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*DYS-APPEARING/RE-APPEARING:*  
Trans Men Actors Resisting  
Cisnormative Theatrical Traditions  
with Phenomenal Stage Presence

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“To some, I will never be a ‘real man’ no matter how skilled my portrayal. Maybe, then, I will always be just an actor.”—SCOTT TURNER SCHOFIELD, “Are We There Yet?”

“What makes us so confident that we know what’s real?”—JAMISON GREEN, *Becoming a Visible Man*

ACTING CIS

Traditional actor training espouses “bodily unity,” or unobstructed access to all parts of the physiological (and expectedly able) body; anything else would be what Jerzy Grotowski calls “biological chaos.”<sup>1</sup> A focus on bodily unity in actor training implies that an alternate, dysphoric, or otherwise non-normative embodied experience is “chaotic”—an obstacle to overcome, unhealthy and unwhole—and that embodied disconnections signify failure or lack. This attitude toward disjointedness, when applied to transgender embodiment, infers that trans people are nothing more than broken cisgender people.<sup>2</sup> But the trans “whole” body offers an alternative conception of “wholeness,” one with empty spaces creating a fragmented human form. For trans men, that fragmentation localizes around the chest and pelvis, but the empty spaces that emerge there create healthier and more peaceful versions of embodiment for many trans people.

This paper troubles assumptions of acting techniques that actors are by default cisgender. Rather than easily (or painlessly) participating in exercises designed for cisgender actors—such as tracing breath through the abdomen or following a ball of energy from the toes to the top of the head—a trans body encounters a spider web of shattering lines that may block that energy ball or seamless breath. Therefore the idea of bodily unification, which is so heavily enforced in performance training and practices, requires a new definition when considering trans men: a new definition that understands, prepares for, and factors in gaps, shattering, and disappearing, all of which are in opposition to ideas of bodily unity. I suggest trans men can be purposeful within our dysphoria and find ways to take skillful control of a dysphoric way of being through performance, and can do so in a way that does not conflate the socially gendered experience of performativity with performance itself.

Over the course of four sections, I trace phenomenological theories of trans embodiment and queer theories of time and space to display the unique ways trans men travel through the world and encounter the stage with a distinct stage presence informed significantly by the trans body's own absences. "Phenomenology provides a framework for making sense of transsexualism," Henry S. Rubin notes, because in essence one's inner feelings, or self-identity, are validated by phenomenological theory, even when the body one feels oneself to have is not necessarily the same body that is delimited by its exterior contours.<sup>3</sup> In phenomenology, one's own perceptions are prioritized as a means of determining truth.<sup>4</sup>

As such, I apply these phenomenological theories to specific experiences of my own body in performance practice. Through my subjectivity as a trans actor who has a body in space, something complicated happens, both in and out of the performance environment. Some of the experiences I am working through are common to other trans men, but by no means can there be one overarching trans masculine experience of bodily subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> The idea that transgender is as simple as "being trapped in the wrong body"<sup>6</sup> is a common misconception and dangerous misinformation. It is impossible to say trans subjectivity is any one thing, but such a complexity (a multiplicity) is counter to most established approaches to an actor's body, where everyone is presumed to have the same full-body access and abilities.

In part one of this essay, I define trans-specific terminology and situate dysphoria as a diagnosis using a de-pathologizing medical model.

I then explore “realness” through a trans masculine lens, developing my argument that trans men can and do project imagined body parts into real space. Part two distinguishes stage presence from stage absence and contextualizes how presence equates to star quality. The next section, part three, surveys transgender phenomenology, and positions projection as a kind of “appearance” directly relating to Drew Leder’s idea of bodily *dys-appearance* in which a body dissociates, emerging as “an alien thing.”<sup>7</sup> In part four, I mark these *dys-appearing* acts as firmly Muñozian queer doings that imagine a queer utopia. I conclude that trans men’s survival methods already comprise imaginative techniques that do not correlate inevitably to ideas of make-believe, playing a part, or just pretending. Projected bodies are as real as they are legitimate, but the ability to actively create a body in space and time also allows trans men to use that creative survival technique as a method for stage acting, a technique that specifically revolves around our ways of strategizing cis space. I end with a postscript that provides an application for these ideas, moving away from a utopic futurity and into the current space where imagined objects can emerge.

### PART ONE: WE KNOW THE FEELING

The trans masculine community includes female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming people who were assigned female at birth. Some use male pronouns (he, him, his); some use gender-neutral pronouns (ze/hir, or the now more common they/their). I focus this work on “passing” individuals—those who are perceived by others as male and are generally assumed to be assigned male at birth—for whom passing has substantial personal importance. These trans men experience gender dysphoria as it occurs with an un-joined relationship between body and identity. Considering the concept of bodily absence described by phenomenologist Drew Leder as an “awayness” from the body or a sense of disembodiment,<sup>8</sup> I posit that trans men dissociate with the body as a part of gender dysphoria.

As I am invoking it, the clinical diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria is specific to transsexuals, or those seeking medical transition.<sup>9</sup> In *Transgender History* (published before the name of the diagnosis was changed from Gender Identity Disorder in 2013), Susan Stryker sums up the symptoms this way:

Feelings of unhappiness or distress about the incongruence between the gender-signifying parts of one's body, one's gender identity, and one's social gender (a condition sometimes called "gender dysphoria") are officially classified by medical and psychiatric professionals in the United States as a mental illness known as Gender Identity Disorder, or GID.<sup>10</sup>

As these are diagnosable symptoms, Gender Dysphoria is categorized in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.<sup>11</sup> For a person diagnosed with Gender Dysphoria, the condition of experiencing a marked difference between the expressed/experienced gender and the gender assigned by others can cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, and other important areas of functioning. Gender Dysphoria manifests in a variety of ways, including strong desires to be treated as the other gender or to be rid of one's sex characteristics, or a strong conviction that one has feelings and reactions typical of the other gender.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that not all transgender or transsexual-identified people pursue medical reassignment or resonate with medical definitions of Gender Dysphoria. Transgender embodiment does, however, generally involve a reconfiguration of the body (surgically or not). I describe trans men's embodied subjectivity as a place of reconfiguration—disappearance and reappearance—by incorporating trans scholar Henry S. Rubin's correlation of transsexualism and anosognosia, or phantom limb syndrome. According to Rubin, transsexuals perceive phantom limbs because "transsexuals 'fail' to recognize parts of their body as their own and imagine others that are not physically present."<sup>13</sup> While the psychic separation experienced as a part of Gender Dysphoria exhibits itself as awayness, areas of the trans man's body can be surgically eliminated through various gender affirming procedures. These bodily areas can then either reappear in times of trauma or be reappropriated to other locations: to other body parts or to objects not connected to the body organically, namely a genital prosthetic or "packer."

Swimming through the slippery, tenuous Cartesian divide between mind and body, so typically perceived to be the nucleus of transgender unhappiness, trans men are constantly conversing with the concept of a clean cut down the middle (or, more accurate to common ways of attempting to account for trans embodiment to cisgender people who feel a need to comprehend it, the cut decapitates right at the neck, literalizing a brain/body split). Pointing out these psycho-physio pressures and using words like "awayness" does have negative connotations, yet

the experience of awayness is recognized by many trans men, including myself. In both casual conversations and formal interviews across two decades with other trans men, many others also identify with these shared experiences. Articulating the split between mind and body, many trans men recognize this common phenomenon that provides structural elements for trans masculine subjectivities.<sup>14</sup>

Discussing transsexualism by way of a pathologizing medical model is problematic to individuals who inhabit mind/body splitting as everyday lived experience. Though it is controversial in transgender communities to have one's gender identity labeled as a mental illness, a diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria is generally required for those seeking medical gender affirming procedures through hormones or surgeries, or for those seeking to change their legal sex. Stigma associated with this kind of medical model conflates "diagnosis" with "pathology."

During a panel called "Genderfull Lives, Genderfull Politics" in the *We Who Feel Differently* Symposium held at the New Museum in New York City in 2012, trans activist Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad clarified that "to de-pathologize does not necessarily take away the diagnosis." Benestad insisted that it is possible to address the medical need without being classified as "sick." In Benestad's words, "*To diagnose* means 'to look through windows of knowledge. *Diagnose* does not equal *pathology*; it equals *knowledge*."<sup>15</sup> Another trans activist on the panel, Reina Gossett, explained that in relation to Gender Dysphoria there is a difference between pathologizing and being identified with a diagnosis.

As my argument on embodied subjectivity in a trans acting practice rests upon a psycho-physio phenomenon, namely the split of the mind and body as experienced by transsexual men, I am using a de-pathologizing medical model that acknowledges and validates awayness as opposed to looking for reasons, causes, or cures that would supposedly enable us to feel more like cisgender people. Rather than ignoring characteristics that fall within a diagnosis in performance practice, centering those diagnostic features goes a great distance in normalizing them. If acting technique disregards gender dysphoria, assuming a universally cisgender experience of the body, a trans technique does not ignore our diagnoses, but embraces them and incorporates them into the model itself.

Simultaneous with this consciously obstructed mind/body communication I am arguing must be incorporated into a trans acting technique, some trans men interpret and replicate male cultural and historical (re)

presentation. Trans theorist Michel J. Boucher claims that trans men draw from depictions of non-trans men to be seen as “real.”<sup>16</sup> To be recognized by others in a manner that matches one’s self-identity can entail embodying cultural signifiers in order to convey readability. “Realness” is of primary importance to many trans men,<sup>17</sup> and being read as a gender that was *not* assigned to them based on perceived sex at birth holds the utmost urgency and can drive the terms of psychic and physical survival.<sup>18</sup> Of course, for other equally valid trans identities that are non-binary or gender non-conforming, to pass as a sexed identity that is generally acceptable by the mainstream can be of lesser value. For many, passing is neither necessary nor important, and actually could be a barrier to communicating the authenticity of non-binary genders. Thus, passing has its problems, but it is also a significant source of validation for those who seek it.

Those of us who seek or sought passability are forced through a pathologizing cycle that begins with psychotherapy and arrives at medical transition. Yet, describing transgender bodily experience does require considering what psychoanalysis conceives of as *bodily ego*, or what Freud described as a mental projection—a turn inward that exceeds biology.<sup>19</sup> Translating this into the phenomenological concept of *proprioception*, or a “felt sense” of the body, *proprioception* has also emerged in transgender theory in support of claims about identity and “realness.”<sup>20</sup> As trans theorist Gayle Salamon has postulated, a body can and does exceed the confines of its own skin.<sup>21</sup> This body is more than who we are. “Realness” for a trans man is his concept of lived truth and being in the world as a “real” man. His being in the world combines sensations of movement as interpreted through anosognosia (phantom limb syndrome), which aligns with that individual’s “felt sense” of the body, a sense that exceeds delimiting skin.

Phenomenology goes hand in hand with this conception of realness by defining the trans self-identity as a valid one. “Realness” can refer to what is materially given, but transgender experience exists in between an internalized identity and a possibly un-matching exterior physical body.<sup>22</sup> Notably, Judith Butler affirmed that bodies are not solely morphology, insisting they are not “merely implicated in an irreducible tension between the psychic and the material but *are* that tension.”<sup>23</sup> Many scholars are in conversation with this particular dialectic, and especially for trans scholars, this exchange “is at the heart of transsexual desire.”<sup>24</sup> As Salamon explains: “both body and psyche are characterized by their lability rather than their ability to contain.”<sup>25</sup> For trans people,

legitimizing the invisible inner self can be equally as imperative as the materiality of morphological contours. Within the movement between inner and outer selves, we may prioritize the *invisible*.

The psycho-physio communication between material and psychic realities engages in a hermeneutic dialogue because the trans man is in constant interpretive negotiation with the world. He can decide what is or is not true about his body by interpreting his position in relation to external factors (other people, for example). The word “reality” comes from the Latin root *res*, which means “that which we can fathom.”<sup>26</sup> Defining reality plunges us into nebulous ontological realms, as “reality,” like embodied transgender subjectivity, is not a fixed state. But the main point—without drowning in the philosophy of metaphysics underpinning our understanding of these ways of being—is that all of these psycho-physio maneuvers make sense to trans men simultaneously with such maneuvers shaping the world into making sense for *us*. As transsexual men become “away” as a part of gender dysphoria, we *know the feeling*, which allows the feeling to be diagnosed, though it need not be pathologized. Trans embodiment, though complex, is not “a complex.” I will now explore how to approach or re-approach acting methods as an actor with gender dysphoria: a possible, yet unexpected psycho-physio experience for actors to have.

## PART TWO: “YA DON’T GOT IT.”

In 2010, on the closing weekend of Marina Abramović’s retrospective *The Artist is Present*, a group of trans/queer New York City artists re-performed some of Abramović’s best-known works under the title *The Artist is Absent*.<sup>27</sup> This re-performance replaces the “presence” named in the title with “absence.” One could, of course, ascertain that *the* artist, Marina Abramović, is absent in the re-performance, but I propose that beyond re-performing the piece, re-naming it and prioritizing absence are more complicated acts than the fact that the original artist is simply missing. Rather, the notion that “the artist is absent” is a kind of performance methodology embodied by queer/trans performers themselves.

Absence is commonly perceived as a performance failure because many audience members easily register and judge when a performer either has or does not have stage presence. Theatre historian and performance scholar Joseph Roach penned an entire book on stage presence,



this “easily perceived but hard-to-define quality possessed by abnormally interesting people,” calling the phenomenon simply “*it*.”<sup>28</sup> We, as contemporary audience members, know what it means when a director says to an actor, “Ya don’t got it, kid. Don’t quit your day job.” Having *it* is aligned with an intrinsic natural ability that cannot be learned or gained, a quality with which one is simply born. Our ability to recognize when a person does not have *it* implies a lack of ability in that person—the ability to have stage presence.

The opposite of stage presence is referred to as stage absence,<sup>29</sup> and performance practitioners and scholars, such as Phillip Zarrilli for example, expend energy ensuring that actors work with and through presence, avoiding absence.<sup>30</sup> I suggest avoiding absence stems from the fear of “lack” itself, the fear of not having *it*. Not having *it* represents a particular anxiety for the actor—an anxiety identified, labeled, and polemized primarily by cisgender men. Widely recognized as a trait a star should have, *it* exists dialectically between having/not-having and when one does not have *it*, they lack.

Under the lead of cisgender men’s legacy of acting theory, no alternative embodiments can furnish subjects with *it*. This is particularly apparent in the case of trans men, psychoanalytically pathologized as “lacking” a penis (thereby embodying a prevailing psychoanalytic male anxiety of castration), or anyone, for that matter, without a penis. “Lack” and “absence” go together in the theory of stage presence. If trans men, then, could re-value a position of “lack” and work with and through absence, another performance method would emerge. Something queer surfaces in this repositioning within a present/absent divide: present/absent; present absence; absent presence. Of course, there is no presence without its own negation, but in re-valuing the absence necessary for presence, the concept of stage presence is queered. By redefining this absence *as* presence, trans men then resist the expectation that we should feel more like cisgender men for whom absence is a bad thing, and where “lack” epitomizes castration. Engaging with these metaphysics of absence and presence in an alternative way, trans men—either consciously or subconsciously—have the ability to expand the boundaries of physical presence into a metaphysical presence.

“Packing,” for example, refers to wearing a male genital prosthesis, known generally as a “packer,” or either a “soft pack” or a “hard pack” dependent upon its functional purpose or aesthetic aim. When a *new* part

such as this reappears, it does so in the manner of a phantom limb, as Rubin suggests, with a sense of corporeal realism.<sup>31</sup> I suggest that trans men can achieve queer presencing through the use of packers, or possibly even without using them. The packer stands in for the body parts that are not there, yet at the same time, those “missing” parts are not only *there*, but also experienced as real body parts by many trans men. I contend that within this specifically trans absence exists a resistance—one that is in itself dynamic, reactionary, emotional, sexual, validating, empowering, and vibrant with life, all of the things that would be considered stage presence—the *it* that we supposedly “lack.”

### PART THREE: DON'T DISS THE *DYS*

Transgender phenomenologists such as Salamon, Boucher, and Rubin deprioritize the role of gender performativity as a somewhat abstracted theory of social construction, instead highlighting lived gender experience as an everyday occurrence. Responding to gender theory that has focused on performativity, Salamon's writings are in direct communication with Judith Butler whose rhetoric in the past has been criticized as a fairly distant view of lived gender. Rubin critiques the trend, derivative of Butler, in which transgender represents gender performativity. He writes:

Trans phenomena are the new queer chic; our lives have been appropriated to demonstrate the theories of gender performativity, but only to the extent that they fail to reproduce the normative correspondence between body morphology and gender identity assumed as a matter of course by non-transsexuals.<sup>32</sup>

These influential trans theorists have done the important task of unknotting the threads tied between trans phenomena and the expectation that bodies are, or should be, cisgender. The next step from the lived gender/gender performativity conversation these theorists are enmeshed in is to resituate how trans stage performance transcends performativity as so imagined by non-transsexuals. Implicating that gender-regulated actor training assumes all actors are cisgender, I shift focus to trans actors whose encounters with stage performance will help to clarify common embodied experiences of trans men in general.

Acting is a particular area where a body is expected to be fully *engaged* in order to have stage presence, but through this phenomenological lens, we can understand how trans men actors can resist the conception

that absence is negative, useless, undynamic, or just plain bad acting. To actors using traditional actor training methods (particularly those methods taught in studio classes deriving out of Stanislavski method, via Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner, or embodied experimental techniques born out of the 1960s practitioners, such as the aforementioned Jerzy Grotowski, as well as Joseph Chaikin whom I will discuss in the following section), bodily absence is troublesome because those traditions teach and enforce bodily unity.<sup>33</sup> The bodily unity concept contradicts a trans actor's particularly queer (or queerly particular) embodied experience, whereas an acting technique designed for trans men not only allows for, but also incorporates, bodily awayness in ways that do not perceive "absence" as unhealthy.

Trans actors can encounter the stage in a Halberstamian "queer time and place,"<sup>34</sup> an alternative to a cisheternormative time and place. Our bodies transcend physical space and transform into metaphysical space with psychically constructed metabodies (projected selves), reconstructive surgeries, and/or practical prosthetics—all of which, as I will now discuss, are objects of dis- or reappearance. I argue that while bodily awayness—which I now refer to, following Leder, as a form of disappearance or *dys-appearance*—is translatable to a diagnosable symptom of Gender Dysphoria, this bodily awayness is not necessarily a bad thing in acting, as techniques that espouse bodily unity imply.

In *The Absent Body*, Drew Leder coins the term *dys-appearance*—a phenomenon in which the body distinguishes itself during dysfunction or illness.<sup>35</sup> Leder expounds upon the origin of the prefix *dys*:

[. . .] *dys*, in Greek, signifies "bad," "hard," or "ill." (It is the opposite of *eu*, the prefix meaning "good" or "well.") [. . .] the body frequently appears at such times when it is ill, confronts the hard or problematic situation, or in some way *performs badly* [emphasis mine]. This Greek sense is preserved in English words such as "dysfunction," as well as in many terms for illnesses, such as "dysentery," "dyslexia," "dyskinesia," or "dysmenorrhea."<sup>36</sup>

*Dys* is also a variant spelling, now somewhat archaic, of the Latin root *dis*. This originally had the meaning of "away," "apart," or "asunder." Leder uses the spelling *dys* both for its Greek connotations and to allow for a visual mark of difference between "*dys-appearance*" and other modes of "disappearance" where things generally go away. The Latin significance is also fully intended. The body in *dys-appearance* is marked by being away, apart, asunder. As Leder clarifies, "[. . .] the body may emerge as an alien thing, a painful prison or tomb in which one is trapped. [. . .]

The experienced self is rent in two as one's own corporeality exhibits a foreign will." Separation can occur from and in opposition to the body. Therefore, the body can thus be "away, apart, asunder, *from itself*."<sup>37</sup>

*Dys* also certainly appears, as Salamon explains, in gender "dysphoria."<sup>38</sup> Transgender, Salamon writes, is the consequence for embodiment and subjectivity "when the relation between self and skin is not one of ease and euphoria but discomfort and dysphoria."<sup>39</sup> The body away from itself reiterates the experience of a split between mind and body that I describe as trans subjectivity. This language is also strongly reminiscent of the diagnoses I illustrated earlier, such as the persistent discomfort and inappropriateness of the assigned body and its non-cooperation with the self. When trans men dissociate from areas of their body as a part of dysphoria, I suggest they are *dys-appearing*.

A trans body has areas that disappear (and later reappear), body parts that intentionally or subconsciously recede from direct experience. The zones where problematic parts are situated become isolated voids. For example, for many trans men, the chest is often entirely off-limits for any interaction, but some acting techniques require meditating on the solar plexus, located between the navel and the bottom of the sternum, even to begin (the Viewpoints method is one such example). Many traditional and even experimental acting training techniques unintentionally reinscribe cisheteronormative social conventions. To create trans-centric models of actor training that do not rely on bodily unity as prerequisite for the actor, I train my eye towards disrupting cisheteronormativity/cis-heterosexism with an alternative studio model. Actor training techniques that focus on crafting performances through attending to non-normative experiences of embodiment will result not just in more inclusive environments, but ultimately in a queerer, more vibrant, more diverse and more socially-engaged contemporary theatre scene that takes as a given the presence of trans and gender-non-conforming bodies.

#### PART FOUR: QUEER DOING, TRANS TIME

In his book *Cruising Utopia*, the late Jose Muñoz describes how the ideas of both queerness and utopia have a relational quality that works against cisheteronorms and the balance of being and nothing. Both queer and utopian, the "nothing" (what is not there) becomes valued over the "present" (what is there), effectively the opposite of castration anxiety.

“Lack” is not empty, but generative, as queer utopia works with and through nothingness and ephemerality.<sup>40</sup> This is a different way of perceiving absence. In fact, by trans-valuing the not-there, it places value in a different way: a trans/queer way. Or one might say queer utopian practice values *differently*.<sup>41</sup> By looking at trans men’s absence this way, by working with and through the not-there, we get another understanding of what matters. I use Muñoz’s theory to situate the ways in which trans men’s embodiment holds the force of a kind of queer *doing*.<sup>42</sup>

Packing, as I’ve suggested, is one kind of queer *doing*; it is a technique that contributes to both survival as well as aesthetics for some trans men. A major source of misinformation about trans men is that trans masculine experience centers on not having penises.<sup>43</sup> However, it is, at least to some degree, about penises. Earlier, I stated that for trans men, body parts might disappear and re-appear, sometimes in the form of prosthetics that can be material or psychically projected metabodies, in the form of a phantom limb. I adhere the phallic imagery suffusing Drew Leder’s description of *dys-appearance* to Rubin’s phantom limb, and theorize a trans masculine phantom phallus:

If I am poking something with a stick, I can switch my focus to the stick itself, feeling its impact upon my hand. More difficult, yet possible, via an attentional shift, is to experience the tactile sensations strictly as modifications of my own hand. However, I cannot continue on indefinitely and experience directly the nerves in my hand [...] <sup>44</sup>

In the above citation, the “stick” could easily be replaced by another thing, such as a prosthetic, that through an attentional shift could allow the prosthetic’s owner to experience “tactile sensations.” Both Butler and Salamon describe queer phallic embodiment in its relation to the idea that a phallus does not have to be a penis. Salamon writes: “The join between desire and the body is the location of sexuality, and that join may be a penis, or some other phallus, or some other body part, or a region of the body that is not individuated into a part, or a bodily auxiliary that is not organically attached to the body.”<sup>45</sup> She converses with Butler who writes: “Consider that ‘having’ the phallus can be symbolized by an arm, a tongue, a hand (or two), a knee, a thigh, a pelvic bone, an array of purposefully instrumentalized body-like things.”<sup>46</sup> As evidenced here, certainly a phallus can take any number of other forms, but in the case of packers, there is a clear correlation to where the “tactile sensations” shift attention.

In order to connect *dys-appearance* to absence, and then absence to acting, I now introduce the concept of “absent time.” Joseph Chaikin claims that:

An actor should strive to be alive to all that he can imagine to be possible. Such an actor is generated by an impulse toward an inner unity, as well as by the most intimate contacts he makes outside himself. [. . .] I don’t mean that there is no difference between a stage performance and living. I mean that they are absolutely joined. The actor draws from the same source as the person who is the actor.<sup>47</sup>

Chaikin calls for inner unity in this passage, but if we look at the phrase “the most intimate contacts he makes outside himself,” we see that Chaikin refers to the ways an actor gives attention to his environment and to his fellow actors. I read this as the ways a trans man connects to a packer, an intimate contact outside himself. To restate Chaikin, “the actor draws from the same source as the person who is the actor.” The actor makes the same attentional shifts with his packer as to the space of the stage. He comes in and out of direct engagement; he can have imagined, but real “tactile sensations.”

The basic starting point for the actor, in Chaikin’s method, is giving full attention of the mind and body—to be:

[. . .] awake in that very space and in that very time (not an idea of time) and with the very people who are also in that time and space. [. . .] We are trained and conditioned to be “present” only in relation to the goal. When I go from my house to the grocer, I’m not present. Once I arrive at the grocer, I’m not present until I’m back at the house. Going from point A to B we are in a kind of nonlife, and from B to C the same. This is one of our earliest lessons . . . to be in relation to the goal. This teaches us to live in absent time.<sup>48</sup>

For Chaikin absent time is the time of zoning out. It is the common occurrence of spacing out while you are on the way to doing something. In Chaikin’s example you have to go to the store, and suddenly you are at the store. You do not recall the journey; you missed the entire process of travelling until arriving. Not paying attention on stage likely would result in a poor performance. However, I am considering what the differences are, if any, between absent time and *dys-appearance*. I believe disengaging from time, in Chaikin’s “relation to the goal,” differs very little from a trans man disengaging from, for example, a pap smear until the exam is over. Trans men can disengage/disembody and/or re-embody because we know the dysphoric triggers and how to avoid them. If we frequently

exist in what Chaikin calls absent time, or “nonlife,” what are the ways that *dys-appearance* can be lived?

One way to account for trans absence in terms of attentional shifts and projected selves is to incorporate Martin Heidegger’s theories of emergence, bringing something into *appearance*.<sup>49</sup> Heidegger also discusses making visible the invisible space of air. For example, there are many images that come into being in front of the ground against which they emerge. The perceptual ambiguity of face illusions strongly exemplifies this phenomenon as made famous by the “Boring figure,” a drawing of a young woman and an old woman who are both the same image.<sup>50</sup> Another ambiguous figure is the vase that has two silhouettes of faces in the vase’s negative space. A third example is the rabbit that is also a duck; its ears turn into a duck’s bill when your attention shifts. Ambiguous figures reflect a mode of being’s coming to presence or a bringing-forth of something out of itself. As one figure comes into appearance, the other figure disappears. While both actually co-exist, only one is visible or can be perceived at a time. It is not possible to see both the faces and the vase or the rabbit and the duck simultaneously, but it is possible to go back and forth between them.

This phenomenon of going in and out of appearance similarly reflects ephemerality as Jose Muñoz discusses in his article, “Ephemera as Evidence.” In the article, Muñoz proposes “queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing.”<sup>51</sup> He argues against the need for evidentiary procedure grounded in “material reality” and interrogates the ways claiming alterity in political scholarship is marked as improper or inappropriate writing, practice, and theory-making.<sup>52</sup> Using Muñoz’s “ephemera as evidence,” I contend that trans metabodies are ephemeral, but in the same way that phantom limbs are ephemeral. Simply because they are non-material does not mean they are not real. Like performance, constructing a metobody is an embodied practice. As bodies are more than material, we therefore are—and are understood to be—both “real” and “constructed.” Construction in no way lessens realness. We are, as so many trans men like to say, self-made.<sup>53</sup>

## CONCLUSION: BINDING TIME

I hope this work sheds some light upon the creative power of self-identity. Inventing a self is something trans men do to live, and because that is

a very real thing, self-creation can re-define realness itself. We know the transformative potential between imaginary objects and space objects, and because this skill is a survival tool, we become experts. We become virtuosos. We become highly attuned and present actors working with and through absence itself.

In further iterations of this work, I intend to continue researching the medical history of phantom limb syndrome. I also feel that Couvade Syndrome (the phenomenon that occurs when cis men experience sympathy side effects of pregnancy or even labor pains) could be an interesting model, if not a key one, to describe another form of masculine phantom embodied experience. I expended a particular focus in this paper on packing, but in the future, I would also like to consider binding. Though binding has been a costuming tool in theatre and performance for a long time, and a custom among trans men since well before there were any video tutorials, let alone products designed distinctly for a trans man's use, binding has gone without rigorous analysis as a means of informing trans men's spatial and temporal relations. Elizabeth Freeman's book *Time Binds* does catalogue numerous definitions of binds or binding that could reflect queer time. However, significantly, and perhaps suitably, the queerest binding I can think of, a trans man's queer *doing*, is absent.

#### POSTSCRIPT: LIVING SPACE

Connecting the concept of bringing forth something out of itself to trans men actors, I have repurposed an exercise that is fairly common in theatre classes, especially for children. In *Theatre Games for the Classroom*, the author Viola Spolin describes a kind of material that can be used in a variety of different theatre exercises she names "transformation games." The purpose of these games is to, like Heidegger (among others) "make the invisible visible" by utilizing a material called "space substance."<sup>54</sup>

A primary element of Spolin's work is the emphasis that *space is stuff*. As bodies are more than material, we are *more* than just *stuff*. By rearticulating Spolin's language and tools here, our *more*-ness is also "stuff" or material to work with. Spolin explains that when creating a "space ball" for a game, the ball is not imaginary, but is a part of space that is called "ball." If a participant tosses an *imaginary* ball (and this is an important distinction), the participant may be conscious of a real ball



that is missing, that is not *there*. The player who imagines is working with the *idea* of a ball, but a space ball, on the other hand, is a ball that comes into existence. Spolin expresses that in practice, this distinction is not at all abstract—any audience can see the difference. Working with space substance is not to be misconstrued as pantomime. With space substance, the player is not attempting to create an illusion for an audience, but is instead awakening an intuitive area which can perceive the space object as it emerges—making the invisible visible.<sup>55</sup>

These abilities to both create and perceive emerging objects in space underlie my definition of trans men's embodied subjectivity. Many trans men can recognize the ways this phenomenon significantly contributes to sexuality, particularly the construction of real body parts that emerge from invisible space. If we look at Spolin's language, it is clear that my repurposing of the terms from this theatre game does not have far to go to suit my intention. Specifically, a primary element to the success of the game is that the participants must intuitively perceive the unseen space as *real*. In order to "sense" space, over the course of several different exercises, Spolin writes these directions:

Move the space material about between your palms!  
Play with it! Let it thicken!  
If an object begins to take shape, let it grow!  
Feel its weight! Its texture!  
Keep it in space!  
Out of the imagination!  
Focus on the space object!  
Feel the object!  
Don't let it disappear!  
Let your whole body show the object's life!<sup>56</sup>

In the context of this paper, it would be a challenge to see this language in any other way than in creating and perceiving a phantom penis. I believe that many trans men enact the ritual of this theatre game as an unconscious survival tool, an act of unmediated self-affirmation. This theatre game trains people to work with space in ways that trans people could have either an innate ability for, immense experience with, or both.<sup>57</sup>

NOTES

1. In *Towards a Poor Theatre*, originally published in 1968, Jerzy Grotowski describes that when we suffer from a “lack” of totality, we reach biological chaos. See Grotowski, Jerzy, and Eugenio Barba. *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 255.

2. Michael Alexander, a noted trans man advocate and educator since the time he was himself a trans teen, has recently expounded on the concept that “trans people are not broken cis people.” His short statement can be found on his personal Instagram @ftmichael1.

3. Rubin, Henry S. “Phenomenology as Method in Trans Studies.” *GLQ* 4.2 (1998): 270.

4. Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 56.

5. Although I do not refer to trans men actors’ testimonies here, much of the material for this paper derives from work I did for my Master’s thesis called *When Trans Men Dance: FTM Embodied Subjectivity and Classical Ballet*. For that project, I interviewed six trans men dancers as case studies.

6. For more on the idea of a “wrong body” in relation to performance, queer theorist and critical historian Julian Carter writes on phenomenological accounts of the “wrong body” experience filtered through contemporary dance.

7. Leder, Drew. *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 87.

8. *Ibid.*, 87.

9. I use “gender dysphoria” to refer to general phenomena, and “Gender Dysphoria” to refer specifically to the clinical diagnosis.

10. Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History* Berkeley: Seal, 2008), 13.

11. In the fifth edition of the *DSM*, published in 2013, an effort was made to remove GID from the book. Though the diagnosis was not removed from the book, there were significant changes made including its renaming to Gender Dysphoria. By replacing “disorder” with “dysphoria” in the diagnostic label, it became not only more appropriate and consistent with familiar terminology, but it also removes the connotation of being “disordered.” See Parry, Wynne. “Gender Dysphoria: DSM-5 Reflects Shift In Perspective On Gender Identity.” *Huffington Post*. N.p., 4 June 2013. Web. 21 Nov. 2014.

12. American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Washington, D.C, 2013).

13. Rubin, Henry S. “Phenomenology as Method in Trans Studies.” *GLQ*. 4.2 (1998): 271.

14. Cole, *When Trans Men Dance*.

15. “We Who Feel Differently” Symposium held at The New Museum in New York City, May 4, 2012.

16. Boucher, Michel J. “Do You Have What It Takes to Be a Real Man?: Female-to-Male Transgender Embodiment and the Politics of the ‘Real’ in *A Boy Named Sue*

and *Body Alchemy*.” *Performing American Masculinities: The 21st-Century Man in Popular Culture*. Ed. Elwood Watson and Marc E. Shaw (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2011), 215.

17. It is important to note here that I use “realness” to signify trans men’s lived authenticity as *men*. “Realness” has its own significance in queer culture, stemming directly from ball culture where competitors perform virtuosic passing and utilize their own survival skills in a community-empowered contest. As Pepper LaBeija says in Jennie Livingston’s *Paris is Burning*: “It’s not a takeoff, or a satire. No. It’s actually being able to *be* this.”

18. Boucher, 227.

19. Cavanagh, Sheila L. *Queering Bathrooms Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2014), n.p.

20. Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 2.

21. Salamon, Gayle. “The Bodily Ego and the Contested Domain of the Material.” *Differences* 15.3 (2004): 108.

22. *Ibid.*, 91.

23. Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 66.

24. Rubin, 274.

25. Salamon, “The Bodily Ego,” 108.

26. Chaikin, Joseph. *The Presence of the Actor* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 8.

27. As noted in the 2010 performance’s press release, *The Artist is Absent* (curated by Ariel Speedwagon, Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky, and Quito Ziegler) gave the audience the opportunity to experience works by Abramović in a context that drew heavily from the queer, transgender, and BDSM/leather/kink communities, whose connections to Abramović’s work are frequently alluded to but rarely made explicit.

28. Roach theorized why such an untranslatable condition of being is so familiar and traces “*it’s*” origins centuries back, correlating the elusive quality of charisma possessed by extraordinarily interesting people to a link between the sex appeal of today’s celebrity figures with those who lived centuries before. See Roach, Joseph R. *It*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 2007. 1.

29. Stage absence was contemplated thoroughly by actor, director, and theorist Joseph Chaikin in his book *The Presence of the Actor*.

30. Phillip Zarrilli is known for training actors in psychophysical process through Eastern meditative practices like yoga. He has described methodologies that use Asian martial/meditation arts as an actor’s technique. For more, see his article “Toward a Phenomenological Model of the Actor’s Embodied Modes of Experience.” *Theatre Journal* 56.4 (2004): 653–66.

31. Rubin, 271.

32. *Ibid.*, 276.

33. These, of course, are each complex and nuanced performance forms. In previous iterations of this work, I focused analyses on a series of methods designed by male practitioners including Stanislavski and Grotowski.

34. See Halberstam, J. Jack. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

35. Leder, 85.
36. Ibid., 87.
37. Ibid., 87.
38. Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 27.
39. Ibid., 27.
40. Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 118.
41. The “We Who Feel Differently” Symposium discussed the idea of “difference” as a way of being in the world. One such instance of queer being is to utilize the adverb form of “different,” differently, thereby making queers active subjects and our difference an action. See more at: [wewhofeeldifferently.info](http://wewhofeeldifferently.info).
42. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 81-4.
43. Bordo, Susan. *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), 38.
44. Leder, 114.
45. Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 51.
46. Butler, 88.
47. Chaikin, 5-6.
48. Chaikin, 65-66.
49. See Heidegger, Martin, John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson. *Being and Time* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1962).
50. An anonymous German postcard from 1888 depicts this image in its earliest known form. The figure was later altered and adapted by others, including the two psychologists, R. W. Leeper and E. G. Boring who described the figure and made it famous within psychological circles in 1930. Seckel.
51. For more see Muñoz, José Esteban, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts” published in *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8.2 (1996): 5-16.
52. Muñoz “Ephemera as Evidence,” 8.
53. I refer here most specifically to Henry Rubin’s influential 2003 book, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men*. However, the term “self-made” was rather unfortunately appropriated for Norah Vincent’s later book about going “in disguise.” The term has also recently been reclaimed without historical connotation or reference to Rubin’s book by a newer generation of trans men.
54. Spolin, Viola. *Theater Games for the Classroom: A Teacher’s Handbook*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1986.
55. Ibid., 42-43.
56. Ibid., 44-54.
57. When I say “innate” ability, I mean the way this process works as a survival method, a kind of instinct that comes as naturally as the truthfulness of self-awareness.

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