

## Medicine, Memoir, and Metafiction: Speculative Realities in Contemporary Transgender Knowledge Production

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### Abstract

Through a long history of genre-evading texts that remix personal biography with pop culture, sci-fi, and fiction, trans people have resisted fear-based paradigms of what transness is or what it should look like. Drawing on humor, metafiction, and autobiography, these texts subvert historical medical conceptions of transness, as well as the imagery promoted by ‘mainstream’ fiction that portrays trans people as diseased monsters. In doing so, they disrupt the stability of institutional medical knowledge and instead write a powerful depiction of their lived realities with ramifications for wider audiences and ‘public transness’. This paper examines some of the ways trans creators have continued to build on this creative tradition, highlighting Torrey Peter’s *Detransition, Baby*; Grace Lavery’s *Please Miss*; Tom Cho’s *Look Who’s Morphing*; and TikTok account *HumbleTortoise* as key sites of epistemic innovation. This paper argues that these texts build on a longer history of experimental genre-breaking in trans art, while also forging new possibilities through their uniquely situated cultural standpoints. Attending to the ways transness is being both speculated and made real through genre-breaking text and intervention allows us to situate the agency of trans people in the creation of biomedical knowledge; provincialize institutional medical knowledge as the sole arbiter of objectivity; and imagine a radically inclusive approach to trans knowledge production that troubles the borders between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ and refuses to assimilate trans lives into a single or homogenous narrative.

### Introduction

When I started hormone replacement therapy, I was met with a tangle of approval letters and medical actors, including a primary care doctor,

psychologist, and endocrinologist—none of whom were necessarily trained in gender-affirming healthcare. Traversing these steps of bureaucracy was like playing a game of pass-the-parcel, where all that waited beneath layers of paper was a note that said *Surprise! We decided not to let you start HRT after all.* But parallel to this process was a swirl of information discussed on Reddit, Facebook and social media. Here, I read advice from trans people on how to navigate medical gatekeeping. What kinds of things should you say—or not say—if you are trying to get a referral? What paradigms should you play into? Other advice included information that doctors might withhold (or not know about), including possible side effects and dose levels. In an op-ed for *Insider*, López (2021) writes: “The only place I’ve been able to turn to for concrete answers on how to achieve the results I wanted...was online platforms like Reddit.”

Knowledge of what transness is and should be is constitutively produced by a mess of actors and is constantly in flux. Velocci (2021) shows how 1950s physicians Harry Benjamin and Elmer Belt influenced the construction of transgender healthcare practices, surmising that who was deemed to ‘qualify’ for medical services was defined by patients’ “acceptance” that they could not change their sex—as well as avoidance of malpractice suits from unsuccessful surgeries. Today, fear-based medical practice (specifically, physicians’ fears) persists in attitudes that demand extensive psychological evaluation before starting HRT and in discourses around detransition and children being “rushed into” medical transition. Latham (2019) identifies how medical doctors have constructed an idea of transness disconnected from trans people’s realities: the “phenomenon of ‘transexuality’ is self-referentially constituted via selective attention...this has produced an ongoing feedback loop of ‘corroborating data.’” This vision propagates itself by forcing trans people to perform these medicalized paradigms, refashioning their lives into what Sandy Stone (2013) calls ‘plausible histories’; thus, in physicians’ eyes, this knowledge is made ‘real.’ Rather than take seriously the idea that knowledge might come from outside biomedical institutions, doctors hunker down on an approach of sickness- and fear-based medicine.

Although this alternate reality of medical transness is experienced first by doctors, it makes its way to the public through the news and entertainment. Cultivating fear is profitable, including fears that arise from perceived threats to the dominant structure through the specter of “category crisis” (Cohen, 2018). Because public debates around transness have co-opted the language of ‘science’ and ‘medicine’, ideas of sickness have followed trans people out of the hospital and into public bathrooms,

housing shelters and Congress. “I live daily with the consequences of medicine’s definition of my identity as an emotional disorder,” Stryker stated in 2000, and in the years since activists and legislators have sought to weaponize pathologization against trans people: scaremongering about ‘rapid onset gender dysphoria’ and promoting ideas that trans people are predators or have internalized psychological problems. Culture and biomedicine feed each other, rendering a dynamic in which trans people are simultaneously fearsome and incapable of autonomy. Such a political hegemony seeks to constrict the terms of the debate, positioning trans people as the opponents of a two-sided war waged by scientific rationality. But by looking beyond an epistemology of “scientific objectivity,” focusing on the textures of self-authored transgender realities, can we unsettle a framing that forces trans people to comply with terms set by cissexist medical institutions?

Trans people have historically worked to disrupt exclusionary medical systems. Several community stories document the history of how in 2001, two trans women started an underground clinic in a barn that provided orchiectomies for trans women (Lamb, 2010; dirtycitybird, 2020). Community systems of knowledge-sharing about DIY medicine and grey-market trading of hormones comprise a not-insignificant portion of HRT access globally (Qvistgaard, 2017). Explicitly LGBTQ-focused and led clinics, such as Anchor Health in Connecticut and Callen-Lorde in New York, reframe the paradigm that transness inconveniences the ‘proper’ practicing of biomedicine, and transgender physicians like Anchor Health’s founder, Dr. A.C. Demidont, are motivated by their own visions of biomedical futures: “The future, in my mind will be shaped by AI, genderless language and efforts to remove systemic biases.”<sup>1</sup> In explicitly biomedical spaces—perhaps especially so—trans people are constantly thinking about ideas of futurity. However, these approaches cannot escape the structural and epistemological limits of a biomedicalized approach. How else is trans knowledge in the contemporary U.S. constituted? If we are to provincialize medical practitioners as contemporary creators of trans knowledge then we must look to trans writers who incorporate experimental approaches and personal narrative into their analysis of biomedical power: “I want to use my own experience to illustrate how the requirements for diagnosis and treatment play out on individual bodies,” Dean Spade writes in “Mutilating Gender,” while Susan Stryker’s lecture “My Words to Victor Frankenstein”—at once literary analysis and performance art—advanced

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<sup>1</sup> A.C. Demidont, personal communication, December 11, 2021.

the paradigms of transgender knowledge production by attending to trans affect and rage. Emblematic of this practice is also Preciado's (2013) biopolitical narrative *Testo Junkie*, a self-described "body-essay...a somatopolitical fiction, a theory of the self, or self-theory" (p.11). The persistent ability of trans people to combine, modify, transform and circumvent generic convention is captured by the idea of *remix*: "taking existing paths, forging new ones, constantly coming up with new combinations of living to access the social, medical and communal care needed for life" (Blackston, 2022). In this article, I aim to articulate some of the innovative ways trans creators continue this practice of remix and experimental knowledge production beyond the sphere of academia today.

I explore these possibilities by looking at recent texts that play with genres of metafiction and memoir, where we can widen the ecosystem of what Haraway (1988) calls partial perspectives. How do trans people portray a transness beyond the binary of medical 'facticity' and sensationalist monstrosity? Drawing on genre, humor, and their own lives, they disrupt the binary between research and fabulation, nonfiction and fiction, reality and unreality. I highlight contemporary examples in Torrey Peter's *Detransition, Baby*; Grace Lavery's *Please Miss: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Penis*; Tom Cho's *Look Who's Morphing*; and TikTok account *HumbleTortoise*, situating these texts as offshoots from a lineage of experimental media. These texts evidence trans creators' ability to assemble and remix pop culture, autobiography, insider knowledge and inherited practices of previous trans writing. In doing so, they forge new modes of transgender knowledge production, resulting in a contemporary trans oeuvre that is characterized co-presently by lineages and divergences. Attending to the ways transness is both speculated and made real through genre-breaking text and intervention allows us to situate the agency of trans people in the creation of knowledge; provincialize institutionally-produced medical knowledge as the sole arbiter of objectivity; and imagine a radically inclusive approach to trans knowledge production that troubles the borders between 'fact' and 'fiction' and refuses to assimilate trans lives into a single or homogenous narrative.

### Memoir and Metafiction

Florence Ashley identifies three key bases for prescribing hormones: gender dysphoria, gender euphoria, and creative expression through the body (Ashley, 2019). Although gender euphoria and dysphoria have relatively agreed-upon articulations, "creative transfiguration...is more

difficult to capture in words.” This trouble underscores why we must turn beyond the confines of biomedical literature to narratives told by trans people, which communicate not just discursive content but also imaginative ontologies or even ‘vibes.’ Reading trans-authored texts allows us to rethink trans biomedicine and storytelling as connected and independent avenues of creative trans-figuration and trans embodiment. Constrained by scope, I first examine this possibility in three books: Torrey Peters’ *Detransition, Baby* (2021), Tom Cho’s *Look Who’s Morphing* (2014), and Grace Lavery’s *Please Miss: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Penis* (2022). *Detransition, Baby* is a critically and commercially acclaimed realist novel that explores Reese’s, Ames’, and Katrina’s attempts to forge a new model of parenting for the baby in Katrina’s womb, while *Please Miss* is the quasi-memoir of a British academic and public intellectual, with frequent slippages into dream sequences, satire, and mixed-media parody. Finally, *Look Who’s Morphing*, written by Australian author Tom Cho, is a collection of short stories that blends comedy and pop culture with ideas of transfiguration, embodiment, and Asian-Australian culture. Each of these texts are united by trans authorship and a playful approach to genre, echoing a longer tradition of genre-experimentalism seen in the works of other trans writers (Bey, 2019; Preciado, 2013; Spade, 2006; Stone, 2013; Stryker, 2000). Each also sets forth an embodied transgender life otherwise. Blending autobiography, fiction, and body politics, these texts remix transgender knowledge. They suggest new ways of making meaning that expand the scope of possibility for trans lives. They also, through differences in content and context, reveal the myriad ways in which contemporary trans authors build on and diverge from a longer heritage of experimental creation.

Through a mix of fiction and biography, these authors write vivid depictions of trans experiences in medical care. Authored from embodied knowledge, they present stories that might otherwise be distorted by distrust or misunderstanding when medical researchers attempt to excavate such information from patients. In one passage in *Detransition, Baby*, Peters depicts Ames’ experience gaining an HRT prescription:

Ames, who had no history with trans therapy, and none of the paperwork that the hormone gatekeepers tended to require, had spent weeks before the appointment fretting that the endo would declare him “not really trans” and deny him hormones. Upon hearing that the doctor appreciated appreciation, Ames therefore gushed with gratitude, and duly walked out with a prescription for injectable estrogen. (p. 17)

I read this event as a negotiation between the trans patient and the doctor, making visible the 'hidden curriculum' and strategic maneuvering informed by trans community knowledge-sharing and often required for trans people to successfully (if anxiously) access their medication. In a few sentences, the passage covers several key topics: therapy requirements (Ames has not had trans therapy but *is* trans); the idea of ubiquitous gatekeeping (“tended”); medical debates over what ‘really counts as trans’; the stress of navigating trans healthcare; strategic communication; and a specific articulation of what the substance ‘HRT’ is in this case (injectable estradiol). What is interesting is how much information it manages to articulate as presuppositional trans knowledge. Rather than waste time reciting debates about imposed medical standards, the narrative shows readers how things *are as they are* in this particular (often shared) lived reality. Indeed many trans readers would resonate with the inherent truth in this exposition, but as further evidence I note that Peters states in an interview that “both Reece and Ames are heightened versions of myself” (Preston, 2021). As a trans woman, Peters implicates herself in the narrative, and emphasizes the ‘authenticity’ of her characters’ lives. In fact, this book is not the only one that uses semi-biographical vignettes of clinical encounter to establish groundwork for the readers in terms of shared transgender knowledge. In *Please Miss*, Lavery spends some time discussing her initial appointment to—like Ames—obtain an HRT prescription.

I wanted...[to] be rescued from taking the hormones somehow, either by the doctor telling me that I wasn't a good candidate after all, or else by my saying, *you know, I've learned something today, and that's we don't need to take hormones to be real trans people, we can just get resentful in unpredictable ways, and that is valid.* (p. 166)

Ames' experience and *Please Miss*' protagonist's both mirror each other and diverge. Lavery gestures to the risk of gatekeeping, that the doctor might deem her a 'bad' candidate, but this is a given rather than a focal point. We feel the plausibly autobiographical narrator's anxiety at the enormity of starting HRT. Lavery invokes cultural references that may resonate among many trans readers: the tension between the theoretical (un)importance of hormones as a characteristic of transness rooted in contemporary 'validity' language, and her persistent desire to nonetheless take hormones. This dry humor, like Peters' narration, grounds comedy in realism while winking to trans readers in-the-know. Lavery, leveraging irony, playfulness, and personal experience, skates around hot-button online discourse. These passages show us how trans writers reify 'trans

knowledge' not only on the page but also in the minds of their readers, taking as given the inherent authenticity that comes with their personal experiences.

Trans authors also explore what it means to struggle with and against classification. Once again, these texts offer creative reorganization of discussions that have troubled biomedical authorities and trans people alike. *Detransition, Baby* discusses the COGIATI (Combined Gender Identity and Transsexuality Inventory), an online questionnaire to “determine if the test takers [are] true transsexuals who [need] to transition, or merely transgenderists.” The COGIATI test was created by an artist and trans woman named Jennifer Diane Reitz, and although it is widely considered to be outdated it is simultaneously beloved and ridiculed as a cultural touchstone of the late 1990s.<sup>2</sup> This test diverges from current clinical standards but displays a similar logic in its turn toward an algorithmic arbiter of what counts as ‘actual’ transness. By including it in the novel, Peters again makes reference to a particular ‘real world’ insider knowledge common to many transfeminine people of her generation, winking to her readers while contextualizing the ‘real’ ways in which people engage with that knowledge. In one scene, Ames (Amy) expresses confusion that Jen, “obviously a true transsexual...kept saying things that countered what the COGIATI test said a true transsexual should feel.” Here, the ‘true transsexual’ chafes against an implied categorical standard, and Peters’ use of dramatic irony makes use of shared community knowledge to pry at classificatory norms. The idea of the ‘true transsexual’ as an ever-present specter in the backdrop of trans people’s minds and political realities is referenced too by Lavery, who writes that “The bigots have decided to divide trans people into two types, the Real Transsexuals and the Autogynephiles” (136). This paradigm of transexuality and autogynephilia is perplexing for Amy in her exploratory stages of transness: the incongruity that arises at the site of comparison between her expectations, the prevailing knowledge paradigm of sorting and classification, and the affective dimension of ‘being trans’, are central to her character development and to the reader’s understanding of Amy’s lived experience. In fact, the novel points out that the category ‘transgender’ is a relatively recent construction both anti-trans institutions *and* trans people have consolidated over time: “Institutions require categorical names in order to function...they assigned a name to this population...and since transgender women wanted access to resources,

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed the test also made a light-hearted appearance in one of *Detransition Baby*’s more recent trans realist fiction forerunners, *Little Fish* (Plett, 2018).

that's what we ended up calling ourselves." Who really gets to codify difference into categories? Peters and Lavery highlight the stakes and agency of trans people navigating classificatory demands.

Frictional experiences with identity-based categorization are further explicated in Cho's *Look Who's Morphing*, though Cho's attention to the complicating factor of race distinguishes the text from Peters' and Lavery's writing. In "A Counting Rhyme," Cho plays off Australian rhyming slang with a poem: "Six, seven. Soon-Yi Previn. Eight. Mate. China plate. Kitchen sink. Chink. Ginger beer. Queer. A Chinese queer. A kitchen sink of ginger beer" (Cho, 2014). Here, Cho explores the commonalities and frictions between race, immigrant identity, queerness, and transness. "Chink" and "Queer," both with afterlives as derogatory slurs, are pushed into proximity through the rhyme "a kitchen sink of ginger beer." This metaphor evokes embodiment of both queer and racial identity, as well as inside/outside tensions. Incongruity serves a double purpose—while the intersections of queerness and Chinese-ness are folded easily into (white) Australian linguistic culture, this can only be done in nonsensical fashion and mediated through the two words' connotations as slurs, reclaimed or otherwise. Further, the genre of Cho's poem—a list of rhyming slang—functions as its own form of commentary, repurposing a dialect clouded by specific ideas of white, cisheterosexual Australian identity to express Cho's convergently queer *and* Asian identity, referencing "China plates" and winking toward a transcultural Australian identity. In another story, Cho continues to mobilize comedic metafiction to create a sense of absurdity. The narrator writes that his Chinese name "apparently means 'I will skip and pick clover from lush fields.' Hate it hate it hate it" (25). Comparatively, his Auntie Weng's name means "a very nice and intact hymen" (26). The gendered dimensions of these exaggerated names satirize exoticism and gendered cultural norms while hinting at dysphoria. Both the narrator's and Auntie Weng's names invoke embodied femininity and the narrator suggests a discomfort at his name while critiquing Orientalist tendencies to fetishize Chinese and East Asian names as carrying elaborately symbolic and spiritual meaning. The metafictional character of the text is plainly satiric but offers routes to layered meaning-making. Through recurring themes and generic twists, there is a strong sense Cho's stories reflect his experiences as a queer, transgender Asian-Australian.

It is worth noting that although these themes of racial and sexual ambiguity surface throughout *Look Who's Morphing*, Cho does not explicitly deal with race or transness by name. This approach diverges



from the textual traditions inherited by Peters and Lavery's realist or surrealist approach to writing about transgender experience. Instead, Cho plays with a kind of gender "restivity," a concept theorized by Snorton (2017) in relation to Black experiences of "gender in the afterlives of slavery" (p.172). In highlighting the restive properties of *Look Who's Morphing*, I draw on Awkward-Rich's (2019) description of Snorton's "restivity" as a "useful concept for narrating all manner of black and nonblack gender-nonconforming people in the archive...because it more adequately describes the kinds of performances that many of these folks undertook, in which gender was not necessarily a locus of identity but 'a terrain to make space for living.'" Through this lens, gender is not a fixed characteristic but rather a necessarily fluid experience that responds to a hostile landscape of racism and other overlapping forms of discrimination. In *Look Who's Morphing*, gender is not a "locus of identity"; instead it is a fluid, mediating space through which discussions of culture, heritage, race, sexuality and immigrant experience might unfurl. Unlike what Awkward-Rich (2019) critiques as a tradition of "race unconsciousness" in "queer trans theory," Cho's approach is framed by his cultural starting point as an Asian-Australian, second-generation immigrant—distinct from Peters' and Lavery's standpoints as white authors. This allows Cho to move fluidly through a multiplicity of genres, 'trans-ing' his characters and stories while simultaneously dealing with complex cultural themes. "Is this a novel, a memoir, or an academic experiment with language? It's often hard to tell, and perhaps that's the point," reads one review on Cho's website (Hergott in Cho, 2019). Transness in *Look Who's Morphing* does not appear in particular historical details or the depiction of specific "types" of trans people—rather, it emanates from the text's transformative genres and form. Gender restivity is thus enacted through genre restivity, as Cho's writerly persona slips in and out of roles as Godzilla and Whitney Houston's bodyguard, while shifting through memoir, fanfiction and rhyme. In doing so, Cho not only leans into Stryker's (2000) call for trans people to reclaim words like "monster," but does so in a uniquely restive way by morphing not just the narrator's 'self' but also the landscape in which the narrator interacts—just as Cho's gender is situated in his cultural terrain, his protagonists' bodies, identities and worlds are similarly entangled.

It is worth comparing *Please Miss* here, in which Lavery demonstrates a similar tendency to shapeshift—refracting between realism and fiction to trans-figure the trans body through a playful and fluid approach to representation. Lavery writes: "Genre and comedy are my two

main routes back to the body” (Lavery, 2022 January 7). However, a key difference to *Look Who’s Morphing* is the extent to which a clearly articulated vision of trans(sexuality) is a locus of the book. One instance in which this becomes clear is a dialogue between an unnamed doctor and Lavery. Speaking back to herself through the doctor’s mouth, Lavery writes: “You came to this clinic to embark upon the process of transforming your body into a woman’s body. Elsewhere in your life, you have set about the still more laborious process of transforming the *story* of your body into the *story* of a woman’s body” (Lavery, 2022, p.54). The “story” here could be read not only in reference to how one might reframe the embodied experience of transition outside the clinic, but also as the book itself, the process of which this fictionalized doctor is a part. ‘Elsewhere in your life’ refers to the rest of Lavery’s life as a woman beyond the clinic, but also the creation of *Please Miss* and the scenes within. The boundaries between story, the body, and the text are slippery. Even the index section of *Please Miss* feels like a continuation of the story of Lavery’s embodied knowledge as a trans woman—a playfully detailed inventory of granular experiences and a vast library of shared community knowledge. With tongue-in-cheek index listings like “facefucking” and “broccoli blow-job,” Lavery’s *Please Miss* impishly demonstrates a rapport between genre and the body as mediums of knowledge-production—while calling into question whether the entire project is “a novel, a memoir, or an academic experiment” (Hergott in Cho, 2019). However, she does so with clear and consistent refrains to trans experiences with biomedicine, trans (and anti-trans) politics, and self-reflection on what it means to be trans and have a ‘trans’ body. Thus Peters, Lavery, and Cho play with the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction to explore common themes of identity, categorization, and embodied plasticity, but each writer mobilizes unique cultural knowledges and references in doing so.

### From Biomedical to the Unreal

The shapeshifting in trans writing hints at something beyond a fluidity of gender: it prompts us to question what the line is between real and unreal. Trans-exclusionary reactionaries have quickly spun the vacuous phrase “Sex is real!” into a rallying cry—but why the obsession with the real? As Messeri (2021) observes, our lived ‘reality’ is often influenced just as much by our perception as it is the physical forces of the world. Can we take the real at face value, and what possibilities might emerge if we stopped thinking about sex and gender in a framework of real or unreal?

One person exploring these possibilities is Parker, a writer and musician who posts videos on TikTok under the username HumbleTortoise. As of the time of writing, Parker has over 160,000 followers. Their most popular series on TikTok are videos in which they announce the “genders of the day.” In one example, Parker announces that “The Genders of the Day include:

- It’s not self sabotage...it’s digiorno (I’m getting a lil too comfortable on this app)
- What if the real game was the squids we made along the way?
- We are gathered here today, both submissive and breedable...
- He’s The Perfect Man: Made Entirely of Clay...?
- Leg so hot. Hot hot leg. Leg so hot you fry a egg” (Parker, December 3 2021)

Parker concludes with a cheery “As usual, you can take your pick and register; there’ll be new genders out next week!” Much like the category of “transgender” itself (Valentine, 2007), these genders are inherently tied to the cultural trends amid which they are situated and made.<sup>3</sup> Parker announces them with irreverent glee. These genders cannot be made sense of using a conventional framework. Rather than prescriptive categories, they evoke intangible feelings. These genders are difficult to pin down, resisting the predation of forced commensurability (Stengers, 2011) inherent to the cis/trans binary—they are humorous, poetic, sometimes personal, and enmeshed in pop culture. Taken together, this series argues that gender is almost impossible to definitively classify except through speculative approaches that move adjacent to what they are actually describing—almost but never quite reaching the precision of an easy-to-define category. The TikToks suggest that gender is a joke—but a joke that trans people are in on, and not the victims of—and Parker embraces an approach to gender that is both earnest *and* refuses to take gender seriously, by leaning fully into the absurd. Expanding the slippage between fiction and reality—the kind of transformation and shapeshifting central to Cho’s, Lavery’s, and Peter’s writing—is central to what makes these videos humorous and engaging, and Parker’s choice of medium—TikToks—is oriented around practices of remixing.

Parker’s use of TikTok as a medium also allows them to incorporate embodiment in interesting ways. In most of their “Genders of the Day” videos, they hold the camera, zooming in and out as they speak, creating a lively sense of motion and energy. As they hold the camera in their hands, the TikToks take on an embodied quality that a more static video filmed on a motionless tripod might lack. In a discussion of trans

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<sup>3</sup> See Netflix’s streaming show *Squid Game*, DiGiorno brand frozen pizza, “submissive and breedable” memes on social media, among others.

representation in visual culture, Halberstam (2017) notes: “seeing trans\* bodies differently...means finding different visual, aural, and haptic codes through which to figure the experience of being in a body” (p.89). Though Halberstam mentions handmade crafts, Parker’s lively TikToks also have a haptic quality. The genders that Parker announces are not semantically connected to their personal transmasculine gender identity (May 14, 2021) or their gender expression, but nonetheless are inseparable from the facial expressions, intonations and laughter expressed throughout each bulletin list of unconventional genders. Parker’s agency as an author is visibly and audibly performed, and ‘haptically’ represented in their self-filmed videos. Their creatively named genders, which might otherwise read as bizarre and inaccessible, are made ‘real’ to viewers through the lively and embodied practices through which they are communicated.

These visual and embodied qualities highlight key differences between Parker’s TikToks and the books written by Peters, Cho, and Lavery. These differences emphasize the urgency of attending to a wide array of trans creators and artists. Just as Cho’s racial and cultural background lives in his work, the same can be said of Parker, who is Black. “Intersectionality is at the core of my being,” Parker explains in one video, “so I’m not either Black or queer or trans, I am all three at once. And they all influence each other” (Parker, June 19 2021). Thus while “transness” and “Blackness” are not always mentioned by name in Parker’s TikTok videos, they are nevertheless present in every video. What is markedly different about Parker compared to Lavery, Peters, and Cho is that they are visible and audible in the text. Unlike a book, in which an author’s corporeal embodiment might be obscured, Parker is visible and close-up through the entirety of each TikTok video. Although the valorization of trans of color ‘visibility’ in popular media has been rightfully criticized for its tendency to surveil and police while unevenly distributing benefits (Awkward-Rich, 2019; cárdenas, 2016; Gossett, 2017), Parker’s choice of media also allows the text to offer gendered constructions at two simultaneous levels: the absurd Genders of the Day are inviting and relatable to all viewers, but unmistakably entangled with their creator’s own personality and presence. Blackness and transness, along with joy and verve, are co-present with such genders as “He’s The Perfect Man: Made Entirely of Clay...?” In invoking such co-presences, Parker’s TikToks bear similarities to *Look Who’s Morphing* but diverge from Peters and Lavery. While Peters and Lavery reference popular culture in *Detransition, Baby* and *Please Miss*, Cho and Parker literally merge their narrative personas with popular culture at a diagetic level—

becoming, identifying with, and morphing into characters and memes. The metafictional tone of their texts in which they are simultaneously earnest and aware suggests a propensity for restivity (Snorton, 2017), which as mentioned before, dovetails particularly with Black and POC trans people who are already predisposed to understanding and navigating fluid intersectional identities. Further, the departure from realism or surrealism into new, absurdist genres in both Cho's and Parker's works mark a difference from Peters' and Lavery's books, which are less restive than they are rooted in the 'actual' world. While Peters, in referencing the COGIATI and other insider knowledge, builds explicitly on a historical 'durée' of white trans culture, temporality in Cho's and Parker's work is instead fleeting and agile. As Gill-Peterson (2018) notes: "Transgender studies has to an important extent magnified the whiteness of transsexuality by its reliance on its medical archive," and indeed the realisms in *Detransition, Baby* and *Please Miss* are largely evident in depictions of biomedical encounters—encounters unmentioned in *Look Who's Morphing* and Parker's TikToks. Trans creators may thus share common thematic concerns, but in Parker's and Cho's turn from the biomedical to the unreal, differences in method draw our attention to the work of race and cultural standpoint. In doing so, they demonstrate the importance of epistemic creativity that emerges beyond the sphere of biomedical power.

### Imagining Otherwise

In this paper I have traced the confines of biomedical knowledge and subsequent responses by trans scholars, writers, and creators, noting that recent trans creators have built on a longer tradition of experimental genre while also mobilizing their personal experiences to remix trans knowledge in creative and transformative ways. I have also considered questions posed by Billard and Zhang (2022) in their argument for a trans media studies, including "How do trans media producers represent their identities to their audiences?" and "How do we explain the breadth of trans media representations within broader sociocultural and political contexts?" In the case studies in this paper, we glimpse how various sites of knowledge production—biomedicine, publishing and TikTok—enable different kinds of epistemic interventions. The valences of these interventions give us space to imagine otherwise. The assemblage (Puar, 2007, p.211-15) of recent trans-authored texts that includes *Detransition, Baby*, *Look Who's Morphing*, *Please Miss*, and HumbleTortoise's TikToks, each and together reveal how transness can be at once theoretical and lived (in and out of the

clinic), academic and pop-cultural, real and speculative and hopeful. These creators' experimental strategies of mixed media, genre-breaking, and playfulness with and beyond reality draw upon a longer lineage of trans writing and art while mobilizing their unique cultural, racial, and gendered standpoints to push the boundaries of knowledge production even further. Stryker (2022) writes: "trans-ing manifests and enacts the material truth of a potential for worlding otherwise. It shows not only that "another world is possible" but that another world is actual, and exists now." By bending the 'real' world into fiction, (sur)realism and even absurdity, Peters, Lavery, Cho and Parker construct realities and unrealities that manifest worlds beyond the framework and scope of biomedical pathologies.

At the same time, we should attend to what *kinds* of knowledge are being made by the texts discussed in this essay. As discussed, race and culture play critical roles in trans experience and approaches to transgender knowledge production. Peters and Lavery are white, hailing from America and Britain respectively, and though there are few published trans authors, there are still fewer trans of color authors who have reached the commercial or critical recognition that *Detransition, Baby* has received except for Janet Mock's memoir *Redefining Realness* (Mock, 2014). Comparatively, as Lehner (2019) writes, "social media provides a venue that is unregulated and, as such, has become the arena in which nuanced and expansive trans and nonbinary trans people—particularly those of color—produce self-representations... trans and nonbinary self-images introduce radical intersectional subjectivities that have the potential to circulate prolifically." This observation is exemplified by the creativity and popularity of Parker/HumbleTortoise on TikTok—but Kat Blaque (2019), a Black trans woman YouTuber, and Schuyler Bailar (2022), an Asian trans man and athlete, are other examples of North American trans people of color who have intervened in the digital sphere of public transness through education-based activism on social media. Moya Bailey (2022) further points to Janet Mock's work with the hashtag campaign #GirlsLikeUs as a mode of community building online for trans women (particularly Black trans women) (Mock, 2012; Jackson et al., 2020). Structural forces of capital and white supremacy shape who has access to different knowledge-making platforms or media: attending to decentralized media like TikTok as well as Twitter (Mock, 2012) or Tumblr (Hawkins & Giesecking, 2017), offers critical insights into the landscape of transgender knowledge production that likely diverge from publishing alone. No person or text can hope to represent the breadth of trans knowledge and life, but piece by piece we

accrue a better understanding of the ways trans people are engaging with media to redefine the landscape of knowledge production and trans embodiment.

Each of these interventions act as parts of a growing assemblage, building and manifesting a reimagined present while calling attention to the risks of hewing too close to the promise of a singular trans perspective. When heterogenous and marginal voices are elevated and given space to experiment and play, collective trans knowledge pushes the boundaries of genre and gender and develops exciting modes of storytelling and living—“projects of subjective liberation—of making a world for exuberant trans desire, among other modes of living” (Abi-Karam & Gabriel, 2020). Trans interventions that place the agency of lived transness at the center of trans reality, disrupt the idea that trans liberation can be achieved through biomedical research like ‘transgender brain scans’, and instead lead us to a politics of transness grounded in material exigencies and contemporary ontologies. Community, solidarity, and collective knowledge-making manifest radical and creative worlds, as we write powerful stories that sustain our realities full of texture and color and depth.

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