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CROSSING OVER, COMING OUT, BLENDING IN: A TRANS INTERROGATION OF THE CLOSET

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the discursive and material impact of 'coming out' on trans (sexual/gendered) identities and bodies. By drawing on the lived experiences of local trans subjects, the centrality of disclosure within larger lgbti discourses on liberation is troubled. Trans lives often run against the grain of a clear demarcation of a public inside and outside and, as this paper demonstrates at the hand of autobiographic narratives and photography, the very position of being trans(sexual/gendered) escapes the delineations of visibility and readability that discourses surrounding the closet largely maintain.

By pitting the secrecy of passing (as a cisgendered subject) against the disclosure of 'coming out' as trans, the identities of trans men and women are discursively constructed (be it in academic discourses or even in the popular media) as necessarily visible and knowable. This idea is undermined by the actual fact that the successful gender transitioning of a trans subject largely renders their transness invisible. At the same time, emphasis on trans visibility may present a positive move towards lobbying for the equality and freedom of trans people. Yet, the notion of 'progress', of a move from concealment to open celebration, can in effect give rise to a teleological conception of full public disclosure that ignores the complexities of trans lives, and the extreme conditions of precarity that they are often subjected



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to. This paper argues for a conception of 'being trans' as something that is neither completely open and visible, nor totally secret, but rather as something that is wrought by continuous processes of concealment and exposure.

Keywords: Trans, Photography, Autobiography, Visibility and Concealment

INTRODUCTION

Being visible is not always easy, but invisibility can also be quite difficult to muster. To think about (in)visibility within a gender context implies that the signs, codes and texts that discursively locate the gendered subject can have a great impact on the visualisation of human lives. Such forms of gendered demarcation run a particularly strong course over and through the lives of trans subjects, with images and text playing a profound role in the conceptualisation of 'transness' – be it as a state or a process of gender transitioning. As the subject of this article, the experience of a trans man,¹ Charl, who participated in my doctoral research is drawn upon to demonstrate some of the issues that pervade local trans conceptions of visibility and invisibility, and the adjacent concerns surrounding private/public and secret/open that impact in such conceptions. Even though this example is not necessarily presented as generalisable and the purpose of Charl's personal account does not serve the function of setting a standard for treating modes of trans visualisation, it does intersect with various theories and narratives surrounding trans lives. Charl's account of his ideas surrounding forms of photographic and textual/narrative disclosure provide a particular point of reference that, as I will demonstrate, shows how the very idea of a 'visible', 'unveiled' state of transness is questionable due to the very contingent (time- and context-based) nature of all modes of sexual and/or gendered disclosure. At the same time, such a personal account speaks to a wider discursive setting in which burgeoning academic and popular interest in the visualisation of trans identities is more noticeable.² For this reason, this study was sensitive towards both wider theoretical framings of trans visibility, as well as the particular account that was provided by Charl as to his identity as a trans man.

By grappling with both the personal and public, the trans subject and the larger discourses³ surrounding such subjectivities, the study was primarily concerned with photography as an autobiographical tool of self-representation, and it addressed the medium's complex relation to textual and/or verbal forms of self-narration. Often imagined as mirror-like surfaces that reflect reality and identity, photographs are closely aligned with how human subjects see and remember themselves. The study was interested in the representational, media-based dimension of memory that finds its expression in photographic records. Photographs, as an ethics of seeing and a visual grammar (Sontag 2008: 3), are bound by their own rules, particularly when they are bound to constrictions regarding their viewership and circulation. However,

questions around the power of photography to recollect truthfully have haunted this medium ever since its conception, and these questions have become particularly pronounced over the last few decades.

This is particularly relevant given the role that both photographic and textual narratives often play in trans subjects' accounts of self. Both images and words are used within the public arena to represent ideas around a trans self, and such autobiographic narratives provide an intricate framework out of which trans subjects emerge as authors of their own life stories. These narratives also have a strong social dimension insofar as they are complicit in debates around the public visibility of trans identities, particularly with regard to the manner in which such identities have been framed within autobiographical accounts. As such, photography and narrative provide an important framework for approaching the very idea of a visible, open and knowable position of being or emerging as trans.

DISCOURSES ON TRANS SUBJECTIVITIES AND PUBLIC VISIBILITY

The ability of human subjects to disclose, visualise and enact certain facets of their identity within the public arena is intricately tied to discourses on social respectability. These discourses have significant consequences for trans subjects, especially in terms of how they visualise, document and archive their lives. While the medium of photography, in particular, has played a significant role in providing a public record of trans lives, these records are not uncomplicated as various conflicting discourses inform the manner in which such lives are made visible and public. By tracing discourses on the public and the private, forms of trans visibility are manifested in a complex relationship, especially in terms of autobiographic modes of recollection that aim to promote a purportedly uncloseted, open view on trans identities.

Photography has played a considerable role in tracing both the delineation and convergence of private and public discourses, which not only impacts on trans lives, but also has much larger social repercussions for the human subject in general. Bourdieu (1990: 29) argues in this regard that 'the arrival of the domestic practice of photography coincides with a more precise differentiation between what belongs to the public and what to the private sphere', and that photography therefore has an inherently regulatory function as it determines and stabilises social norms (Schwartz 2000: 16). Slater (1997: 129) concurs that photographs have a domesticating function, as they mediate between the private and public spheres, and they facilitate a flow of images and information from the one domain to the other. Photography is central to the infiltration of public discourse into the private sphere, argues Slater (1997: 137), as 'the camera ... [became] a central signifier of modernity at home'. As a technological and ideological apparatus, the camera acts both as a capturing device of, and a channel for, discourses around the public and the

private. Through photography the personal can be made public and shared amongst a certain population, and photography is therefore not only important for establishing bodies of knowledge, but also for determining the public to whom these knowledges can be revealed (see also Elkins 2001; Jenks 2007; Mitchell 2005; Van Dijk 2007).

Being linked to notions of respectability, the relationship between the private and public spheres has played a large role in determining which actions/identities are concealed and invisible (thus consigned to the private sphere) and which can be displayed publically. Both the private and the public are tied to conceptions of morality as social, cultural and political institutions determine their relationship to one another. As Elshtain (1981: 5) argues:

The public and the private as twin force fields help to create a moral environment for individuals, singly and in groups; to dictate norms of appropriate or worthy action; to establish barriers to action, particularly in areas such as the ... regulation of sexual relations, promulgation of familial duties and obligations, and the arena of political responsibility.

In Western discourse the private/public divide serves as an enabling structure that governs the sexual and gendered citizenship of individuals (Fraser 1990; Joseph 1997; Warner 1992), as well as the gendering and racialisation of space (Bauman 1999; Eisenstein 1994). With the demarcation of separate private and public spheres built on simultaneous processes of disempowerment and empowerment, 'the demarcation of public and private life within society is an inherently political process that both reflects and reinforces power relations, especially the power relations of gender, sexuality, race, and class' (Sullivan 1995: 128). The location within and movement between the public and private spheres are determined relationally and refer to hierarchic positions ranging from individuals or groups who are marginalised, socially isolated and restricted in their public expression of their identities and/or bodies, to those who have the agency to move freely between the spheres and to visualise themselves within public spaces (Madanipour 2003: 235–237).

The dichotomous structure of public/private is also supported by a chain of binaries that provide a hierarchic barrier between normalised identities and their 'deviant' counterparts – cisgender/transgender, heterosexual/homosexual, as well as male/female and white/black being examples of polarised identities that historically found their 'socially acceptable' expressions located in separate spheres. The public sphere has long privileged the white, heterosexual, cisgender male by defining his 'modes of public speech and behaviour' as a universal norm against which forms of 'deviance' could be measured and maintained (Crawford 1995: 4; see also Berlant and Warner 1998; Landzelius 2004; Morgan, Marais and Wellbeloved 2009; Phillips 2004; Rheeder 2010; Theron 2008a, 2008b). Of particular importance to the article are the circumstances that lead to those people who present a variant gendered self being 'stigmatised, ostracised, and socially delegitimised to the extent that they may fail to be socially recognised' (Gagné, Tewksbury and McGaughey 1997: 480). This

is particularly relevant to the trans subjects, as they often describe their position within society as an impasse between fitting in (as men/women) and standing out (as trans men/women) within public spaces. As an effect, the *transness* of their identities (i.e. the signs – be they corporeal or discursive – of having transitioned or of being in the process of transitioning) is often suppressed in public spaces in order to gain access to official discourse; that is, *to pass as men/women in order to be recognised as human*.

In this regard, the current research formed part of a larger project of drawing on autobiographical narratives and photographs to negotiate the relationship of certain (erased or marginalised) identities with public discourse. For example, Kotula's (2002) compilation of autobiographic essays, Diamond's (2004) collection of autobiographic essays, and Ames's (2005) anthology of transsexual memoirs are but some of the important texts that specifically deal with trans men and their accounts of self, and that specifically deal with the idea of images and texts as forms of transactional knowledge (i.e. as vehicles for exchange and interaction). See also the work of Elkins (2007) and Hirsch (1997) on the interplay between photography and text within a narratological context. While these texts deal predominantly with American or European stories of trans lives, Morgan et al.'s (2009) book is one of the only texts that present a collection of local autobiographical trans narratives (this text is of key importance to the article and will be revisited later). These books share a perspective on autobiography as a key tool for creating awareness of trans-related issues amongst the general public. In this regard, they seem to demonstrate a common goal of trans autobiography of putting trans lives into the public domain (Prosser 1998: 130).

The specific use of photographs as autobiographic documents that can 'prove' the existence of trans identities presents a divergent array of responses, particularly from within trans communities themselves. One of the strongest responses to photography is that it can be seen as an important tool for responding to the silence that pervades trans lives within the public arena. For example, Cromwell (1999) argues that the visibility of trans men is crucial for self-empowerment, and that it serves a political agenda insofar as it supports the construction of socio-political identities, the education of the public on trans matters and the reclaiming of history (see also Bolin 1994; Sullivan 1990). Producing images of trans men in the media, Cromwell (1999: 142) argues, is necessary to 'demythologise' such subjects, and to provide a nuanced account of the diversity that characterises their lives.

Contemporary photographs of/by trans subjects often try to displace the voyeuristic gaze that has long grazed trans bodies. Such images potentially have a disruptive function as they call attention to the 'profound silence and passivity' (Singer 2006: 608) that often pervades photographs of trans subjects. According to Singer (2006), the portrayal of trans subjects in the popular media resonates with the role that photography has played in producing a medical model of transness

(in particular, of transsexuality) as a pathological condition. Photography's aura of unmediated reality has lent itself to the medical gaze, particularly as it was used to map the gender 'deviance' of nonstandard bodies (Singer 2006: 602–604). Trans bodies were often framed in photographs to furnish scientific 'evidence' of psychological and corporeal abnormality (Meyerowitz 2002), and photography thus served the function of reducing such bodies and subjectivities to depictions of Otherness, both within scientific discourse and the public imagination (Singer 2006: 604).

By implicating the viewer in the act of looking and disrupting the voyeurism that underlies the photographic gaze, self-portraits allow trans subject to 'talk back' and 'look back' (Singer 2006: 609). In addition, they can provide a platform for visualising the social situation of trans lives – they can show the trans subject in a specific social (and everyday) setting, thus contributing to a displacement of the intrusive gaze that is ingrained in cisgender viewership. According to Singer (2006), photographs therefore have a profoundly ethical dimension within a trans context, as they show the viewer how to relate to a trans subject, and they provide a document that substantiates the subject's claim to recognition.

Autobiographic photographs of trans subjects can also respond to the sensationalism that is often a characteristic of the depiction of trans identities in the media – an idea that will be unpacked later in the article in more depth when I deal with particular images relating to trans bodies. This idea is also echoed in some of the writings on trans people, where emphasis is placed on how representations of 'transsexual bodies' through sensationalist journalism can have a tremendous impact on the public imagination (Meyerowitz 2002), and how sex reassignment surgery can specifically be exploited as a 'spectacle' to demonstrate the power of science and health technologies for 'curing' gender deviance (Shelly 2008: 133–134; see also Namaste 2005). With the media often using images of trans subjects for their purportedly 'spectacular' nature (Shelly 2008: 134) – to inspire affect and desire, and to entertain or shock – popular representations of trans people often remain transfixed upon their exotic, eroticised Otherness.

At the same time, the positive impact of the media on trans identities can also be underlined. Media depictions of trans people can potentially generate self-reflexive understanding, and can facilitate the coming-out process of trans men and women (Ringo 2002). The media can play a central role in the formation of trans identities (Shelly 2008: 139), and their power to create awareness speaks to both a trans and cisgender audience (see also Cordova 1992; Cromwell 1999). This understanding is particularly relevant to the current study as the trans subjects who participated share a view of the media as a form of trans empowerment – not only did the media play a crucial role in their lives by 'awakening' them to the possibility of their own status as trans, but they also see the media (to varying degrees) as important for creating awareness amongst the general South African public. It is important to note, however, that the very idea of 'the media' can be a highly essentialised and homogenised

concept. Even though this concept arose time and again in my interviews with the trans subjects who participated in the study, their very interpretation of public depictions of transness differed, depending on the context and content of a given media channel or message. The very complexity and variance pervading a local understanding of trans identities as publically represented and mediated will be unpacked later in the article when specific examples of media representations are discussed.

CULTURES OF CONFESSION: ON PASSING AND DISCLOSURE

The visibility of trans identities is, however, more complex than merely providing a positive visual reference for trans or cisgendered people. If autobiographic presentations of self are considered to be constituted by social processes (an idea that I have specifically highlighted thus far), such forms of interaction are not free of hierarchy or normative convention. Autobiography is firmly situated within a culture of confession and, as Gilmore (2001: 2, 14) argues, if read within a testimonial context the notion of ‘giving penance’ is significant in autobiographical modes of self-expression. Autobiography does not exert its authority through its resemblance to ‘real life’, Gilmore (2001: 3–4) argues, but rather on the basis of its proximity to discourses of ‘truth’, and from the power it draws from acts of atonement that transform the private into the public. See also Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Savage and Burrows (2007) for sociological interpretations/framings of confession.

In the case of trans acts of confession, Green (2006: 500) argues that trans subjects often ‘pay for the privilege’ of telling their stories as they are expected to confess publicly and recite their ‘litanies of struggle and change’. At the same time, autobiographic narratives and images of self are considered to be vital to acts of self-exploration and public visibility for trans subjects. For Ames (2005: xii), autobiographic narratives can be seen as coming-of-age stories for trans men and women – they are rites of passage that chart the psychological and physical transition of such individuals. Such differing perspectives reveal trans autobiography to be a simultaneously confessional and empowering means of expression.

In investigating the role of confession, Butler’s (2004) analysis of disclosure as a means of complying with/making use of structures of power is particularly relevant. By drawing on the idea of the confessional as an imposed compulsion to disclose, Butler (2004) demonstrates how the act of confession is controlled by authoritative discourses. For Butler (2004: 165), confessing to certain desires and acts is a means to constitute oneself – it becomes the scene of identity and the locus of the body. Butler (2004: 172) emphasises the act of confession as a bodily act, as ‘whatever is said not only passes through the body but constitutes a certain presentation of the body’. Along these lines, confession can be seen as a ‘bodying forth’ of information about the self, and a ‘stylised assertion’ of the body *as self* (Butler 2004: 172). To

confess also counts on a technique of framing that which is confessed as completed – as Butler (2004: 167) maintains, ‘to publish one’s act in language is in some sense the completion of the act’. However, this technique of framing is not a singular performative act, but it is reiterative and intersubjective – the meaning of the confessional is produced between different subjects, one who confesses to another, and it therefore constitutes a mode of ‘doing something together’ (Butler 2004: 173). This idea resonates with a conception of gender as a reiterative social comportment – a way of confessing a particular identity with and for others. According to such a conception, the very concept of ‘uncloseting’ a (trans) identity is underscored for its reiterative dimension – an idea that is revisited when I deal with the visual dimension of trans disclosure.

The discourse of confessing of a particular identity is made all the more complex in trans narrations of self. The idea that gender is governed by confessional acts takes on a loaded meaning when used to describe the disclosure of trans identities, both for its corporeal⁴ and social implications. It is especially in terms of the latter that trans acts of disclosure play a very important role. As Prosser (1998: 11) contends, transsexual narratives ‘attest to the valences of cultural belonging that the categories of man and woman still carry in our world’, and these narratives draw attention to the foundational power that the experience of ‘gendered realness’ carries in society. Confessing to transness inevitably means that one steps into a world of discourse that plays a fundamental role in refiguring one’s gender identity; yet, as Prosser stresses, such a role is social, interactional, and open to change and (re)negotiation. To confess and to narrate (to ‘uncloset’, so to speak) are therefore emphasised as tools that are central to both the corporeal and social manifestation of identity within a trans context – they are ways of ‘staking a claim’ to the ‘realness’ of trans identities (Prosser 1998: 11). Along these lines, the rights of trans subjects to function as citizens with social and political rights are, to some extent, highly dependent on trans visibility. Openly being a trans man or woman is crucial for lobbying for trans rights and, as Green argues (2006: 503),

by using our own bodies and experiences as references for our standards, rather than the bodies and experiences of non-transsexuals (and non-transgender people), we can grant our own legitimacy, as have all other groups that have been oppressed because of personal characteristics.

When openly presenting transness, the status of ‘being trans’ seems to be important for creating a visual framework with which to contest discrimination.

At the same time, some trans narratives of self place particular emphasis on the act of passing – of not being read as trans, but as male/a man or as female/a woman. Within such a framework, passing means ‘blending in’ and ‘becoming unnoticeable’ as trans, and that a subject is read by the general public as ‘a “real” man or woman’ (Cromwell 1999: 39). Not passing, or becoming detectable as trans, implies that the individual ‘fails’ to be ‘*just* a man [or woman]’ (Cromwell 1999: 39; my emphasis).

According to this formulation, passing can be seen as a way to keep anything that is superfluous to a 'normal' cisgender identity hidden from the public eye. In addition, passing is often regarded as an achievement (Gagné et al. 1997: 501) – of having attained the ability to be recognised as the gender of one's experience. At the same time, not being able to pass can have serious consequences for trans individuals and can result in discrimination, harassment and assault (Namaste 2000: 144). Passing is therefore directly linked to the degree of precariousness that a trans subject might be exposed to. The ability to read someone as trans, or their ability to pass undetected as the gender of their experience, creates a tension with regard to the visibility of trans identities. Green (2006: 501) aptly describes this tension as a 'visibility dilemma' that underscores the representation of trans subjects. Within a cisnormative society, trans subjects are forced to 'fit in' (Green 2006: 501) and, for this reason, signs of transness often become invisible in direct proportion to successfully passing as the gender of one's experience in everyday society. At the same time, the objective of remaining invisible as a trans person, of being in stealth,⁵ means that tremendous care has to be taken not to let any sign of one's transness slip. As Green (2006) points out, in order to be a 'successful' trans person, one is actually not supposed to be visible as trans at all. Various transphobic social conventions and institutions reinforce such a 'burden of secrecy' (Green 2006), while the livelihoods and relationships of many trans men and women depend on maintaining the secret of their trans status.

In this regard, a complex relationship is also demonstrated between trans(sexual) men and women and calls for gender transgression that often pervades queer activist movements. Arguments, such as those proffered by Raymond (1979), Stone (1991), Bornstein (1995) and Wilchins (2002), for a genderqueer interrogation of the closet often frames trans men and women as the more conservative, gender-compliant alternative to queer identity structures. As such, queer is represented as a politically progressive response to biological essentialism, particularly to transsexual experiences of gender embodiment (Elliot 2010: 36–37). Following on such arguments for a queering of 'conservative' trans identities, various authors have spoken up for the valence of gendered belonging that some trans subjects might crave for. Rubin (1998) and Prosser (1998) share the sentiment that it is often assumed that being trans is necessarily concerned with the queering of gender, and that this places an unfair burden on transsexuals to oppose the very gender categories that they seek to embody, while Elliot (2010) notes that queer often seems to elide trans subjects' 'desire for the ordinary', and these desires, 'unlike those of most women and men, are hard won and deserving of respect' (Elliot 2010: 38). Queer, as an extensive questioning of assimilationism and conventional gender and/or sexual norms is thus read, to some degree, as a discourse that is barbed with overt and implied criticism of trans(sexual) identities. Such discourses potentially have an impact on the gendered experiences and representation of self of trans subjects and, as the following sections

will demonstrate, play an important role in how trans subjects visualise and imagine themselves in relation to, or outside of, the structure of the closet.

ON METHODOLOGY

The abovementioned complexities regarding the visibility of trans lives are also reflected in (and responded to) in the methodology employed in my research methodology. The article draws on doctoral research that was conducted into the personal photographic archives of trans subjects. For the purpose of the research project, a process was facilitated whereby three trans men were asked to select specific photographs from their personal photographic collections as an archive of their own making. During a series of interviews that were conducted over a period of two years, these men used narrative accounts to give a sense of their relationship to the medium of photography. My project, as I explained it to these participants, was concerned with the manner in which they use photography as a vehicle for the recollection of their gender identities, and the manner in which they store, categorise and display (or archive) such photographs. Their responses to this explanation were diverse, both in terms of their relationship to the photographic medium; their own understanding of their roles as archivists; as well as their interpretation of their identities as trans men. During these conversations it emerged that varying degrees of visibility were afforded to the photographs that they chose to discuss – while some images were specifically pointed out for their ability to convey a sense of self that the participants found conducive to creating a personal, social or political identity, other examples were not shared by the participants out of fear that these images might put them at risk.

As such, certain ethical considerations arose during the course of the study, particularly regarding the idea that these trans subjects, including Charl, would be made identifiable to a public audience. This issue was addressed when I applied for ethical clearance from Stellenbosch University, South Africa, the institution where the study was completed. Accordingly, the following information was included in the informed consent forms that all the participants agreed to: any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with the research subject will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with their permission or as required by law. Nothing that they shared during the interviews (be it information or images) would be attributed to them by name, unless they gave me express permission to use their name.

The issue was also raised with the participants that, if they decided to share personal images and allow for these images to be published in my research, they might become identifiable to a general public. If they did not wish to be identified, they could ask of me to edit the images under their supervision (none of the participants chose to have their images edited). In addition, the participants were also given the

option of withdrawing from the study at any time – not only at the time when the interviews were conducted, but also before the study was submitted for examination. For this reason, all the participants were given a copy of the thesis (in the form of a final draft) to read and comment on, with the option of changing and removing information as they saw fit. No information or images were specifically removed, but additional comments were added as they requested.

Within such a framework, Charl's decision to be identifiable in image and text is a strategic one. Charl was given the option to use a pseudonym, yet he preferred to use his real name. This decision is deliberate and it is largely based on the idea that this name is reflective of his current status as a man, and that to change his name would imply some form of dislocation from his chosen identity. In addition, the images that he chose all speak of his experience of his male identity. If read in this light, the study thus allowed for the participating subjects to reveal and monitor their identities as they saw fit, but always with the knowledge that they would be sharing some aspect of their transness to a public audience.

HERE IS THE MAN/HUMAN: THE (DIS)APPEARANCE OF TRANSNESS IN PHOTOGRAPHIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Such a visibility dilemma is illustrated by the approach to the subject of autobiography by one of the trans men, namely Charl, who participated in the study. During the course of my research, Charl often reiterated his distrust of the photographic medium, and his relationship with photography was revealed as quite tenuous, particularly for the manner in which it frames him as visible (and hence as 'public'). For this reason, Charl emphasised the power of narrative accounts when dealing with photography as such accounts allow for the viewer of a given photograph to read it 'correctly'. Because of photography's overwhelming power to frame and stereotype, Charl (Personal interview 14 March 2011) prefers text above image, and words, which can be used to 'supplement' a photograph, also have the power to contain an image, to keep it from getting out of hand, so to speak. As such, Charl places great emphasis on narrative accounts of self as a means to (re)contextualise and re-author the way in which he has been framed through photography. Hence, when thinking about his public self, he emphasises words and text for their ability to give recognition to the vulnerability he experiences when dealing with photographs of himself, especially those that frame him as trans.

Such a view of a public trans identity as shaped by visual and textual codes is aligned with Singer's (2006: 607) conception of text and photography as guiding tools, so to speak, insofar as they provide a way to direct the spectator's gaze when dealing with trans representations – the combination of text and photography thus provides a framework within which a sense of coherency can be created. At the same time, words can alleviate the spectral power of the photograph, and they also create

a visual space to support, contextualise and refigure the ‘evidence’ that photographs seemingly present.

Charl’s view of the relationship between image and text is strongly geared towards its enabling and/or disabling function for allowing him to pass as a man. Charl (Personal interview 22 May 2012) places much importance on his ability to pass within everyday society, and his view of photography and narrative as autobiographic devices reflects such a concern with not necessarily being read as trans. As passing is treated as an achievement, and in some cases a necessity, Charl’s emphasis on being read as a man resounds both in his contact with people in public spaces, as well as in his presentation of self within the photographs that he chooses to share with a public audience. This idea is echoed in Charl’s response to a question on how important it is for him to pass as male in everyday society:

It is very important. For that reason I always get worried when I do decide to shave, I get worried that they might see the feminine coming through. So as far as possible, I shave very seldom, because when you see the beard, you see a male ... Basically I stay in stealth, because I do need to be accepted. I don’t often wear casual clothes, because jeans are too unisex, I need to wear something that makes people immediately see me as a male. So people look at me and think that I am very formal, but actually I am not being formal, I’m just looking after myself. (Personal interview 22 May 2012)

In the case of Charl’s response to autobiographic representations of self, a fear of losing control over his body image is pervasive. By avoiding any slippage between (disparate) body images and his current bodily appearance, Charl demonstrates a strong need to keep this current body image intact within his own photographic records. Knowledge of his status as a trans man is disclosed only via narrative and not through photography itself. For Charl it is of critical importance that, if the photographs he shares with a public audience were read in isolation – that is, without the support of their narrative explanations – he would most probably pass as a man, as only the narrative framing of such images provides overt reference to his status as trans.

The capacity of text to frame a subject as trans is displayed in two different images that Charl chose to share with me, and that he has shared with a general public audience in the past – both figures 1 and 2 are photographs that form part of his own photographic collection, and that he made available in the past for publication in texts where his status as a trans subject was disclosed. Figure 1 appeared in *The Big Issue* – a local magazine that is run by a non-profit organisation that aims to empower homeless, unemployed and socially marginalised people (What is the Big Issue? <http://www.bigissue.org.za/magazine/>). The aim of the article, and the magazine in general, is to create awareness of and empower people who find themselves in precarious situations. Meanwhile, Figure 2 appears in Morgan et al. (2009), a compilation of autobiographical texts and images by trans men and women that

provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of South African trans identities to date.



Figure 1: Charl. *Untitled* (n.d.). Digital photograph.



Figure 2: Figure 2: Charl. *Untitled* (Morgan et al. 2009). Digital photograph.

Both images serve an illustrative purpose insofar as they provide visual reference to some type of, or individual case for, trans life – while Figure 1 appeared in a

magazine article that suggests the general outlines of a precarious life, Figure 2 suggests a more detailed perspective of how a specific trans life is lived. In both these images text serves the explicit function of drawing attention to the status of the subject (of Charl) as trans – a knowledge that the images cannot in themselves secure, but which is framed as such by the media through which these images were circulated. While the particular focus of the article is on the images themselves and Charl's subsequent narrative response to them, it is important to note that both these photographs were accompanied in the original publications by the words 'trans' (which made the depicted subject identifiable as such). While the text in Figure 1 gave no direct reference to Charl's identity (his name was not used in the magazine), Figure 2 was accompanied by text in which Charl was identified by name and started by unequivocally stating: 'My name is Charl and I am a trans man' (Morgan et al. 2009: 27).

While these two photographs never in themselves disclose any particular detail that would make Charl readable as trans, the way in which they are framed by the word 'trans' that accompanies them reveals his status. In Figure 1, Charl is strategically not showing his face as he was still in stealth at that time, and the image was to appear in a public magazine article that dealt with trans-related issues. While his existence as a trans man is thus referenced, his personal identity is kept secret. In this regard, Cromwell's (1999: 39) view on trans narratives of self as a means of 'blending in' is echoed to some degree, as far as Charl as the subject remains unnoticeable as an individual subject to an outside audience. This idea also speaks to Green's (2006) formulation of confession as a difficult process, one that can unsettle and endanger the gendered existence of trans subjects.

As Charl was not comfortable with sharing his identity at the time, he wished to remain anonymous – not being rendered identifiable thus speaks of a condition of perceived precariousness, and of trying to reference such a condition (without aggravating it by exposing his identity) in order to create awareness for disenfranchised people. This image thus references a general idea of trans existence by providing photographic 'evidence' of the bodily fact – the depicted beingness – of a trans man. To a certain degree, the absence of a clearly identifiable subject plays into this idea of providing a general outline of trans identity, and while Charl's identity becomes invisible to the degree that he is no longer referenced as a particular subject, the general subjecthood of trans men is suggested by providing a template (a body without a face) into which such identities can be inserted.

Subsequently, Charl (Personal interview 17 May 2011) has become more ambivalent about the image, as he feels that it shows him as if he is 'hiding'. Even though Charl dislikes the way in which he is framed in this image, his feeling of aversion is more orientated towards the role of the reader in interpreting this image as a sign of hiding than it is to the photograph itself. This idea shows how the audience is implicated in this process of authorship – a general (largely cisgendered) public

played a large role in the creation of this image, as Charl anticipated their reading of and reaction to it. This image, which depicts Charl as a faceless, anonymous subject, is deemed suitable by him for public circulation, but not necessarily for sharing with friends. Figure 1, which shows Charl as if he is ‘hiding’, is not really suitable for showing to friends because it is, in his words, ‘not open’ enough; yet the very fact that his identity is concealed made it a fitting image for circulating amongst a public audience.

In contrast, Charl (Personal interview 17 May 2011) describes Figure 2 – which was taken at a later stage when he was more comfortable with disclosing his status as a trans man – as a ‘good’ image, one in which he is clearly identifiable and in which he appears as a ‘more open’ person. According to Charl, this image shows him ‘on a good day’ and is ‘quite descriptive’ – with most of its descriptive value hinging on the fact that he is caught with his ‘inevitable cigarette’ (ibid.). In all, the image frames Charl ‘as *me*’ (ibid., Charl’s emphasis), and it conveys an idea of self that Charl is comfortable with – that is, an idea of self that is masculine and open, and shareable with both friends and a general public audience. Here, Prosser’s (1998) view of autobiographic stories and photographs as a means to give gendered ‘realness’ to trans lives is echoed insofar as this example speaks of the social, interactional and negotiable function of trans autobiography – that is, the latter’s place in the corporeal and social ‘telling’ of identity. To use Prosser’s (1998: 11) words, it speaks of the ‘cultural belonging’ that a trans subject experiences, and negotiates, within a gendered society.

When comparing figures 1 and 2, both of which were presented alongside text that casts him as trans, mixed feelings of vulnerability and approval arise in Charl’s interpretation of each image. One of the overriding factors is the context within which each image was taken – while Figure 1 shows Charl at a time when he was still in stealth, Figure 2 is reflective of a period where he has ‘come out a little bit since working at *Genderdynamix*’⁶ (Personal interview 17 May 2011). However, this description does not imply an overall progression from concealment to disclosure, or from a feeling that his vulnerability is actually being diminished through such forms of disclosure, but rather from context-specific moments in which Charl feels more, or less, precarious in relation to photography. In Charl’s case it is not a matter of becoming more or less precarious, but his vulnerability rather emerges as contingent upon various contexts that intersect and overlap in the domain of the visual. The context within which a photograph is taken (with the contingencies of time, space, photographer and anticipated audience all playing a central role) and the context within which it actually circulates (i.e. the space within which the anticipation [the idea of] an audience meets and breaks with an actual audience) are thus interrelated. Photography’s power to frame lies in its ability to reproduce as much as to produce modes for understanding a given subject (e.g. as trans or cisgender), while its inability to always frame ‘correctly’ (in this context, to frame a popular and/or

general understanding of a trans subject without aggravating their stigmatisation) is part of the reason why Charl does not always trust the medium. He is aware that these frames are context-dependent, and thus never completely controllable when photographs are shared with a public audience.

Even though photographs can, in Charl's experience, be quite unmanageable, both the photographs that were shared by Charl direct the spectator's gaze towards the masculinity of the present-day subject. Figure 1, for example, might seem quite elusive as it defies an intimate visual understanding of Charl as an identifiable individual. However, this image still serves a crucial role for corroborating his masculinity, as the person depicted in this picture may be slightly indistinct, but he still appears to be male. At first glance, this image maintains a quality of aloofness, as it does not seem to allow for much intimacy between subject and viewer. At the same time, Charl's turning away, his act of hiding his face from the viewer, suggests a degree of vulnerability that, when read in conjunction with the text that frames him as a trans man (and not *just* a man), is quite affecting.

Figure 2 places particular emphasis on Charl as an identifiable trans man, while simultaneously emphasising his status as a post-transition subject. The image act as a referent that traces the fulfilment of Charl's gender transitioning and it serves as a visual monument that testifies to the resolution of his gender identity. According to this image, Charl is a man, and it emphasises the product (rather than the process) of gender transitioning. Instead of drawing attention to the dichotomy of the pre-transition/post-transition self, this image highlights only the present self – it opts for emphasising the trans man as someone who *is*, rather than someone who has *become*, or who has left a gender or another version of self behind. Yet, the very process of a trans existence is still alluded to by the naming of the subject (in this case, of Charl) as trans – one reads this post-transition image in relation to the narrative framing of this photograph, and the act of trans disclosure makes transness imaginable.

Figures 1 and 2 are examples of two different approaches to the subject of trans visibility. They reveal, on the one hand, how photography can be used to solidify a certain version of self. Yet, on the other hand, they also show how acts of disclosure form part of a process of identity exposure through which transness and/or masculinity is reiterated. Furthermore, the discourse of disclosure often presupposes that a singular identity would be disclosed and that this act would entail the subject ultimately (and finally) verbalising and visualising the self, thus overlooking the range of identities that might be revealed through images or texts.

CONCLUSION

The emphasis that is placed on trans visibility is especially relevant to the genre of autobiography, where the act of participation, of presenting one's images/story, falls within a rhetoric of defying secrecy and invisibility through public disclosure.

However, as the article has demonstrated, simultaneous processes of disclosure and concealment can potentially play a large role in the identities of trans subjects. Photography may be vital for renegotiating and even stabilising a sense of self, yet its capacity for providing a final, singular version, a comprehensive archive of the human subject, is undercut by competing and omitted versions that lie at the edge of frames of representation.

By pitting the secrecy of passing against the disclosure of ‘coming out’ as trans, the identities of trans subjects can be problematically reduced as necessarily visible and knowable – an idea that is undermined by the actual fact that the successful gender transitioning of trans subjects largely renders their transness invisible. At the same time, emphasis on trans visibility may present a positive move towards lobbying for the equality and freedom of trans people; yet the notion of ‘progress’, of a move from concealment to open celebration, can in effect give rise to a teleological conception of full public disclosure that ignores the complexities of trans lives, and the extreme conditions of precarity to which they are often subjected.

As the article has argued, the process of making oneself known (or intelligible) as a trans subject can be thought of as a reiterative practice that occurs with, and in relation to, an other. The degree to which a trans identity can be represented as ‘fixed’ or ‘finalised’ is, for example, highly influenced by this relationship. The way in which Charl is framed in his photographic records might show an overwhelming compulsion towards reiterating a masculine self, yet such forms of disclosure are never completely stable or final – to use Butler’s (2009: 4) words, ‘the job is never done “once and for all”’. To tell the story of oneself to an other is never a final, completely stable act, and it does not lead to a complete resolution of the multiplicity and conflation that is part of human subjectivity. Rather, that which is emphasised through the photographic record’s reiterative framework occurs alongside that which is limned, precisely because this framework’s investment in making a subject comprehensible transpires at a point of forgetting an other version of self. As Butler (2009: 7) maintains

if a life is produced according to the norms by which life is recognised, this implies neither that everything about a life is produced according to such norms nor that we must reject the idea that there is a remainder of ‘life’ – suspended and spectral – that limns and haunts every normative instance of life.

As much as photography and text can provide a valuable framework for approaching and recognising trans lives (or any life, for that matter), the very idea that such tools can still be used *to finalise* and to *lay bare* speaks, perhaps, of a lingering romantic yearning for the empirical and discursive to give some sense to the contingencies and unintelligibilities of a gendered human life.

NOTES

1. I use the term ‘trans man’ as interchangeable for ‘ftm’ (female to male), with the former being preferred (above ‘transsexual’) by the research subjects to describe their own experienced identities. I also use the terms ‘trans’ and ‘transness’ to refer to general positions and practices of questioning or disidentifying with the gender roles assigned to a person at birth, while the term ‘cisgender’ is used to describe people whose gender identity matches their sex at birth.
2. Local writings on the subject of trans activism and public visibility include the following sources: Vincent and Camminga (2009) explore how South Africa’s medical, legal and military establishments have exerted power over transsexual bodies; Klein (2009) explores transgender activism in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa; and Preez (2006) investigates the relation between technology and transsexuality.
3. In this context, I draw on of language systems and modes of visualisation as integral to the manifestation and circulation of discourse (Hanssen 2000: 7). Foucault’s theory of the discourse of power – according to which the human subject is discursively constituted by hegemonic formations – is also of great importance in this regard. Foucault’s (1980) notion of sexual ‘normalcy’ and ‘deviance’ as invented through systems of power, is crucial for my investigation of trans lives.
4. While the current study was specifically interested in the social repercussions of forms of disclosure, it is important to note that acts of confession are also central to the medical and physical ‘treatment’ of – or rather, response to – trans(sexuality).
5. Being ‘in stealth’ is a phrase used within trans communities and writings to refer to people who want to hide the fact that they have transitioned, and who want to be integrated into society as the gender of their experience.
6. *Genderdynamix* is a local trans advocacy and support group for whom Charl was working at the time.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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