Four) that masculinity studies as an area of scholarship must attend more to the interactions between femininities and masculinities, paying definite attention to female masculinities and transmasculinities, and problematizing the expectation that male = masculine = man. However, I have not talked about femininity or transfemininity. All of these limitations are connected in discussions of anti-racism and femme power. This connection was brought home to me in my conversation with Sunny Drake, who reflected on the significance of women of colour and femme queer women, in relation to his own journey:

I’ve learnt a LOT of my politics from femme women, especially working class and/or femmes of colour. As a bonus to my political education, I don’t quite understand why, but I would say that if I wrote a list of the people on earth who are most able to see my gender how I experience it, the vast majority on that list would be queer femme women. Go figure? Hmm, maybe because queer femme women have had to fight shit up hill to have their own genders seen and validated and celebrated and recognised.

(Drake 2011)

Judith Halberstam advises that young trans/queer scholars draw inspiration from “feminism and ethnic studies rather than white queer studies” (Halberstam 2005: 220). I have focused on the overlaps between feminism (especially queer and third wave feminism), post-colonial ethnic studies, and trans theory. I am particularly indebted to Anzaldúa and hooks, and I am also inspired by Logan Gutierrez-Mock and Nico Dacumos, who centre their politics on women of colour feminism and their own queer/trans mixed-race experiences. As stated in Chapter Three, a politics of
incoherence, from my white transmasculine perspective, involves practicing anti-racism and honouring the work and stories of women/people of colour.

The practice of anti-racist incoherent white masculinity is also part of what Hale calls the “demilitarization” of the borderzones (2009). Hale and Halberstam, in a note about their collaborative work on the butch/FTM borderwars, assert that “we intend our collaboration to represent the possibility of forming mutually productive working alliances across an increasingly rigid border” of butch versus FTM (1998: 285). Their work is, therefore, an effort towards demilitarization. Practicing anti-racism (with the understanding of how class and race are interconnected), as a queer white transmasculine subject in the borderzones, undermines the hierarchy I have previously described in Chapters Four and Five, a hierarchy that devalues butch masculinity and masculinities attached to people of colour, and positions white transmasculinity as the norm.

Correspondingly, I have also argued (in Chapter Four) that we must maintain a critical and transformative relation to norms, both the hegemonic norms of masculinity, and the new possibilities for alternative or incoherent masculinities. One of the dangers of incoherent masculinity is that it will reaffirm similar patterns of hegemonic oppression (arranged slightly differently). Since I am writing from a Pakeha perspective, I am have been particularly concerned with speaking to (and about) white (trans)masculinity.

2. My Experience as Femme: Gendered Incoherence of a Different Flavour

As I finish this project, I reflect on the shifts that have occurred in my life over the last two years. I am now “he” rather than “she,” in almost all aspects of my life. Testosterone treatment has “masculinised” my body (for example: broader shoulders, deeper voice) and I enjoy being perceived in public as a gay boy or queer masculine person. In Chapter Five I described how I identified as both butch and trans, as both boy and girl. I still feel I am a mix of boy and girl, a genderqueer blend, but I am noticing
more and more that my transmasculinity is femme, rather than butch. Butch masculinity attracts me, and I occasionally feel butch myself, but more often I feel comfortable inhabiting social space as a queer femme transmasculine person. My social habits (ways of talking, moving, interacting) are queerly femme. This prompts me to ask several questions, which I cannot answer here in any depth: what is the relationship between transmasculinity and femme identities/communities/politics? What can femme teach transmasculine and queer people about histories of gendered and racialized oppression? How can we, as researchers, avoid segregating masculinities from femininities? How is femme also a practice of gendered incoherence, a strategy of resistance?

Many of the important themes I discuss in Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six are fruitfully fused in the notion of femme power. It is impossible in this brief concluding section to do justice to the wide range of literature on femme identity, community and politics. Instead, I suggest that femme, as “rogue femininity” (Marston 2011), is a practice of gendered incoherence akin to incoherent masculinity.

Marston identifies “1950s femme lesbians, contemporary femme dykes, drag queens, trannies and femme gay men” as differently positioned femmes (2011: 206). She illustrates that masculinity and femininity are interrelated concepts, often embodied in various combinations that defy categorisation or separation. The uniting force of femme, for Marston and I, is that we femmes do our gender/s consciously, in resistance to racism, sexism, able-ism, homophobia and the WSCP (White Supremacist Capitalist Hetero-Patriarchy). The WSCP condones only certain kinds of femininity and punishes illegitimate femininity or transgressions from the norm. Femmes, often subject to the policing of our femininity according to WSCP standards, insist on embodying whatever femininity means for us, in our particular context.

Conscious gender expression that resists the WSCP: such is femme, and such is incoherent masculinity, as I have described it. The politics of incoherence that I have

77 For examples of academic and artistic work that explore femme identities in relation to butch, queer, trans, and lesbian politics, see Coyote and Sharman (2011), Volcano and Dahl (2009), Noble (2006), Rose and Camilleri (2002), Harris and Crocker (1997).
described focuses on masculinity, but such practicing conscious and ethical gender is relevant to anyone.\textsuperscript{78}

I have argued that a politics of incoherence requires a commitment to social justice that emerges from my particular (dis)location and extends across identity categories to find solidarity with others who are different to me, with whom I share ethical and political values. In Chapters Four and Five I describe how this coalitional politics applies to butch and transmasculine communities. I also argue that there are no clear divisions between these identities and communities: some people are both butch and transmasculine, and for some, social context determines how we relate to different aspects of butchness and transmasculinity. Similarly, there are no clear divisions between femme and transmasculine identities and communities, and coalitional politics are essential.

Considering the ambiguity of language and the lived reality of overlapping identity categories, in Chapter Four I proposed that we broaden the scope of masculinity studies so that the practices and identities of women, femmes, and feminine people are part of the conversation. This is also the recommendation of theorists R. W. Connell and J. A. Messerschmidt, who note that masculinity scholars (or scholars of gender and cultural studies) need to “give much closer attention to the practices of women and the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities” (2005: 848).

I am concerned that my project is impoverished by the lack of attention to femme as queer femininity, and by the lack of femme voices in this text. While I cannot remedy this without extending my scope, and I cannot explore femme power in detail here, I can assert the importance of femme as a strategy of resistance, akin to the incoherent masculinity I am advocating. Femme is also a practice of gendered incoherence. In femme I find strands of black feminism, anti-racism, queerness, difference, and class struggle.

\textsuperscript{78} Sinclair Sexsmith describes “conscious gender building” through butch and femme identities: “I believe we must be able to make the expression of gender conscious, otherwise we will not know what we are taking on that is not necessary, harmful, or even toxic” (2011: 186). Mr Sexsmith was the first person to bring the notion of conscious gender into my life, and I am grateful to her. See Sexsmith (2011).
3. Relations of Difference: Femme Incoherence and Anti-Racism as Examples of Coalitional Politics

So what are the connections between femme incoherence, anti-racism, and a politics of incoherence? What does this indicate about areas for future research, activism, and growth?

As I discussed in Chapter Five, transmasculinity is a concept/identity associated mostly with white middle-class status. Femme (like butch) has strong historical and contemporary ties with racialized and working class communities. I return to Nico Dacumos’ statement that he will “continue to search for alliances with those who foreground the concerns of femmes and feminine-identified people while also creating new options for enacting masculinities” (2006: 26). As people practicing incoherent
masculinity, we can follow Dacumos’ lead, from our own specific (dis)locations of power and privilege.

Another link between anti-racism and femme power is Dacumos’ comment that in his experience, “liberation for all people depends on close attention to the needs, desires, and issues of women of colour” (2006: 26). In Chapter Six I explored narratives of transmasculinity and feminism. One of the outcomes was a concern that trans activism would be subsumed into feminist activism. Instead, different groups can form coalitions based on ethics and political goals.

While there is tension between Dacumos’ insistence on centring women of colour and this fear that trans activism will be subsumed into a larger feminist movement, I propose that these strategies can co-exist productively. Paying close attention to the “needs, desire and issues of women of colour” (Dacumos 2006: 26), is something that I have suggested white transmasculine people undertake as part of adopting incoherent masculinity and practicing anti-racism. It does not require marginalizing trans issues or becoming subsumed into a larger feminist movement. Rather, it requires an analysis that links masculinity and femininity, men and women, in relation to white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy (WSCP), and develops strategies that target the intersections of these structural oppressions.

Practicing anti-racism and affirming and recognising femme power (as embodied by anyone: male/female/genderqueer/black/white/mixed-race/etc.) are strategies that work most effectively in combination, because both challenge white misogynist supremacy and actively create alternatives to the WSCP culture. Femme, as rogue femininity, is deeply embedded in class and race structures: the less white and less middle-upper class that you are, the more heavily your femininity will be policed and the more strength you will need to resist. Femme has a long history of women and people of colour fighting back.

Marston also describes femme as “a move from dispossession to self-possession” (2011: 207). Femme as dispossessed femininity is closely linked to women of colour feminism
and a heritage of working class women and feminine people. As a concept, an identity, and a bridge-builder, femme brings together many of the aspects of a coalitional politics of incoherence, insisting that we consider the “interconnectedness of power,” which Syrus Ware, recommends in relation to Audre Lorde (Ware 2010: 13).

Future research regarding queer and trans subjectivities and communities needs to continue building on the connections between femme, butch, transmasculine, transfeminine, queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc., and their intertwining with race, class, and disability. Trans theory needs to ask questions such as, “Who is being constructed as the dominant trans subject?” “What can we learn from a trans of colour critique?” and “How can trans theorists and activists build bridges with other movements, such as disability and immigration rights?” Salamon advises that transmasculine and queer communities must be careful not to elide or evade difference, but to engage with it: the same is true of trans theory as a political and academic field (Salamon 2005: 268).

Salamon also identifies a legacy of feminism in transmasculine communities: finding solidarity with others with whom we share a gendered identity (2005: 268). These relationships must not come at the expense of femme power, must not require an evasion of difference. Solidarity can be found within shared identity, shared experience, or shared ethics/politics/priorities. Throughout this thesis I have emphasized the importance of relationships, as part of engaging with difference and finding possibilities for coalitional politics based on shared ethics rather than identities (Hale 1997).

In Chapter Five I described desire as a force that unites butch and transmasculine people. Similarly, desire bonds femme with butch, transmasculine, transfeminine, genderqueer, and so on. Desire brings me into relationship with the people around me. Desire engages difference, and propels me into coalitions that are variously flavoured personal, political, artistic or activist. As Hall argues, we need spaces for queer recognition, where incoherent embodiment is recognised and valued (2009). These are spaces of desire, where queer and incoherent people of all genders recognise and affirm each other.
Only in relationship to other people is my incoherence valuable, effective, and sustainable. By remaining critical of norms (old and new) and creating more space for incoherent embodiments and ethical genders, we are re-distributing power and enabling further resistance. Sunny Drake concludes:

For me, the challenge becomes listening to my desires, checking where they come from, meshing them with my broader politics, and ultimately allowing them to just be as long as they fit with my politics (and I find that if they don’t fit with my politics, either my desires or my politics shift!). And, finding ways to support others to be themselves too, no matter how normative or non-normative their stories.

(Drake 2011)


Appendix A: Trans-Terminologies

In trans and queer communities and theory, there is a proliferation of terms to describe embodiment and identity. This proliferation reflects the complexities of embodiment, identity and language as well as the ongoing transformation of political (queer, trans, feminist) movements. While I attend to the complexities from my specific position, I do not attempt to chart the proliferation of terms. In some cases, I offer my own interpretation of terms, without presuming that my interpretation will correlate with others, but more often I avoid definitions and focus on why I use this term or the effect it has. I do not apply terms to any person who does not self-identify as such.

What follows is a necessarily incomplete list of terms. My intention is to provide some explanation for the choices I have made, and to give a broad idea of what these terms might mean, especially for people who are encountering them for the first time here. I focus only on trans-related terminologies, rather than addressing the breadth of queer/feminist languages.

For a more extensive list of terms that relate to gender and sexual diversity in New Zealand, see the Human Rights Commission (2008) *To Be Who I am/Kia noho au ki toku ano ao: Report of the Transgender Inquiry.*

**Trans:**
I prefer to use “trans” rather than “transsexual” or “transgender” because this is, in my experience, a term that helps form bridges between different trans communities in New Zealand. Trans means different things to different people, it would be impossible to define, but it includes, on a basic level, some kind of gender and/or sex diversity. More specifically, it is often used to refer to “people whose gender identity does not correlate

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79 See Katrina Roen and Patricia Elliot for discussion of the different (and sometimes conflicting) interpretations of what it means to be transsexual versus what it means to be transgender.
to the sex they were assigned at birth and people who identify as outside of binary sex/gender.”

**Queer:**

Both queer and trans are terms that are grounded in particular experiences but expansive enough to hold whoever identifies with them. Queer is resistant, non-normative. Like trans, it must be used with awareness of particular power dynamics, for example, applying these terms to indigenous people, or anyone who does not self-identify as such, is problematic. Instead of using these terms to colonise others, I claim them for myself as integral parts of who I am, where I live, and what I stand for.

I often use queer to describe my sexuality or other people’s self-identified sexualities, but it is not limited to sexuality: genderqueer is a term that signals queerness of gender, for example.

**Genderqueer:**

Like queer, genderqueer is a term that resists definition or fixity, and will be embodied differently by different people. As a genderqueer person, I am queer in my gender identity and presentation, as well as my sexuality. More specifically, as a genderqueer person I do not identify as male or female. I prefer to be known as a transmasculine person, or a queer femme boy. I discuss genderqueer as an identity in Chapter Three.

**Transition:**

When I use the word transition I refer to gender transition, specifically, which is a personal and unique process of embodiment and identity. I am gesturing towards a purposefully vague concept that is instantiated differently by different people.

Transition could be understood as change, or as alignment, or as making visible my own masculinity/femininity/other sense of myself. Our transitions are sometimes written on our bodies, sometimes not. We sometimes avail ourselves of medical technologies: hormones, surgeries, and so on, but there is a danger in simplifying transition to mean “medical interventions.” Many people choose not to undergo physical or medical transition, and many more people lack access to such technologies due to systematic
oppression (colonisation, racism, sexism, or able-ism, for example) and financial obstacles.

The medical model of transition often hinges on the idea of being in the “wrong body,” or on the idea that one must change the external (body) to fit the internal (mind). Though I do not myself identify with the “wrong body” narrative, which would position me as a boy stuck in a girl’s body, some people do. One of the criticisms of this model is that it bestows the power to “make gender” on medical systems instead of transpeople. I see my transition as the ongoing process of becoming myself and becoming visible to the wider world as a transmasculine queer person. Self-identification is a crucial concept in queer and trans communities: I am the authority on my identity and have the right to expect that others will respect my identity (they will not override who I say I am, they will accept my self-identification). The concept of self-identification is gradually filtering into the medical model, with medical professionals negotiating their role as “gate-keepers” (to medical support for transition) in more ethical ways. Historically, this has been a tension between medical systems and trans communities.

In my conversation with Sunny we talk about what “transition” means for us, and Sunny expresses it thus:

I absolutely did already experience myself as a boy before taking hormones, a boy in a boy’s body. Yet I also sought to change my body! I guess it’s not that I’m “becoming” a boy. I don’t relate to the word “transition” in the standard medical way. Yes I’m in transition (as I have been and hopefully will be for my whole life – I could substitute other words there like “growing”, “learning”, “journeying”). I’m not becoming a boy with hormones. I already was a boy. And now my body is changing in ways that feel good.

(Drake 2011)

(Trans)masculinity:
I use (trans)masculine/(trans)masculinity to signify my specific concern with transmasculinity and my desire not to create divisions between different masculinities. I
write from a transmasculine perspective, but the practice of incoherent masculinity that I describe is not limited to transmasculine people. The aim of using (trans)masculine is to highlight the simultaneous particularity and openness of categories such as masculine, feminine, genderqueer, and so on. Some of my interviewees articulate this particularity and openness in relation to their own sense of self, noting that they were sometimes comfortable being (just) men, other times being transmen or transguys. One of my primary goals is not to further reify divisions between trans and non-trans people, while also maintaining my (trans)specificity and the particular locations and identities of my interviewees.

**Transmasculinity:**
I describe myself as a transmasculine person, rather than a transman, because I do not identify as male or as a man. Transmasculinity is a broad category, like trans, and includes anyone who identifies as transmasculine, whether or not they identify as male. Some butch people identify as transmasculine, as do some genderqueer people, some femme people, and all combinations thereof. Transmasculinity is often used as a reference to masculinity, from a trans perspective, and in some cases (not all) it signals the combination of female-assigned-at-birth status and current masculine identification. It is sometimes used in relation to transfemininity.

**Transfemininity:**
This is a broad category of feminine people who may identify as genderqueer, butch, femme, or as a transwoman or transgirl. It also includes people who identify as women, female, and feminine, from a trans perspective or history. In some cases (not all) it signals a combination of male-assigned-at-birth status and current feminine identification. I position both transmasculinity and transfemininity as porous and expansive concepts.

I am inspired by Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lise Jean Moore, and their use of the term “trans-” (2008). They write, “Rather than seeing genders as classes or categories that by definition contain only one kind of thing (which raises unavoidable questions about the masked rules and normativities that constitute qualifications for
categorical membership), we understand genders as potentially porous and permeable spatial territories (arguable numbering more than two), each capable of supporting rich and rapidly proliferating ecologies of embodied difference” (Stryker, Currah, and Moore, 2008: 12). Transmasculinity and transfemininity must not be read as counterparts to a bipolar “male and female” or “masculinity and femininity,” because this reduces their scope and returns to a simple binary. By positioning these concepts as porous and expansive, I hope to move away from taxonomizing impulses and binary sex/gender.