Geek Culture and Art Therapy: Explorations of Gender Dysphoria Expressions

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Abstract

Gender dysphoria is a psychologically distressing condition, which transgender people experience, as an incongruence between one's natal sex and perceived gender identity. The standard medical reaffirmative interventions in treating gender dysphoria involve hormone replacement therapy, psychotherapy, and gender reassignment surgeries. However, not all transgender people choose to undergo medical reaffirmative treatments either because of inaccessibility to such treatments, lack of financial or informational sources, personal reasons, or the severe difficulties they experience in transitioning due to transphobia or discrimination. The purpose of this research report is to explore the creative ways transgender geeks employ to alleviate gender dysphoria and communicate lived experiences, especially when gender reassignment surgeries or hormone replacement therapy (HRT) are unavailable. These creative ways may involve tropes within the geek subculture such as avatars, or character creation that conforms with one's perceived gender, and role-playing in online video games and virtual environments that allow one to express their gender. Other creative ways include art as therapy through painting, writing, or journaling, as well as dressing up as a means of expressing one's gender identity.

The theoretical framework that informs this study is phenomenology which helps appraise or analyse the lived experiences of the research participants. A key concept that has helped shape the research approach is surfaces and depths in considering how the trans body and trans art as *texts* are read and interpreted in relation to passing or transitioning. There are four emerging themes in the overall study which include: time/temporality, genres of textual hybridity, geek subculture and identity, and art as therapy. The data for this project was collected through 'deep-hanging out' as a method of observation, fieldnotes, and semi-structured interviews with two participants, Archer and Kahless, both of whom are white transgender men from different socioeconomic brackets and identify as geeks or creatives. Additionally, autoethnography has been included as part of polyvocality and reflexivity. The ethnography is multi-sited in the suburbs of Roodepoort and Randburg where my participants reside.

The findings in the ethnographic text have shown that both participants primarily engage in creative arts as a means of self-expression and secondarily as a way of

alleviating or communicating gender dysphoria. Art, therefore, fulfils two purposes for my research participants: as a form of therapy and for creative expression.

Chapter One: Extended Introduction

1. Introduction

In the South African context, there is a history of negative treatment of individuals with transgender identities, where impositions of heteronormative binaries propagated legislation and social policy during the apartheid era. This is demonstrated by the historical criminalisation of drag and transwomen (Camminga 2017 & Husakouskaya 2013). The relevance of my study will harness the life histories of transgender persons to establish and foster a deeper understanding of transgender identities, agencies, and lived experiences in post-apartheid South Africa where, in spite of Constitutional protections, forms of exclusion still exist. Specifically, the research study will focus on transgender geek subculture in Roodepoort and Randburg areas of wider Johannesburg.

The literature on the transgender community has focused on the socio-political and socio-economic factors that contribute to hegemonic and counterhegemonic gender discourse and the politics of queer identity and expression in an otherwise transphobic and patriarchal society (Müller 2017). However, very little research extensively or exhaustively approaches the transgender subject within the geek subculture. Henceforth, my research study examines how gender identities are expressed in creative ways vis-a-vis gender reaffirmative treatments and other attempts to negotiate identity within social and bureaucratic constraints. In defining the geek subculture, McCain, Gentile & Campbell (2015, 1) refer to it as a "subculture of enthusiasts that is traditionally associated with obscure media (Japanese animation, science fiction, video games, etc.)". Roleplay, dressing-up, and video games are central motifs of this subculture and by extension the transgender geek. Art as therapy also plays a large role in alleviating not only gender dysphoria but other psychiatric and somatic conditions. This will be the locus of my research – an exploration of how creative arts, along with dressing-up and video games, alleviate gender dysphoria.

Owing to the plethora of genres or hybridities within geekdom, this study especially focuses on transgender geeks within the *otaku,* or fanboy/girl, and auteur geek spectrum – such genres include science fiction and fantasy in the 'text' format of literature, films, animations, and, saliently, music. My participants are aficionados within these textual formats and subsequent genres. I on the other hand am well-acquainted yet consider myself more of a consumer than a producer. Similar to my participants, I see myself as a member of the trans geek subculture

The literature review below concerns itself with conceptualising the research question which is how trans geeks alleviate gender dysphoria in creative ways, especially if hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and conventional biomedical treatments are inaccessible for reasons, I explore in the ethnographic text, drawing from participant responses. Roleplay and fantasy play, products of geek subculture, are useful insofar as they inform the study, particularly for making sense of gender embodiment pooled from cross-cultural references of fictional characters in anime, video games, and films through the utility of avatars, or simply, the process of avatarisation.

The main theoretical framework of this study is the concept of *surfaces and depths* that posit the participants' bodies as 'texts' to be written and read upon, i.e. how trans-persons articulate their gender-reaffirmed bodies and how society treats and perceives them. In this way, I merge the approaches of practice theory and phenomenology to land on the framework of surfaces and depths by situating trans bodies as being-in-the world and existential practices "affecting the possibilities, sequences, and modalities of experience" through sociality (Schatzki 2019, 28-39).

According to Csordas (1990, 6), the body is both an "object to be studied in relation to culture and, simultaneously, a subject of culture". In resonance, Lock and Farquhar (2007, 1) further assert that lived bodies, across spatial and temporal materialities, are "assemblages of practice, discourses, images, institutional arrangements, and specific spaces and projects". With this in mind, bodies are never without consciousness and thus are politicised and socialised. In other words, "the body is never, therefore, simply a physical object but rather an embodiment of consciousness and the site where intention, meaning and all practice originate" (Lock and Farquhar 2007, 6). As such, bodies are textualized in social and political contexts, and like texts, have layers of embodiment, interpretation, and meaning.

A purview of the body is equated with surface reading, whereas intensive reading equates to depth reading of the body as text. The idea of the 'body as text' can be drawn from Winterson's *Written on the Body* (Winterson 1993) wherein socialisation of the body occurs through colonial language in an attempt to decolonialise gender, especially in the presentation of bodies as templates configuring social identifiers of sexuality, race, and gender (Maioli 2009, 144-148). This representation of the body text is seen as a palimpsest, i.e. "writing material (such as a parchment or tablet) used once or more times after earlier writing has been erased" (Merriam Webster, 2023, *palimpsest*). Another definition of palimpsest aligns with my study's concept of surfaces and depths as "something having usually diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath the surface" (Merriam-Webster, 2023, *palimpsest*). In elaborating on my study's use of the concept of surfaces and depths, the transgender body is thus subjectified and objectified, in the symptomatic reading of surface and depths, as a text would be, across the spectrum of embodiment. The textuality of the body is a thematic element in Jeannette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (Winterson 1992) that precisely locates the body-self as etched, or inscribed, with social historicism.

Furthermore, phenomenology merges with the concept of surfaces and depths as a means to analyse and reveal the essential structures of mental events, i.e. descriptive psychology. Phenomenology's primary methodology is self-reflection (Bertoldi 1977), and when applied to gender dysphoria introspection aids in anchoring and understanding dysphoria as an embodied experience. Self-reflection closely relates to self-reflexivity which can be defined as "a critical approach to professional practice that questions how knowledge is generated and, further, how relations of power influence the processes of knowledge generation"(D'cruz, Gillingham and Melendez 2007, 77) and so is an epistemological orientation to auto-ethnography which involves the synthesis of both my voice as the researcher and those of my participants as co-researchers, i.e. polyvocality.

There are four narrative ethnographic chapters following the literature review in this introduction, namely, T*ime/temporality* which concerns itself with the spatial and temporal aspects of the process of gender transitioning through hormone replacement therapy and gender re-affirmative changes. The second chapter, G*enres of Textual Hybridity*, uses the concept of surfaces and depths alongside the trans body as *text*

and trans art as *textual.* Moreover, biomedical specialisations feature in the treatment of gender dysphoria as genres or hybrids through a language of composites when discussing different sexes – chromosomal, gonadal, etc. – and different genders such as agender, bigender, etc. The third, ethnographic chapter, *Geek Culture and Identity*, assess the expressions of polyvocality and shared experiences through the geek subculture with cultural artefacts – of video games, art, and anime – as avenues of self-exploration. Avatars, in video games, are thus used as player-designed representations of the self in accordance with perceived identifiers such as gender when navigating virtual or digital spaces. The simulacrum and simulation of the imagined self are freely expressed in these gaming spaces and serve, in the context of transgenders, to reassert or reaffirm one's gender and therefore assist in alleviating gender dysphoria. Finally, in chapter four, *art as therapy,* art is seen as therapeutic in alleviating gender dysphoria. Art therapy is not relegated to the realm of painting alone but can also be inclusive of character creation through the embodiment of one's inner self achieved through assistive technologies which aid in the expression of one's perceived gender.

The research study concludes with a summary of each individual narrative, and ethnographic chapter and reiterates how trans geeks, that is the participants and I, use creative arts as mediums for the easing of gender dysphoria.

1.1 Archer, Kahless, and I

Kahless, Archer[1], and I identify as geeks and creatives which is expressed in our consumption and participation in fandom/geekdom tropes of literature, and popular media such as Japanese animation, webtoons/comics, video games, and queer cinema. The research is a multi-sited ethnography from July-October 2019 in the Randburg and Roodepoort areas of the broader Johannesburg region. Another site of the research resides in the realm of art whereunto my participants create and talk about their creations, as expressive of themselves or emblematic or communicative of the existential experience of living with gender dysphoria.

Kahless is 36 years old, White, and prefers male pronouns; he or him. My first encounter with Kahless began when I was still in primary school while he was in high

[1] Chosen pseudonyms

school. Although being the elder sibling of my childhood friends, we barely ever talked or spent time together, except when sitting at the dinner table at one of my many sleepovers at his family's home. As such, I never knew of his experiences or struggles with gender dysphoria. After much thawing of the proverbial ice, Kahless and I started growing on each other; sharing musical interests, exchanging recommendations of auteur cinema, and waxing philosophically together which has become a cradle stone of our relationship to this day. Kahless and I also attended the same university (the University of Johannesburg) from 2013-2016 where I studied psychology and anthropology with Kahless studying philosophy to Master's postgraduate level. One of our extracurricular activities at UJ was crowd-watching anime series together with the UJ Anime Club after classes. Kahless' family is originally from Belgrade, Serbia; his parents immigrated here to South Africa in 1993 to pursue better economic prospects. His father fought and survived in one of the Yugoslavia Wars, but passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, while his mother is a published poet who was recently retrenched due to the economic decline ensuing the pandemic. Kahless also has two younger brothers, one unemployed and the other working in the IT industry.

Kahless is now married to a computer programmer, a man with whom he has a son now 13 years old. While Kahless' life partner identifies as a heterosexual man, he is altogether accepting and accommodating of Kahless' gender identity, especially as Kahless has not yet transitioned through HRT but rather through dressing up. Additionally, Kahless is a stay-at-home parent, homeschooling his child while his husband works at an IT company. In our social interactions which consisted of "deep hanging out" and conversations at his residence, he expressed the longevity of living with a sense of gender dysphoria since his high school days, which especially have become pronounced later in his life. His explorations into gender studies and philosophy have helped him zero in on his dysphoria by broadening his vocabulary enough so as to widen his ability to communicate his gender dysphoria. Another medium with which he expressed his dysphoria lies in visual and literary art where painting allows him to minimise the abstraction in his sensorial dysphoria and make sense of it, whereas writing allows him to explore different aspects of himself through his characters. Moreover, his immersion into queer cinema imbues him with a sense of familiarity and kinship with genderqueer, transgender, and genderfluid characters to whom he can relate.

However, due to inaccessibility to HRT, brought on by non-acceptance from his conservative parent(s) and siblings and financial issues, Kahless attempts to curtail his gender dysphoria by dressing up as a man. One of his iconic looks is that of a lumberjacket with denim jeans personifying the masculine role of being a woodsman. He also smokes cannabis as a way to align himself with his body, as dysphoria can be dysmorphic in its phenomenological experience, he elaborates. One of the ways Kahless has sought understanding from other transgender people is through online forums and public gatherings as a way to connect with people who also experience gender dysphoria. In selecting his pseudonym to represent him*, Kahless* originates from *Star Trek* referring to a legendary historical figure of the militant species, the Klingons. Klingons are militaristic, honour-bound humanoids characterised by prideful ruthlessness and brutality, with *Kahless The Unforgettable* a zealous symbol in their history.

Another participant of mine, Archer, 25 years old, and White, is also a friend of a long-standing relationship. Archer and I first met when he was still in primary school back in the mid-2000s, much earlier before his transitioning. At first, Archer's older brother was one of my best friends whom I often visited during our sleepovers where we would pull all-nighters playing PlayStation games. However, it was only after a few years of acquaintance with Archer that we officially became friends. It was then, after his matriculation that Archer started identifying as a transgender person. One of the factors that pulled us into friendship was our shared enthusiasm for Japanese animation and computer games as well as drawing manga which is the artistic style of Japanese comic books. Archer soon surpassed his brother and me in artistic ability and eventually, his proficiency in art catalysed a desire to become an animator as a career choice. He is now a second-year student at an animation college. Archer is the youngest sibling out of three children.

Unlike Kahless, Archer's family, including his World War Two generation grandmother, was quite progressive in accepting and supporting his identity as a transgender man. After seeing a psychologist periodically to discuss his gender dysphoria, he was able to begin gender transitioning which involved undergoing HRT, seeing an endocrinologist to ensure safe transitioning, and eventually changing his gender marker and name on his ID card. Now it's been over three years since Archer has been on HRT and is *passing* successfully as a man. According to Anderson *et al*

(2019, 45), passing is defined as “appearing to belong to a social group other than the one society has dictated to the individual”. In Archer’s case, assimilation to hegemonic norms around what it means to be read as male works through visual cues such as his beard. Thus, gender is viewed as a “managed achievement” involving a construction or reading of the body for social cues (Garfinkel, in Stryker & Whittle 2013, 58). By itself, passing entails acting in accordance with societal expectations around styles of clothing/appearances, gestural expressions, and the like that are gendered in social spaces (Garfinkel, in Stryker & Whittle 2013, 63). The term ‘passing’ is used in this research study as a part of the coping strategies my participants use to be perceived as members of their desired gender identity and to minimise discrimination.

Archer became a part of this study as someone I knew who fits the research question specificity: a transgender geek who uses art as a way of alleviating gender dysphoria. My participant observation took the form of spending time, or deep hanging out with Archer during sleepovers at his place where we played video games, and watched anime and series together as is my usual way of socialising with Archer. Our sleepovers, as in the past, usually consist of playing games throughout the whole night. In these instances of deep hanging, I took field notes on my computer and recorded our conversations in semi-structured interviews as well as open-ended discussions. Like Kahless, Archer's family migrated to South Africa; his father is Scottish-born and his mother is English. In the 1980s, his family migrated to South Africa to find better economic prospects during the Thatcher administration.

Archer's medium of creative expression resides in digital art as well as traditional painting. He explores aspects of himself, such as his lived-in experiences with gender dysphoria, through character design, especially in masculine depictions as a part of his existential project of self-creation. Another medium of art is that of queer cinema whereby films like *About Ray* (2016) mirror Archer's own gender-transitioning life story through relationality or relatability with other transgender people or characters who experience what Archer also experiences. In choosing his pseudonym, as a proxy of representation, *Archer* is a name derived from an animated satirical, espionage comedy series. The character Archer, in the eponymous animated series, is a humourous personage which relates to Archer’s (my participant) fondness for Internet memes, edge-lord culture, and millennial humour.

Kahless' and Archer's chosen pseudonyms can be considered tropes of masculinity that are also queer masculinity (Klingons are aliens, and Archer is a comedic spin on protagonists in spy films).

Both my participants and I have experienced gender dysphoria between pre-pubescence and early adolescence, and from our individual experiences, we were relatively ignorant of gender dysphoria and/or gender identity disorder as established terms. A shared theme of our individual narratives is that of relief at having an explanation of what we were experiencing upon discovery of the term and the common-ness of gender dysphoria amongst transgender people. Some of us went through phases of changing our gender identities, such as Kahless first identifying as bi-gender in high school, to queer and gender-fluid, and then finally to just being a trans-man, whereas Archer's gender identification has been relatively constant as a transman. On the other hand, my gender self-identification has fluctuated, much like Kahless', from agender or non-gender, to bigender and even cisgender, and finally to transgender. As one can note, gender identity is on a spectrum and fluid enough to evolve or change with one's personal development.

My presence in the ethnography is that of a researcher who identifies as a Black transgender person vis-à-vis my participants who are both White. Additionally, the implications of doing research cross-racially in a context still grappling with the effects of racism and racial segregation of apartheid lie in ethics of representation and mitigating prejudice in informing the direction of the study which is achieved through self-reflection in depicting my lived experiences and articulating those of my participants. I attempted to represent Archer and Kahless authentically by assimilating their voices and views on the subjects of race, gender and class, and experiences with living with gender dysphoria through interviews and open-ended discussions which resembled a dialectical dialogue.

The post-1994 political context brings me and my participants together from a young age through 'integrated' schooling where familiarity with multiple cultures and ethnicities has been a part of our socialisation. In the context of high school, the term 'coconut' was used to refer to me on account of mostly having White friends. According to the dictionary 'coconut' is a derogatory or slang term that refers to "a Black or Asian person who conforms to White culture at the expense of his or her ancestral culture, the idea that, like a coconut, he or she is dark on the outside but white on the inside" (Dictionary.com 2019, *coconut*). Another term synonymous with coconut is "blerd" a

conjoining between Black and nerd as an identity modality that challenges traditional White presentations of ‘nerds’. According to Law II (2017, 3) “Blerds exist in an in-between space, their existence intersectional to the mainstream Black identity”. Blerds, therefore, occupy an in-between space in a society that views their skin colour and ‘nerdiness’ as an inverse relationship (Law II 2017).

For a time, I struggled with this experience of being called a coconut by schoolmates as my experiences with colourism also affected how I felt about myself or being regarded as ‘not being black enough’. Law II (2017,36) illustrates this as “failing the litmus test for blackness” since blerds encounter difficulty or barriers in integrating their nerd identity within the Black community. Identifying as both Black and a nerd becomes a kind of social paradox. As a way of coping with my experience of not being considered ‘black enough’ by peers, cyberspace, especially through massively-multiplayer online games (MMOs) presented opportunities for a sense of belonging and inclusion within geekdom. It is from this that my sense of belonging in the ‘blerd’ subculture informs my positionality in this study in comparison with my White trans geek participants.

What’s more, my phenomenological experiences with discrimination align with accounts of similar transgender persons in South Africa who experience marginalisation far more than their white counterparts as epitomized by contemporary literature in Husakouskaya (2013) and Camminga (2017). In locating the transgender geek subculture in South Africa, McCain, Gentile, & Campbell (2015, 2) assert that the social sciences have not paid much attention to global forms of geekdom but have instead looked at other trends [from geekdom] within the wider U.S. culture. My study also brings new lines of enquiry in South African ethnography as it intersects between trans/queer experiences, Black geekdom, interracial friendship in the South African context, and transnational geek culture.

In thinking about access to affirmative treatments, it has proven important to consider the intersections of race and class as Chang and Culp Jr (2002, 485) assert “that aspects of identity such as race and gender do not operate independently but are woven together to produce people’s lived experiences”. Interplays between gender and race influence a trans person’s lived experiences and thus require an examination as posited by Husakouskaya (2013, 10) in that the “South African medical system poses particular challenges for transgender and intersex people due to the scarcity of

knowledgeable professionals, the rigid understanding of gender and sexuality and discrimination based on gender identity and biological variation."

My fieldwork is multi-sited, focusing on areas in Randburg and Roodepoort – suburbs in Johannesburg where my participants and I live. Historically, Randburg was founded as a town in 1959 (Joyce, 1998) as a consolidation of 32 suburbs and is economically connected to Johannesburg city. Roodepoort, at the beginning of its establishment, was a mining town that, after subsequent growth and expansion, was proclaimed a town in 1904 and then a city in 1977 (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2011). Living as both a trans geek and Black person in these areas means close proximity to stores, entertainment hubs, and malls that specialise in providing cultural products of geekdom, such as live-houses, comic book, and anime stores. Because of the affluence of more gentrified areas within Roodepoort, certain bodies are more policed in a biased attempt of tracking the likelihood of crime, policed through classing and racial profiling. This is especially pronounced in areas that are under neighbourhood community watch or private security patrolling such as the affluent suburbs of Florida and Discovery which are part of Roodepoort.

1.2. Literature review

The literature reviewed is organised around three thematic sections. The first section (1.2.1-1.2.2) focuses on the medicalisation of dysphoria which includes definitions and extensions on the key concepts and the theoretical framework of gender dysphoria and art therapy as part of the amelioration of dysphoria. I draw on phenomenology from the perspective of Bertoldi (1977) in making sense of the embodiment of gender dysphoria from a psychologically descriptive approach in order to examine/elaborate on how my participants experience and communicate dysphoria. In the second section (1.2.3) I discuss geek culture and identity in how one may explore possible selves through avatars and role-playing in cyberspaces. And in the third section (1.2.4) I focus on surfaces and depths in the analysis of symptomatic or symbolic reading of the (trans) *body as text*.

1.2.1 Gender dysphoria: medical and art therapy

Dysphoria may be experienced by transgender people as the opposition to gender assignment at birth and their own self-identification. Some transgender individuals may undergo gender affirmation procedures as a means to manifest the reality of their gender to others within their community.

Abel (2014, 23) offers a definition of gender dysphoria asserting that "in prior iterations of the *Diagnostical and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders*, [gender dysphoria] is marked by an incongruence with one's experienced or expressed gender and the gender to which the person has been assigned usually at birth, referred to as the natal gender". However, the recent DSM-V defines a person with gender dysphoria as meeting the majority of the diagnostic criteria such as a strong desire for cross-dressing and to be of another gender, as well as a desire to have the sexual anatomy of the gender and a general dislike for one's sexual anatomy (Abel 2014, 23). Gender dysphoria is a "discomfort or distress that is associated with a discrepancy between a person's gender identity and that person's sex assigned at birth - and the associated gender role and/or primary and secondary sex characteristics" (Fisk 1974; Knudson, De Cuypere, & Bockting 2010 in American Psychological Association 2015b).

To contextualize gender dysphoria within its social construction, i.e. gender, the American Psychological Association (2012) defines gender as "the attitudes, feelings, and behaviours that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex". Moreover, "behaviour that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender normative; behaviours that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender non-conformity" (American Psychological Association, 2012). This definition is elaborative of hegemonic or conservative gender expression. Gender expression is "the presentation of an individual, including physical appearance, clothing choice and accessories, and behaviours that express aspects of gender identity or role" (American Psychological Association, 2015a). This extends to the term transgender employed as "an adjective that is an umbrella term used to describe the full range of people whose gender identity and/or gender role do not conform to what is typically associated with their sex assigned at birth" (American Psychological Association, 2015a). It is important to note that not all gender-non-conforming

individuals identify as transgender. Dating back to 1910, Hirschfeld, an early advocate for transgenders has argued that “transgenderism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to homosexuality, fetishism, or some form of psychopathology” (Hirschfeld, in Stryker & Whittle 2013, 28). Terms such as transvestite, homosexual and transgender recur throughout my study in the ethnographic chapters as raised by my participants. A salience of ‘dressing up’, as evinced by Kahless, parallels Benjamin’s (in Stryker & Whittle 2013, 45) symptomatizing of transvestism through cross-dressing. Although, in this study I contrast cross-dressing and dressing up, whereby the former denotes dressing in the clothes of the *opposite sex* often taking the form of fetishism (Benjamin, in Stryker & Whittle 2013, 46), while on the other hand, dressing up is more of a self-expression of *gender identity* spread across the spectrum of masculine/androgynous/feminine.

Within dysphoric embodiment as typical of trans experiences, Rubin (1980, 6) asserts that “individuals caught in the turmoil of serious mental illness, threatened with a loss of contact with reality, have often found themselves compelled to create visual art as one way of attempting to cope with their confusion”. The relation of this to my research is the therapeutic effects of art in the lives of trans folk who suffer from acute gender dysphoria. Anderson (1980) contends that the field of art therapy is not necessarily new because of its use by professionals in mental health settings since the early 1930s. Art therapy can be defined as using art as a vehicle for psychotherapy with the implication that the creative process offers to make sense of conflicts and contributes to increased self-awareness and personal development. When used therapeutically, art serves as a means to navigate and find compatibility between one’s inner and outer realities. The methods and purposes of art therapy include the use of fine arts as a medium, such as painting, drawing, sculpting, and clay modelling with the intention of expressing memories, feelings, and emotions, developing new coping skills, and improving introspective skills through the process of creation based on associative experience (Abbing, Ponstei, van Hooren, de Sonneville, Swaab &Baars 2018, 2).

I use art therapy within the literature review to highlight the creative ways and techniques used by a participant in self-expression and making the unconscious visible which Kahless uses extensively. Archer also uses art as a form of therapy, except for him it’s more of a vocation than solely a therapeutic measure. As part of autoethnography, I too use creative arts as therapy, especially in literary forms. Each

format of ‘text’ such as digital art, painting, and (non) fictional writings have one thing in common which is the elasticity of self-expression – eclectic ways of embodiment – my participants and I use in order to understand ourselves better. Hence, we use art *as* therapy instead of art therapy because we borrow techniques from this subfield without the assistance of an art therapy practitioner. What’s more, art as therapy provides ample room for self-directed art that knits themes of self-styling and self-making in an effort of apotheosis/autognosis, or simply, the process of becoming one’s true self.

Art therapy can be considered a ‘genre’ of psychotherapy, especially in the treatment of anxiety disorders such as gender dysphoria as a psychological condition or one of resisting the socially imposed norms of performing gender. Although art therapy is a considered alternative in gender dysphoria treatment there is a lack of clarity on its effectiveness in alleviating anxiety symptoms, especially within the adult population. Overviews of intervention characteristics and working mechanisms are largely absent (Abbing *et al* 2018, 1). The proponents of art therapy consistently show its importance as a supportive intervention in the treatment of mental illness, on the other hand, clarity about its effectiveness is relatively unestablished. The theoretical expectations are that art therapy is believed to ameliorate patients’ anxiety symptoms and improve their quality of life (Abbing *et al* 2018). Experiential reports from art therapy practitioners substantiate its usefulness as contributing to healthy emotional regulation and self-helping skills as well as developing reflection and self-awareness. Because of the emphasis on direct and easier access to emotions contra to verbal or talk therapies, art therapy is most helpful for patients with anxiety disorders in symptom reduction although such a consensus is based on self-reports and shared belief. One of the benefits of using art therapy as my research’s framework in understanding gender dysphoria is the limited research on its efficacy in treating anxiety disorders, especially gender identity disorder which has anxiety as a component. Most art therapy reviews have focused on its effectiveness in several psychodynamic and exposure therapies (Abbing *et al* 2018). At the same time due to clearly substantiated scientific evidence on working mechanisms, art therapy’s anticipated effectiveness is lacking.

However, art therapy’s efficacy was identified through its use in relaxation leading to stress reduction; emotional regulation through conscious processing of difficult and traumatic emotions and memories; and finally, as an outlet for expression

which leads to improved cognitive regulation (Abbing *et al* 2018). One can see that art therapy's usefulness is three-pronged: emotional, stress, and cognitive regulation. An interplay between art therapy and phenomenology occurs in the former's examination of feelings without words, with consciousness sometimes below the surface, and in the latter bringing unconscious contents to the surface and studying them as they appear (Silverman 1980). In other words, art projects the contents of consciousness unto a canvas, for instance, through a process akin to automatism, while phenomenology aids in describing the process and studying mental material. In the context of art, automatism is defined as "suspension of the conscious mind to release subconscious images" (Merriam-Webster, 2023, *automatism*). I explore this dynamic in my participants' articulation about their art-making process later in the ethnographic chapters.

The intention of this research is not to speak to counternarratives of gender and sexuality, but rather, it is to learn from participants themselves what the intention and motivation are behind their artworks' relationship to their dysphoria. To enumerate further, McCaughan (2014) expresses the prolific production of counternarratives of gender and sexuality by queer and feminist activism art against hegemonic discourses. It is not my interest to exceptionalise or exoticise my participants, nor is their art didactic or necessarily autobiographical, rather it is art *as* therapy to counter normative/hegemonic prescriptions on transgender artists.

1.2.2 Phenomenology as means of understanding gender dysphoria

According to Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio (2019, 91), phenomenology may be defined as "an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it". The chief project of phenomenology is to analyse and reveal the essential structures of mental events. The primary utility of phenomenology in this study is to aid in bringing to surface experiences and expressions of gender dysphoria using a modality of *descriptive psychology* through the communicative vehicle of language. A concern with essence(s) is prevalent in phenomenology as a shortcut to investigating ideal types or ideal modes of "being in the world" (Bertoldi 1977,241). In this case, being in the world is replete with a state of affairs in which the world is experienced or

amalgams of lifeworlds (Schatzki 2017). Phenomenology provokes insistence on a counter-hegemony to gender essentialism through the vehicle of essences, breaking down ideals and global notions of what makes one feminine or masculine when both are socially agreed upon and enforced through societal projects of official narratives. Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of phenomenology cautions against reductionism claiming that it is impossible to complete reduction which suggests a plethora of intersubjectivities and the arrival of inconclusiveness in these subjectivities (Bertoldi 1977, 241). believe this also pertains to gender in establishing one's identity on a vast spectrum. The notion of gender and identity plasticity highlights the contrasts between surface and depth where transgender individuals and communities are read and interpreted based on established norms and notions whilst the depth is concerned with deeper existential matters of authenticity and the embodied conflict between recognition and misrecognition.

Phenomenology's usefulness can be applied in the discernment between two worlds, that of the 'objective', scientific world with a set of determinates based on what is known versus that of the lived or perceived world based on experience (Bertoldi 1977, 241-242). This pertains to the dyad of transgender communities' experiences and that of the biomedical industry. I argue that biomedicine or the medical community 'quantifies' or 'determines' gender dysphoria to a set of symptoms, aetiology, and treatment. This is the objectivity of gender identity disorder of gender dysphoria, a medical view albeit with different 'genres' or therapeutic approaches to addressing gender dysphoria (psychotherapy, psychiatry, endocrinology, pharmaceuticals). In contrast, the 'lived world' or embodiment of dysphoria falls under the purview of (inter) subjectivity with different artistic forms of expression such as the literary arts, fine art, and music. This signals the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative, known and experienced. My rationale for choosing phenomenology rests on this distinction between this picture of the world as constructed by medical science and the lived experiences which elucidate the nuances of gender dysphoric embodiment. As such, my study is not only about scientific constructions of gender but of social perceptions thereof. According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology compels us to examine relations and things as they in spite of not ordinarily doing so (Bertoldi 1977, 242). One can say it is because such relations are hidden or concealed under immense strata of social conditioning and enculturation - in the context of gender surfaces and depth.

On the one hand, surfaces can be described as etic constructions, based on what is visible on the outside. These are what one is expected to wear (apparel and appearances), how to behave and present oneself (etiquette and performance), and what is expected of you (conformities and normativities). Depth on the other hand is how you see yourself and your emic identity practices (ethics of authenticity). Phenomenology's approach to the question of reality is descriptiveness as a means of arriving at the true nature of something within temporality and movement in order to better understand the relationship between surface and depth (Bertoldi 1977). For example, the process of gender transitioning illustrates movement across time and space through different phases and changes (perceived within and without) as a result of hormone replacement therapy as well as the existential labour of passing successfully as a transman or transwoman.

Avatarisation as a part of cyber anthropology is also informative within the online/offline worlds because my participants and I use character creation in video games as means of exploring personal identities. Reasons for this vary from participant to participant including my own. Gender dysphoria which is the locus of this research is explored through embodiment. The term embodiment can be defined, through a phenomenological lens, as the referential point through which the world is experienced, through engagements that are social, eventful, or physical in nature (Desjarlais & Throop 2011, 89). In the case of the avatar, embodiment is cyberized or digitised as a proxy or representation of one's identity in virtual environments, environments that are themselves extensions of lifeworlds where social and interpersonal transactions occur.

Nyamnjoh's (2017) concept of "incompleteness" can be applied to the development of personhoods, as an "exploration of ways to complement ourselves with the added possibilities brought to us by the incompleteness of others" (Lategan 2015, 83). The implication of this concept is that identities are fluid and malleable and based on relations with other people. One such example resides in cyberspace, as a democratised locality, that connects a multifaceted array of people represented through their avatars or digitised selves.

Phenomenology aids in bringing to surface the 'texts' participants use in exploring alternative forms of personal identity and self-expression. I will be looking at three texts: video games, literature, and visual art. Fantasy play and roleplay feature

in the digital format of video games via avatars, both online and offline worlds; literary texts in the format of literature both authored and read; and visual art in exploring dysphoria and creative expression. My participants and I harness the narrative potency of the past in order to make sense of our dysphoric precarity within the broader South African context.

1.2.3 Geek culture, identity, and performance/character play

The geek subculture is a collective of technophiles and gamers with a passion for animation, fantasy and science fiction, including roleplaying games and cosplay where people dress up as their favourite fictional characters as part of performances at conventions. Conventions are regularly held that promote geek culture, which is synonymous with Japan's *otaku*(geek) and 'nerd' culture (Kaichiro and Washburn 2013 & Rogers-Whitehead 2015).

As a part of geek culture, avatars are considered personas of users in online or virtual environments such as Massively Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs) and other computer-generated media. According to Trepte and Reinecke (2010, 171), avatars are seen as visual representations or proxies of people, while Chan and Vorderer (2006), extend the definition to include avatars as characters that encompass users' identity, characteristics, and sense of belonging in virtual environments and communities. Thus, in video games like *The Sims* series, players can not only customise their avatars' appearances but also choose their characters' personality traits as well as their avatars' skills and in some MMORPGs, their ancestry and race (Trepte and Reinecke 2010, 171). The term 'avatar' has a religious origin referring to an incarnation of a deity on Earth, thus the term was re-appropriated into gaming nomenclature for the descent of users into cyberspace (Bayliss 2007, 2).

As part of self-identification, there exists a replication of the body in avatars with regard to gender expression and other identifiers. For example, in the popular online game of Second Life, relating to avatar gender preference, studies have found that 4% of women chose to play as male characters, while, on the other hand, 14% of men chose female avatars (Trepte and Reinecke 2010, 172). As one can surmise here, gender reversal or swapping, through avatars, occurs as a way of expressing and exploring identity or embodying personas. Additionally, in-game characters are

perceived as role models or conduits that enable players to perform possible selves and experiment with different personalities (Hitchens and Drachen 2009). In the case of transgender geeks, gender expression (and thus to a certain degree, gender reaffirmation) can be experienced in online games, as well as other video games that include character creation. The process of avatar-creation prompts or conditions how other users perceive one through the gender, race, and other identifiers of one's avatar in virtual and online social spaces. For instance, online games like *Second Life* offer flexibility in how the game is socially approached through exploration of the game environment, role-playing, customisation of avatar appearances and apparel, socialising, and the formation of relationships with other users (Trepte and Reinecke 2010, 180).

1.2.3 Surfaces and depths

The concept of surfaces and depths may find its origins in psychoanalysis and Marxism, as "a mode of interpretation that assumes that a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, [which] describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings." (Best and Marcus 2009, 1). I incorporate this analytic aspect of surfaces and depths in my research in readings of the trans body as a living *text* and trans art as *textual* referring to outside visibility of gender expression, i.e. what one is expected to wear (apparel and appearances) contra to what extent artworks reveals about one's (gender) identity and expression thereof. Also, the depths element focuses on emic identity practice (ethics of authenticity) and the articulation of the experience of dysphoria.

The benefits of surface reading broaden the scope of inquiry through the use of interpretive activities (of which phenomenology shares characteristics) that attempt to understand the complexity of texts. Symptomatic reading, as an interpretive method, argues that the most important aspect of a text is what it represses or hides often through making sense of the latent meaning behind a manifested one. Moreover, "symptomatic readings also often locate outright absences, gaps, and ellipses in texts, and then ask what those absences mean, what forces create them, and how they signify the questions that motivate the text, but that the text itself cannot articulate." (Best and Marcus 2009, 3).

A presentation of dichotomies is interrogated to reveal the manifest meanings through the rhetoric of what-is-not-there, or what-is-hidden. “The surface is associated with the superficial and deceptive, with what can be perceived without close examination and, implicitly, would turn out to be false upon closer scrutiny. The manifest has more positive connotations, as what is truthful, obvious, and clearly revealed.” (Best and Marcus 2009, 4). A good example of this practice may include the symptomatic reading of trans literary text interpreting ‘passing’ as surface signs of the deep truth about gender dysphoria – one of movement and an allusion to the transience of time. In this instance, symptomatic reading may interpret the body as text with the outside being the surface others read upon contra to the inside where the depth of manifest meaning situates. The interpretive activity of lived narratives reveals the manifest behind gender dysphoria as a medical term/scientific truth, thus the surface. In the context of the biomedical world, illnesses are perceived and managed within a set of knowledge and belief structures, material conceptions of what constitutes the body and the social relations encapsulate this. Notions of the self through the body are employed and perpetuated through social reproduction (Cole 2012, 1307-1308).

1.3. Methodology

In this part of the thesis I present the approaches to carrying out my research, what it was like to investigate the personal experiences of my participants who are also my friends, and the impact this has had on informing my analysis and discoveries. Delving into investigations of gender dysphoria required a high level of sensitivity and awareness in presenting Archer’s and Kahless’ experiences, especially when I had extensive access to personal information that they need not have shared. An advantage of selecting friends as trans geek participants meant that I had already an established sense of trust and rapport in capturing the nuances of gender dysphoria, but my past relations with Kahless and Archer also meant that I had to sift through biases and interrogate the presumptions in relation to the study question. I circumnavigated this dilemma through externalising my voice in the form of autoethnography or self-reflection. I needed to occupy the spaces of ‘friend’ and

‘researcher’ at the same time and filter my stream of consciousness in writing up field notes and during interview conversations. Interviews and discussions around some of the themes in the study were usually carried out in-between routinal tropes of my friendship with participants. For example, with Archer, this involved talking about my research study over a game of Civilization 6 or in the case of Kahless, accompanied by music in the background.

As part of the legibility imbued by the symbolic reading of surfaces and depths, the reader is forewarned that the ethnographic text uses a fragmental style of writing in order to induce a sense of dysphoria when reading. This is purposive as a way to embody the discordant and erratic nature of the feeling of anxiety and dysphoria. Furthermore, my own precarity in engaging with my research participants, including suffering my psychiatric difficulties and self-discoveries are reflected in the shifting and contorted style of narrative and thematic analysis. My participants largely feel the same way about their gender dysphoria which yielded immense material for analysis. Spectra and hybridities are therefore pragmatic conceptual tools in trying to understand the *sensorium of dysphoria* to such an extent that in informal conversations we engage in neologism or coinages of the gender spectrum to encapsulate how we feel about our own dysphoria. Emphatically, sci-fi and fantasy genres are major themes of our personal identities as ‘geeks’ because of the suspension of disbelief video games and role play accords in ‘ethics of authenticity.

In presenting ethnographic excerpts, my writing style contains geeky overtures incorporating a Baroque and Rococo textuality and an allusion to mythological references such as calling drinks ‘libations’, imbuing magic into the ordinary and so on. Ethnographic excerpts are herein italicised whereas participants quotes are unitalicised and indented.

Autoethnography has proven pivotal in helping mitigate marginal biases in my research study. The benefits of autoethnography as a method “uses the individual reflexive narrative to creatively highlight undisclosed, untold and potentially subversive texts” and “facilitates self-awareness within the researcher” (Schmid 2019, 266). These can be used to theorise personal accounts with broader themes in the anthropological literature and extend to research objectives. While autoethnography may be challenged by its focus on subjective memory that may impede objective understanding of social reality, the focus on “emotive rather than factual language”

(Schmid 2019, 273) reveals additional facets of lived experience. In a number of scenarios of my fieldwork, introspection came to the fore in dissecting my embodied experience of gender dysphoria as a Black co-researcher, compelling me to articulate and delve into my negative experiences with racism and colourism. This exercise required balancing academic enquiry with self-exposure

In instances of “Deep hanging out” (Walmsley 2018) as a data collection and observation method, my participants and I often occupied the everyday spaces of where our lives unfolded. From LAN overs, where we played computer games together over one network; to excursions in shopping malls; and braais in peri-rural areas. Combined with fieldnotes and recorded interviews, my understanding of my research participants’ gender dysphoria deepened and imbued a keener insight into their perspectives around race, class and gender. Although at first, I encountered awkwardness in formally interviewing friends at the beginning of the research phase, over time our everyday conversations flowed as the basis of such talks were built on the usual activities of gaming, anime, films, books, manga/comics, music and myriad permutations of our friendship.

Moreover, I conducted life history interviews in order to better understand the narratives of gender identification from my participants’ points of view. Gramling and Carr (2004, 2) argue that life histories as a data collection strategy help “focus on chronology to enable understanding about the sequencing of events”. Life histories enable understanding about the interface of an individual's life within a certain social structure” (Gramling and Carr 2004, 2). However, the limitation of life histories, as retrospective data collection is subject to distortion. As such, one way I have mitigated this limitation was through the triangulated use of interviews, audio recordings, participant observation, and my own reflections as part of reflexivity (Gramling and Carr 2004). In the context of my research, the benefits of life history trace out the chronological past and present of gender dysphoria in the lived experiences of my participants. It is important to recognise that this is not an attempt at a totalising and comprehensive typology, rather, life histories enable one to better understand the particularities of lived experiences of participants.

It is noteworthy that both participants are white with different life experiences attributed to class and ethnicity. Therefore, the responses are not representative of the majority within the trans community but partial. I selected these participants on the basis that they are members of Geek culture who identify as transgender and who

actively produce forms of art. I attempted to balance the skewed variance of trans experiences with my own reflections and reflexivity as a Black trans person.

The transgender literature in South Africa substantially concerns itself with the historical marginalisation of transgender communities of colour attributed to the legacy of colonialisation, apartheid, and systemic discrimination or inequality. Most especially, the corpus on transgender experiences weaves the legal, healthcare, and social contexts detailing the inconsistent application of South Africa's gender transitioning law, long-waiting list for gender re-assignment medical interventions, and transphobic violence (Reisnar, Keatley and Baral 2016, 3). On the other hand, the transgender literature in American spaces is dominant owing to the multifaceted experiences of trans persons of colour through the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. In this case, according to Collins (2000, 299 cited in de Vries 2015, 4) intersectionality is the "analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructive features of social organisation" (Collins 2000, 299 cited in de Vries 2015, 4). The theoretical origin of intersectionality, as coined by Crenshaw, sought to emphasize race and gender as two intersecting dimensions of inequality experienced by Black women in feminist and critical race theories (Keuchenius and Mügge 2021, 361). Intersectionality, as a research paradigm, has guided my approach to investigating my participants' life histories vis-à-vis my own.

In navigating the ethical quandaries of my fieldwork, namely, sensitivities around race and racism, and instances of transphobia or prejudice, confidential discussions that were regarded as too personal were relegated off-record as a way of preserving my participants' autonomy in the study. In the depiction of artworks, my participants provided their own meanings of such art, and thus not entirely my own interpretation but a synthesis of our voices. I was careful not to reveal too much personal information about my participants as to their identities taking into consideration the durability of my relationship with them. Pseudonyms and masking of other identifiers have helped in this regard. As to the issue of co-authorship, my participants have received copies of the final research report to commemorate and solidify their inclusion in the research process as they contributed their knowledge, experiences, understandings, and subjectivities on the themes of gender dysphoria, art as therapeutic, geekdom, and identity.

Chapter Two: Time/temporality

At the crack of dawn, and still gripped by somnolence, Archer and I along with his mother make our way to Krugersdorp, to the Department of Home Affairs. I have always known Archer's mother to be self-sacrificing and a part of my community (a complex of flats in Roodepoort) which speaks volumes of ubuntu and children being raised by the community. The purpose of this itinerary, this destination is to procure Archer's new ID card – complete with his reassigned gender and a new name. Archer selected his real name from his favourite childhood novel. Upon arrival, we were greeted with a very long queue already and equally disorganised, but Archer tells me it could have been worse had we arrived later. We waited for 45 minutes or so until the guards ushered us in. A cold spell creeps into my bones as I make mirthful conversation with Archer about the video games (Grand Theft Auto, Civilization, Resident Evil, etc) we play together via LAN (Local Area Network) as well as online. Our conversation consisted of our gaming experiences of fighting difficult bosses in certain levels, video game characters we love and hate, and even delving into the literary phenomenon of fantastical racism in books like The Lord of The Rings and in The Witcher series. Such a dynamic is a recurring ritual of our friendship. I've known Archer since my primary school days, before his transitioning, when I was friends with his older brother, and over time I became Archer's friend too.

2.1 Navigating the time/space of transitioning

The significance of the above excerpt contains the theme of temporality as it is tied to the changes and adjustments that occur across time and space in the journey of one's gender transition. Moreover, this chapter unpacks, through ethnographic and interview excerpts, the bureaucratic process of changing one's gender identification; the intersectionality of race, class, and gender when applied to the varied experiences of trans persons; and the incredulity of something *being amiss* at the onset of gender dysphoria during my participants' pubescence when they were largely unaware of the phenomenon of gender dysphoria or gender identity disorder.

Gender transitioning is a time-intensive process, characterised by a lot of waiting. Waiting for doctors, waiting for home affairs, waiting to pass as your self-identified gender. These transitions include hormone replacement treatments (along with the incremental physiological changes), and reassignment of the gender marker in documents to the continuous performance of 'passing' as one's embodied gender successfully in society. For example, Archer has been on HRT for three tears now wherein he experienced the gradual embodiment of his desired gender through physiological changes. It has taken Archer less than one year to change his name and gender marker on his ID card, and several months of psychotherapy to help with his transitioning.

The possibility of changing one's gender marker and ID name for transgender and intersex people has been legislated in South Africa's constitution since 2004 without the need to undergo genital surgery (Husakouskaya 2013, 11). The excerpt above illustrates an example of the legal aspect of transitioning with Archer, his mother, and I traveling to the Department of Home Affairs (18 June 2019) to collect his new ID card complete with a changed gender marker and name.

The idea of time as necessary for transitioning – arguably any form of social and personal transformation – is rooted in Nyamnjoh's (2017) concept of 'incompleteness' synonymously tied to self-actualisation, or in Archer's case 'self-reaffirmation'. 'Incompleteness' of oneself stems from the temporal and spatial continuity of self-development and self-identity, or personhood often through interaction and relation with others, or as Lategan (2015, 83) asserts "[Incompleteness] promotes the exploration of ways to complement ourselves with the added possibilities brought to us by the incompleteness of others". In this 'incomplete' existential space, gender identity, in particular, refers to not only what is construed as sanctioned behaviour and attitudes but also how one's sexuality is felt and experienced (Lategan 2015, 83-85); thus, contextual and circumstantial factors influence one's sense of identity.

I use the idea of 'idioms of travelling' spoken and written, as shown by my word choice – "itinerary" – to illustrate or mirror a sense of movement in line with my narration. Since Archer and I label ourselves as geeks we use analogies borrowed from geek culture, namely, video games and fantasy/sci-fi literature and its multimedia cognates, as a basis of our language when interacting with each other. This kind of

‘social praxis’ cements kinship as enumerated by the sense of deep knowing having been ‘brought up’ by Archer’s mother and our community in the West Rand. The passage of time and formation of personhood (a person is a person through interaction with other people – ubuntu) involves cultural exchange which in Archer’s case and my own, extends into a network of shared commonalities and interests

The following excerpt illustrates the movement of racialised/gendered bodies in social space with the context a continuation of our visit to the Department of Home Affairs:

> *When the security guards finally open the gates to let us in, we march forward and queue for the second time but only briefly this time. One of the security guards, a woman, with an interrogative voice asks me if I am with Archer and his mother to which I reply in the affirmative. This is interesting to me because of the stereotypes society makes around race and class – Archer is a white male and I a black male – whereby my accompanying them rouses a question of whether I belong which would not be raised had I been the same race as Archer and his mother. The three of us, once inside the bureaucratic citadel, as I called the DOH, stand in another queue to retrieve Archer’s ID card but we were referred to another office because we needed certain documentation from them before the ID card was released. This interested me as I ruminated about the bureaucracy of transitioning, and the time-consuming layers of documentation one requires for altering their gender and name on ID cards. The official, who was cordial in manner and demeanour, referred to Archer as a Mister, further solidifying his affirmed gender as male.*

I use the imagery of knight-errants and mobilisation our journey to Home Affairs as a kind of quest in which Archer, his mother and I are members of the same party. The security guard assumes the role of a garrison soldier who watches over us as if on the crenellations of a fortress. The presence of geekdom in my writing permeates throughout the ethnographic text.

As to the excerpt above, the term “bureaucratic citadel” contains inflections about the ‘paper currency’ of gender transitioning. Currency in how words are agents or actors in enforcing certain roles social agents take on. This Foucaldian ‘body tracking’ (Nail 2016) is enforced through gender marking on one’s ID card/document

which often requires a smorgasbord of preliminary documents – a good example of biopower through medical and legislative documentation. Furthermore, speech, as part of performativity and performance, may reaffirm or 'disenthrall' one's perceived or lived gender; the use of "sir" or "mister" cements or reaffirms Archer's embodied gender. Salih (2002, 56) posits that "gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language", and as such, gender proves to be a performance with performativity being the linguistic performance of gender, as an act of doing, or in other words, "gender identities are constructed and constituted by language" (Salih 2002, 56). South Africa's governmental institutes like Home Affairs are still grappling with the effects of racialised politics. While White bodies in public spaces like DOH are privileged, Black bodies are often under scrutiny, a scrutiny that is embedded and echoes through from the past Apartheid regime in which White masculine men dominated the zeitgeist of social, political and economic spaces. I felt this 'racialised' gaze, so to speak, when I first entered the DOH building, and when we were inside, felt excluded on account of not being referred with the same recognition that Archer received. Archer and I are good examples of the dynamic of the racialised aspect of politics in our interracial friendship, especially when entering spaces that are institualionally and systemically racialised. My argument here is that gendered and racialised state institutions like Home Affairs produce a sense of dysphoria by negating certain forms of kin-making.

2.2 'Conspicuous' and 'Inconspicuous' bodies

The themes within the above excerpt-passage speaks to the history of trans persons in South Africa. Genealogy is a useful heuristic to think about this discriminatory caveat of trans experiences. Referring back to the ethnographic excerpt on pg. 26, one may discern here, the adjective "interrogative" evokes feelings of policing, the feelings stem from having the body put into a suggestive state of being observed and watched very similar to parallels of Mary Douglas' (2002) 'matter out place' – I did not 'belong' as 'matter' in the bodily space of Archer's "matter", employing rhetorical poetry; it is as if my black body 'mattered' only if I was with the corresponding 'matter' of other black bodies, not white bodies. This metaphor of *body muting* or *body aphasia* -- aphasia being language loss or an inability for one to form

meaningful communication, or trouble understanding what others are saying -- best encapsulates this feeling of being out of place (Herath, *et al* 2022, 2). Thus, body aphasia/muting is when the embodied, corporeal self is rendered unable to self-articulate itself but is assumptively 'read' by others, or at least on the surface rather than in-depth.

To elaborate, in informal conversations with Archer I discuss this feeling of being 'policed' or 'interrogated' with him only I did not on account of my silent temperament, but my body language did the 'talking'. Archer, however, used humour to dispel this 'dysphoria' as he colloquially critiqued the state of post-apartheid South African society. Repeating what I intuit many African queer scholars *feel*, I use the word *feel* to describe the 'politics of the gut' which is the seat of anxiety – the embodiment of dysphoria; in this case, "trapped in the wrong body" (Mikkola, 2008, 2) – and the reiteration of language use in framing mental and emotional understandings of selfhood, or self-ness. Additionally, Vincent and Camminga (2009) and Husakouskaya (2013) argue for an understanding of this very dynamic in the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, in that, these social identifiers transfix or transpose lived experiences.

When interviewing Archer about anecdotes of other trans persons he has interacted with, taking into consideration the intersectionality of race, class, or socioeconomic statuses, as well as how his own race and class have differed from trans persons of colour, he says:

> Okay, so it's weird being middle-class right? Because you look at people who live in the township and that must fucking suck, as I've seen, I've met some people who it's really difficult for them, because uhm, for instance, one person I met he can't change his ID 'cause he's from Zimbabwe, so he'd have to go back to Zimbabwe where it's not -- I don't know if it's legal there to do so -- or if some other country in North Africa where it's literally illegal for you to be transgender. You're stuck in a very awkward situation in South Africa 'cause you can't change any of your details. So a lot of people go into fraud or some stuff like that to create fake IDs and it costs a lot of money, so it's not an ideal situation to be in and you see other people or even if you're from South Africa in the township who don't necessarily have access to the A) the knowledge B) the actual medical service they need. So, but then, I see other people who have it a lot easier do you know what I mean? Especially, people I've seen, you know those ones that live like in Rosebank, Fell Crest and all these fancy places whose parents have a lot of money and at the drop of a dime they can get top surgery, bottom surgery, all these hormones, and stuff. The way that the parents speak about it is, it can be frustrating at times like oh to pay for my child

> I'll just pull up R50K whereby you're here, in the middle ground, and can't afford it. I mean sure you can get access to hormones but it costs you an arm and a leg so you kind of have to work around that economically.

While Archer acknowledges the discrepancies between his experiences with gender dysphoria and transitioning and those of others, he renders denizens of townships as automatically obstructed in pursuing gender re-affirming resources, or rather that is the implication. Archer's views correlate to an awareness of privilege on the socioeconomic spectrum where affordability of medical services and easier access to resources is buttressed by superstructures within social and political institutes that historically catered mostly to Whites, while, on the other hand, restricting socioeconomic and political mobility for persons of colour. A class comparison is evoked by Archer in differentiating his 'insufficiency' to the affluence of upper classes; a Marxist overture owing to this figment of classism. A generalisation of townships is made by Archer when he collectively assumes township areas as not efficnet in rendering aid and resources to transgender persons. This supposition is universal in South African everyday talk of township as a heuristic for poverty and ascribing social malaises to areas purposely underresourced and ignoring how denizens utilise their agency in making life liveable in spaces, historically, designed to be labour camps (Coombes, 2003).

In discussing the limits of accessibility of resources, healthcare and knowledge, Camminga (2017, 2) asserts that "trans women of colour experience the most brutal response to their lived experience" wherein marginalised people, in contrast to upper and middle classes, impact access to gender affirmative technologies, especially with the recent de-pathologization of Gender Identity Disorder which makes medical coverage for marginalised groups financially difficult. In addition, Bray (2015) mentions that some medical insurances consider some gender reaffirmative technologies to be 'cosmetic' which is a consequence of the de-medicalization of gender dysphoria, and thus, makes the procuring of HRT and other treatments more difficult. As Archer quotes in an interview, relating to the relegation of gender reassignment surgeries and HRT into 'cosmetic' surgeries:

> They [medical insurances] don't see things like hormone replacement therapy and surgeries as something of a medical necessity. To quote them "we consider it purely cosmetic". If someone is in genuine mental distress like in gender

dysphoria, you should endeavour to save their lives, not just to make them look prettier or something

The interplay between race, gender, and class influences a trans person's lived experiences as posited by Husakouskaya (2013, 10) in that "the South African medical system poses particular challenges for transgender and intersex people due to the scarcity of knowledgeable professionals, the rigid understanding of gender and sexuality and discrimination based on gender identity and biological variation."

Continuing with the ethnographic scene at home affairs:

As we waited on the Home Affairs personnel to retrieve Archer's ID card, which was held in storage, Archer discussed with his mother about the medical aid coverage for breast removal surgery and how there are certain prerequisites of documentation for gender re-affirmation surgeries for medical insurance. While waiting in the warmest room since we arrived at Home Affairs, Archer commented how some kids need to be sure of undergoing gender HRT (hormone replacement treatment) lest they regret transitioning later in life which would then require de-transitioning. Ergo, gender hormone replacement therapy should happen at age 13 during the onset of puberty because then they know they are gender dysphoric as opposed to kids wanting to be treated as the opposite sex. When we finally had procured the ID card in question, Archer, his mother and I made our way home and stopped by MacDonald's on the way for a breakfast we missed in haste for Home Affairs.

In the instance of 'knowing' as indicated by Archer when referring to the certainty of wanting to transition, taking into account children being unable to provide independent, informed decisions about medical treatments, Abel (2014) asserts that when it comes to transgender health, most people would be uncomfortable in allowing a pre-pubescent minor to choose to undergo gender reaffirmative surgery, whereby, "the likelihood is too high that the child would be unable to fully comprehend the scope of a decision that carries significant, permanent consequences, particularly because the decision to surgically change gender is based upon a conception of gender that can fluctuate during adolescent years" (Abel 2014, 23).

In asking Archer about his earliest memories of experiencing gender dysphoria, in relation to Abel's (2014) observations, he responds by expressing his dismay between the incongruence of his desired gender and the feminisation process of his body during puberty:

> …It's around that age when puberty hits and when your body starts greatly differing from the opposite sex so in my case like when I was around ten when I hit puberty and that's when I developed female parts and that was when I was really fucking upset [chuckles] yeah so when I think about it when you boiling down prepuberty there's only one thing that differentiates a male pubescent is downward genitalia and nobody sees that but when you start developing things like breasts and stuff like that, it's when it usually kicks in like hell, so I used to do weird shit I used to pray that I have a penis and I was very upset. When I didn't that was the end of my whole Jesus phase, but ja it's kinda like you don't realise that was what it was until you get much older

As evidenced in Archer's account of how he experienced gender dysphoria during adolescence, the idea of the trans body as a *text* reveals how bodies are textually revealed, read, and interpreted by self and others. Archer's dysphoric language parallels an existential crisis in a Kierkegaardian motif as a "sickness unto death" (Valco 2015) citing his loss of religious faith and the angst of how his body was misread and did not conform to his felt gender. Moreover, when applying the concept of surfaces and depths in the symptomatic reading of the (trans) body as text, "the surface is associated with the superficial and deceptive, with what can be perceived without close examination and, implicitly, would turn out to be false upon closer scrutiny" (Best and Marcus 2009, 4). As such the feeling of dysphoria lies in the depths of the trans body or embodiment in how self-perception and gender expression manifest.

2.3 The chaos amidst dysphoria

The phenomenological experience of gender dysphoria presents a unique relationship between one's perceived gender in mind vis-à-vis one's biological or natal sex that may differ for each transgender person. The medical consensus operationalizes gender dysphoria as one of incongruence or cognitive dissonance as described in the clinical picture of the DSM-V. Moreover, dysphoria in adolescence,

coupled with puberty, presents a phase of confusion and uncertainty about one's (gender) identity.

Kahless' earliest experiences describe such an experience with gender dysphoria that differs from Archer's in subtlety, whereby he articulates an almost dysmorphic, amorphous dysphoria:

> I got this sense a couple of years ago uhm but earlier on I didn't have a sense of belonging to the opposite sex, I just got a sense of not belonging. I felt…I don't know, it's weird it's like sometimes I'd try to put my clothes on upside down. Like, I had a sense that something was weird about my body but I didn't know what it was.

When asked to describe the particularities of his dysphoria Kahless provides a phenomenological appraisal of the depersonalising effects of experienced dysphoria:

> It's dysphoria but like an embodied feeling, like the body doesn't belong to me so much as I don't physically feel in it. I can reason that it's mine and it can do things but just doesn't... even now I touch the back of my hand, this is weird! Like, it's almost like I took mushrooms and they started to kick in and I'm not sure if my hand has a natural colour or if it's colder or warmer, or if it should be a little bit bigger; there's something slightly off about it.

The concept of 'body-aphasia' closely relates to Kahless' experience with his search for an authentic self amidst the maelstrom of gender dysphoria. His articulation of a depersonalised dysmorphia closely relates to a sense of incompleteness derived from the dissonance between his mind and body self. Kahless later remarks:

> I've been going in-between kind of a few identifiers and I feel like the answer is something in-between all of them, it's not really any of them. So, uhm at one point I started saying "okay, I'm bisexual/bigender" and then I said: "nah I'm actually a transman" and then I thought "no, I'm actually non-binary". Uhm I think there is more than one thing to be expressed inside of me, so it's not going to end up being completely one thing. I don't think I'll ever be able to express myself completely as a man or a non-binary but I'll be somewhere. I want to be seen as male but [with the semblance of some androgyny].

As demonstrated by the shifting and uncertainty of Kahless's gender identifiers, the idea of an 'incomplete' sense of self evokes the necessity of other-selves in filling in those aspects or areas within our self-identity that we may not be able to articulate or develop substantially on our own. As such, the identity of one's gender and other social identifiers lies on a spectrum and not in binary or neat categories. Thus, the

‘incompleteness’ of selfhood promotes the exploration of ‘wholeness’ through interaction and relations with others and the possibilities brought on by the ‘incompleteness’ of others, with race, gender, and class often intersecting to affect or influence lived experiences (Lategan 2015).

2.4. Chapter conclusion

In conclusion, the intersectionality of race, gender, and class designate different lived experiences for transgender people with persons of colour experiencing more difficulty and marginalisation. In addition, the de-pathologizing or de-medicalisation of gender identity disorder has made hormone replacement therapy and other gender re-affirmative interventions pronouncedly more difficult to obtain for transgender people as most medical insurances designate these treatments as cosmetic. When utilising the concept of surfaces and depths, along with descriptive appraisals of gender dysphoria, the trans body as text serves to illustrate the surfaces and depths of how gender is read, by society, through gender specificities of apparel, gestures, voice pitch, and other such expressions that may aid or impede passing as a trans person. The ‘incompleteness’ of the self, incurred by gender dysphoria, promotes introspection and self-reflection in a way that warrants a search for a sense of coherence and stability through medical means, such as HRT and gender reassignment surgery, as well as inter-relationality, and passing as one’s desired gender which is a process that takes time and trial and error as illustrated by the flux of gender identity.

Chapter three: genres of textual hybridity

This chapter discusses the array of gender identities as permeating the spectrum of self-expression. Interdisclipnaries within biomedicine are regarded as hybrids that converge in their treatments, clinical practice and medicalised instruments in relation to transgender people. Additionally, the language of composites is used interchangeably with in recognising different sexes, namely, gonadal, chromosomal, hormonal and genital expressions. This language of sexualised components pairs with its gendered counterparts of identity. This chapter also looks at Archer's experiences and perspectives of gender transitioning and Kahless' viewpoints in intersections of race, gender and class.

The theme of textual hybridity within biomedicine relate to the requirements of gender reaffirmation as stipulated by the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act of South Africa (2013, sec. 49). This involves a cross-relation or interrelation between documentation from endocrinologists, psychologists/psychiatrists, to general practitioners to authenticate and initiate gender re-affirmation medical treatment such as HRT. Such psychological and legal assessments of gender dysphoria are often in accordance with the DSM-V as the diagnostic, medical text as well as conforming to the legal requirements for gender transitioning for transgender people (Zucker, Lawrence & Kreukels 2016, 9-10).

In the context of gender identities, gender exists on a spectrum and when permutations of gender coalesce, they become hybridised. For example, 'cisgender', 'bi-gender', and 'pan-gender', amongst others which highlight the genres of gender through experimentation with words or language. In this case, hybridity may be defined as multicultural admixture or the amalgamation of different aspects of identity (Easthope 1998, 341-342). These genres of gender are configured through prefixes as to one's gender identity, for example, *cis*- describes an alignment of gender with

biological sex*, bi* – describes gender that encompasses both masculine and feminine expressions, *pan* – describes all possible genders. On the other hand, biomedical textual genres include documents from medical professionals that confirm gender dysphoria and thus authenticate gender-reaffirmation surgeries, HRT, and medical insurance for transgender people. Therefore, such biomedical texts objectively confirm one's gender designation and are assorted through hybridized biomedical sub-genres of endocrinology, and psychology or psychiatry. Moreover, legal textual genres, accompanying gender transitioning, involve alterations to identity documents such as birth certificates, passports, ID cards, driver's licenses, financial documentation as well as educational certificates (Justia 2022). Arguably, gender markers can be applied in a myriad of textual genres from governmental (IDs and birth certificates) to medical institutes' catalogues.

3.1 Archer's experiences and perspectives on gender transitioning

To transition to one's gender submitting medical evidence of gender dysphoria is necessitated by the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act of South Africa (2003, sec. 49). For example, this includes a psychological report that authenticates hormone replacement therapy. In Archer's case, the role of social capital, through referrals from one psychologist to another, helped him locate one who specialised in gender dysphoria. In this case, social capital can be defined as "information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one's social networks, or resources associated with interpersonal relationships" (Robinson, Schmid & Siles 1999, 1-2). Cyberspace, as a communal and shared experience, is a locality in accessing forms of social capital. For Kahless, online forums bring transgender people from different walks of life to help him find solidarity and kinship amidst dysphoria. These online forums foster social capital in transactions of information, humanly anecdotal and interpersonal, and resources that may lead to better coping strategies as a trans person in broader society.

To illustrate the prerequisites for beginning gender transitioning, Archer discloses the forms of therapy he had to undergo before gaining access to hormone replacement therapy:

so the biggest thing before I went on hormones, I went on to the psychologist for psychotherapy, so that was like primary thing – you just go once a week – just to kind of have an affirmation that I will go into hormone therapy, and I will do this, I will do that. In the long run, it's easier to speak to someone about your gender dysphoria who understands it on a psychological level, and who knows what's happening to your brain and stuff. You don't feel judged, you don't get questioned. That's why I was so adamant about finding – there is a list of like finding transgender psychologists, there's a list of but everyone we phoned was busy, so someone suggested someone else and that's how we found the person I go to.

The hybridity of biomedical interventions in one's gender transitioning interweaves different specializations in order to monitor and treat one's response or reaction to HRT. The following excerpt demonstrates the biomedical intersection of endocrinology, psychology, and general medicine during Archers's hormone therapy on the 27th of June 2019:

While I was unable to accompany Archer to the endocrinologist, we did speak to some length regarding his health. So far, Archer has been responding well to HRT with no complications. Archer has had regular intervals of visiting the doctor. Six months, after starting HRT, were required for observation should medical complications arise such as weight gain and blood thickening. However, such risks do not normally occur when there is attention paid to one's health by a medical professional. Archer, while we were in his bedroom with his two pets – a rabbit and a cat – mentioned how one requires a psychologist to write a letter confirming one's gender dysphoria in order to give approval to the medical community for gender re-assignment interventions. From here on the endocrinologist and GP intervene to ensure safe HRT and other pertinent treatments for gender dysphoria. The theme of our discussion elucidates the bureaucratisation of gender in society and the biopower concerned with maintaining and regulating the body in society.

Interplays between medical experts on gender dysphoria show transactions of documents to prove and authenticate Archer's HRT and transitioning process. In this case, the sub-theme of biopower is complicit in the medical industry's regulation of citizens' bodies through cataloguing based on politicised variables like race and gender/sex, or in other words, "political control over life and living beings" through hierarchies of documentation (Nail 2016, 249). Archer's mode of existence here is empirically one of an existential self-project where he embodies his true gender as an art of his true self; like a chrysalis emerging out to a state of being and becoming, transitioning requires time and navigating spaces of the social body and the body-politic.

3.2 Intersectionality and Kahless' perspectives

The intersectionality of race and class, in accessing gender re-affirmative medical technologies, favours white populations who receive faster transitioning time than people of colour due to class differences (Camminga, 2017) and the assurances offered by medical insurance for gender transitioning and the affordability of HRT. Intersectionality theory, when applied in the context of transgender communities, asserts that a plethora of adversities creates and constitute, hand in hand, to maintain a manifold matrix of power that is anchored in, and sustained by structures of society and institutional systems (Wesp, Malcoe, Elliot & Poteat 2019, 288). A veneer of this matrix of hegemony can be found in Kahless's polemic rhetoric against cisgenderism in the following interview quote:

> At one point I was involved in a community, one for cisgenders. Cisgender people are a problem. The whole time we are doing this study on ourselves, they're sitting out there not studying themselves; transgender people all have to become experts on gender just to prove and argue they exist. Cisgender people who have trampled us under the system of gender don't even speak about gender or know what it is. It's disturbing. A cisgender person will read the results of this interview and they will not realise that that label pertains to them and that label comes with immense privilege, a privilege which is crushing marginalized people.

Cisgenderism is also embedded within a matrix that fuses or intersects race and class and produces power hierarchies that sustain institutional inequities and racialised-gendered violence, especially in the context of the pronounced marginalisation of transwomen of colour. Kahless's statement resonates with Wesp *et al*.'s (2019,288) definition of cisgenderism as the "cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates, or pathologizes, self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behaviour, expression, and community".

Kahless further states, relating to the (in)visibility of transgender people in society as well as his prognosis on the acceptability of transgender persons:

> I would like for transpeople to be more visible in society like I dunno sometimes I walk around and I'm like where, where are the transgender people? Are they all hiding, like me? Where?...

And

> in the country there is some acceptance but I think it's quite low, it's really low, there's not much discourse around it, as far as I understand people trying to change their names encounter severe difficulty doing so, but ja, I mean states rarely get behind this kind of thing because the body is a site of colonialization, if they stop colonizing us who can they exploit?

Visualised through an intersecting lens, transgender communities experience increased vulnerabilities due to structurally-created marginalized social positions that synchronise race, class, ethnicity, citizenship, sexuality, and age. Such factors enforce or influence the visibility of transgender bodies in society, as Wesp *et al*. (2019, 290) assert: "social and health inequities affect transgender populations as the result of status quo power relations produced within and between oppressive structures, institutional systems, and socio-structural processes". Such 'institutional systems' and 'oppressive structures' may refer to the time delays of name and gender marker changing, and the inconsistent application of medical requirements for transgender individuals to transition their gender, as well as transphobic encounters when accessing public healthcare.

3.3 The framing of gender

This part of the chapter addresses the role of language in priming our conceptions of gender and the semantics and semiotics inherent therein.

In the previous chapter on time/temporality, Archer mentions how HRT should be employed at the age of 13 for adolescents with gender dysphoria because by then "they know they are gender dysphoric as opposed to kids wanting to be treated as the opposite sex".

In analysis, the moniker of 'opposite' conjures a bi-polarised spectrum, an either-this-or-that way of thinking, i.e., the gender binary of male/female. I find that such language use, of binary oppositions, as hypothesized in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Paul and Kempton,1984) configures how we think about 'things'. The availability of pronouns/prepositions which may shape, limit or impede our ability to discuss or converse about how we think about gender, such as 'male' or 'female', 'he' or 'she', and the 'opposite gender or sex', in this instance, reflect gendered binary oppositionality in the English language. This relates to Archer's use of binary language

even though he is against the categorisation of people into neat boxes as with his recognition of intersex people. This becomes a vignette of cognitive dissonance instilled by the priming of language in psychologically constructing our ideas, mores, folkways around gender.

One may discern here that words are attached to identities and the labels given to these identities and identifiers are genres of language and hybridized articulation. How we talk about ourselves unintentionally or intentionally becomes who we are. The use of language is therefore important in how we present certain ideas to the world and the self. As a trans-identifying male Archer uses the word ‘opposite’, a preposition that positions him in the binary camp of thought whereas I for one find myself dispersed throughout the gendered spectrum. Experimentation with words or jargon from gender discourse such as ‘queer’, ‘cisgender’, ‘pangender’, ‘bi-gender’, ‘agender’, etc follow their sexual orientation counterparts ‘pan-sexual’, ‘bi’-sexual’, ‘a-sexual’ which are representations of literary hybrids and thus genres of identity within the biomedical and social and academic ‘texts’. The word ‘texts’ is a metaphor for objects within relevant positivistic and interpretivistic disciplines.

In the following interview excerpt, Archer demonstrates just how language frames and shapes our ideas around identity and relays what he thinks of gender as something society created:

> I think that a lot of people, especially when you’re talking about transgender people, a lot of people misconstrue gender, gender roles, and biological sex. So, biological sex is a fact, right? There’s male, and female and then you get intersex individuals, and they shouldn’t really be counted as a separate sex if you’re born with XXY YYX or whatever, because they’re not the standard, you know what I mean? And to be classified as a biological sex you basically have to be under normal circumstances create children. Most intersex people are born – because of their condition they can’t have children -- but they’re not a separate sex. Gender roles are what society expects of you, you know like clothes you’re supposed to wear, what activities that are considered normal for you to do, and then gender is kind of – I see it as the handicaps your biological sex presents to you, do you know what I mean? Like you have a lot of people that talk about the male and female brain and stuff like that; that’s biological sex. But how you behave because of your brain can be considered as gender. But gender is usually a social, or cultural construct and then biological sex is kind of irrefutable

Kahless further comments, drawing from his experiences, and with a more politicised or socio-political view of gender, mainly a critique directed at the history of

patriarchy, cisgender privilege, the social construction of race, and the hierarchies of power that govern social relations:

> People conflate gender with sex which is quite upsetting. So, for example, when I go to a doctor, or dentist or whatever, there they ask you to indicate your gender, and what they really mean is your sex, they are not interested in your gender whatsoever. For instance, when I was identifying as non-binary what would anyone do with that information?... Gender is a very interesting mess society created similar to the races they created because there is no such thing as race or gender but now society is just entrenched in these concepts which are impossible to proceed without them, without acknowledging how the concept of gender affects things, why is that we have less respect for our mothers than our fathers? Not because they're less powerful or anything like that, it's just because that's how things turned out, you know? The people with the male bodies used to be stronger, they used to drag around the one with the female bodies and raped them and do whatever they wanted and hey some of them still do, I mean Trump is president, right? Our society cannot do without gender and that is unfortunate because even when you look at the sexists it's not just there's male and female and intersex they are so many genetic variations but it's just much easier for us to think shorthand 'oh yeah, people mostly turn out like this or that' but messes out millions of people who don't fall into those categories.

Kahless provides rhetoric that demonstrates the way in which cisgender privilege, covert and overt gender (and racial) surveillance, and conservative power structures reinforce heterornomativity or hegemony that contributes to genderism, transphobia, and sexism (Kearns, Mitton-Kükner and Tompkins 2017, 3).

Referring back to biomedical genres of hybridity, examples include hospitals, fertility clinics, endocrinology practices, and other specialists/physician installations that use spectroscopes, IVF, and other pertinent medical instruments which may be considered as 'texts' of gendered or sexualized hybridity. Another example of such 'texts' lie in the biomedical language use of composites – gonadal sex, hormonal sex, and chromosomal sex which unsurprisingly medical practitioners use interchangeably with 'gender', as highlighted by my research participants. Thus, the incongruence associated with gender dysphoria and the need for authentication, confirmation, and recognition in the form of ID cards, birth certificates, and other identifying documents, configure the prerequisites to transition within the legal system. The subaltern pertains to, in this case, people of colour who seek to transition within this very legal system and who have to go to greater lengths in 'passing' successfully. Social capital, therefore, becomes more important than fiscal capital, *in degree* of influence rather

than *in kind.* This reversal of wealth is prominent in contemporary South Africa whereby previously oppressed groups have to accumulate financial wealth *first* and then social capital in order to gender transition in the private healthcare sector.

Archer's line of thinking posits that '13 years of age' is the appropriate age group to confirm whether one is 'gender dysphoric'. The confirmation lies in the biomedical genred literature of gender dysphoria derived from developmental psychology and endocrinology. Therefore, Archer assumes a more biomedical interpretation of gender dysphoria and trans identity, whereas Kahless' is more socio-political.

In the following ethnographic excerpt, taking place on the 19th June 2019, Archer, his family, and I go to Silver Stars, in Fourways in celebration of Archer's older brother's birthday, and spend a considerable amount of time searching for a suitable restaurant. Later, writing in my fieldnotes:

> *Archer makes a social comment on the class exclusivity of restaurants like this (an Italian restaurant) one that seemingly caters to more fiscally affluent customers. Gender, race, and class all converge to shape, amorphously and with metamorphosis, the individual experiences of trans-folk which Archer embodies phenomenologically. His socio-economic status as middle-middle class and his gender identity make up his idiosyncratic experiences. He does, with a deep yearning, only wish to be 'normal' and live a 'normal life like everyone else', he tells me. What Archer means is that he does not necessarily want to be a part of 'gender-talk' as academic and activist discourse but had to learn the jargon or terminology in order to 'argue' for his existence, to understand what it is that makes him feel so different and estranged. Inadvertently, he had to become an 'expert' by virtue of being a transgender person.*

The phraseology of 'his socio-economic status as a middle-middle class and his gender identity make up his idiosyncratic experiences' relates to his life history where his paternal grandparents emigrated from the UK to South Africa fleeing from economic depression during Thatcher's administration in hopes of a better life. Due to his family's socio-economic mobility, interventions such as HRT have become financially feasible for Archer especially given the lengthy diagnostic process for gender transitioning. Like Kahless, Archer acknowledges that race is interlinked with

class and is visible in South African society. The only exception is that Kahless has a more polemic and political perspective as demonstrated with his antipathy with cisgender privilege. This strongly relates to language use and how we use and think of language in configuring identities.

Furthermore, Archer comments on his desire to pass as a 'normal' person and avoid stereotypes of how transgender people are depicted in contemporary media:

> I just want to be perceived as a normal person, do you know what I mean? There's a lot of uhm – how do I say this without being judgmental? -- trans people who are really out there, and they are usually what people are exposed to in mainstream media, so when people find out you are transgender, that would be how they think you are, like you're crazy, this hardcore activist, or that you're really out there. And here I'm like pretty normal. In the grand scheme of things, I'm pretty normal and that's what I want to be perceived as.

The idea of normality, as described by Stella, Flynn & Gawlewicz (2018, 56) in their analysis of LGBTQ+ Eastern European migrants' meanings of normal, can be understood as living an ordinary life of security, stability, and dignity, which Archer alludes to. Moreover, as Rabikowska (2010, 288) expresses, "normality is always a state to come, a state projected in the future, but it is also immersed in the present from which desires and ambitions originate". In reference to Archer's avoidance of common caricatures of transgender people, public perception is influenced and informed by the mainstream media's depictions of transgender people with such representations significantly impacting the lives, experiences, and gender identity development of trans persons (McInroy & Craig 2015, 606). As a Black trans geek, my lived experiences of what is normal differ those of Archer as we, like all social bodies, are racialised, gendered and class in accordance with superstructures that inform structural and institutionalised spaces in South Africa. Therefore, our meanings of normality is conditioned by the 'everyday' familiarity of my lifeworld

Transgender people are commonly depicted as criminals, sex workers, or mentally ill which is further reinforced by the media's provision of inaccurate, prejudiced, or insufficient information about transgender people that often ignores the historical context. On the other hand, there are some positive depictions that are more sympathetic and educate the public about the medical dimension and the challenges or discrimination experienced by transgender people (Shelly, 2008 in McInroy and Craig 2015, 607).

Kahless offers an example, derived from an interview, of how some members of society conflate gender identity with sexual orientation citing his experience(s) with psychologists:

> One [psychotherapist] was okay, uhm with the therapist I'm quite well with, and she was very attentive and helped. But another therapist was not quite helpful, she conflated gender identity immediately with sexuality as in identifying as a lesbian because you're a woman. But there is a leeway in there since some non-binary people identify as lesbians but I can't comment on that because I don't identify as either.

Kahless' anecdote, though addressing the issue of being misperceived, loosely relates to the broader discrimination, stigma, and poor treatment transgender people encounter in healthcare settings due to a lack of knowledge of transgender people's health needs as well as the medical staff's lack of information or training in working with transpersons. Such marginalization includes verbal abuse, refusal of medical services, harassment, and even violence which may deter some trans-persons from accessing healthcare (UNAIDS 2014, 224). In addition, Husakouskaya (2013, 10) posits that "the South African medical system poses particular challenges for transgender and intersex people due to the scarcity of knowledgeable professionals, the rigid understanding of gender and sexuality, and discrimination based on gender identity and biological variation."

3.4 Chapter conclusion

In summary, there is a network of hybridities or genres of gender that reveal different modalities of identity, in opposition to conservative gender binarism, based on prefixes when discussing different gender identities such as cis-gender, bi-gender, pan-gender, among others. These hybrids of gender are reflected in the LGBTQ+ acronym as a spectrum one identifies throughout the development of gender identity, this especially pertains to my participants' (especially Kahless) shifting identification within this gendered spectrum during adolescence. Other hybrid forms exist within biomedicine such as the interdisciplinary specializations implicated in treating gender dysphoria and providing overall healthcare service to transgender people. These involve cross-overs between endocrinologists in monitoring hormonal fluctuations or

changes during hormone replacement therapy, to psychologists in helping gender dysphoric individuals ascertain the necessity for transitioning. The legal changes to transgender people's identity documents are numerous (driver's licenses, passports, ID cards, bank accounts, etc.) and demonstrate legislative genres accompanying gender transitioning. In addition, there are different types of sexes in biomedicine that reveal genres or hybrids of composites such as gonadal sex, chromosomal sex, hormonal sex, and genital sex. These hybridised sexes run in tandem with their social counterparts of rearing, gender roles and sexual orientation (Karkazis 2019, 1888-1889).

Harnessing participants' views on gender and sex, Archer expresses the commonplace misconstruing of gender and gender roles with biological sex and asserts that gender expression is the types of apparel one wears or the types of activities that are considered appropriate for different genders. Kahless, on the other hand, provides a more politically nuanced perspective on gender wherein hierarchies of power reinforce societal patriarchy through heteronormative expressions of gender under cisgender privilege. Expressions of normality or living a normal life, during the process of transitioning, are expressed by one of my participants, especially amidst the mainstream media's negative depictions of transgender people. Kahless' experience with an unhelpful psychologist communicates the broader theme of trans-persons' difficulty in accessing healthcare due to discrimination, misunderstanding, and a paucity of knowledgeable professionals.

Chapter Four: Geek culture and identity

The term *geek* has an unsavoury origin, one historically derived from carnival sideshows. Etymologically, *geek* originates from the English dialect of *geek* or *geck* (derived from Middle Low German) meaning fool or freak which retains this meaning in modern German (Duden, 2012). However, in recent times the term has increasingly become an endearing reference for those who demonstrate expertise in a certain field – either in the anime, film, fantasy, or gaming subgenres (Sugarbaker 1998, in McArthur 2009, 61).

In defining geekdom, the geek subculture is a social collective of technophiles and gamers with a passion for animation, fantasy and science fiction, etc., including role playing games and cosplay where people dress up as their favourite fictional characters as part of performances at conventions. Conventions are regularly held globally that promote geek culture, which is synonymous with Japan's 'otaku'(geek) and 'nerd' culture (Kaichiro & Washburn 2013 and Rogers-Whitehead 2015). Both my participants and I identify as geeks or at least resonate with some aspects of the geek subculture through a mutual appreciation of video games, science fiction and fantasy franchises such as *The Lord of The Rings, Star Wars/Star Trek*, and *Final Fantasy.* This chapter analyses the role of creative mediums in alleviating gender dysphoria within the subculture of geekdom.

4.1 Origins of participants' pseudonyms

My participants chose their pseudonyms, Archer and Kahless, from popular television series as an extension of their geek identity. For instance, Kahless's name is borrowed from *Star Trek Discovery,* from a legendary figure in the history of the militant Klingon alien race, *Kahless the Unforgettable.* Kahless stated how he tries to remember himself through fictional characters, where suspension of disbelief allows him to be acknowledged as the actual character, especially when he tries to approximate his genuine embodiment through layers of clothes. Geek subculture,

especially *Star Trek,* aids in the comprehension of the self for Kahless, hence in choosing this name and the fictional title attached to it.

On the other hand, Archer chose his name as a display of humour from the cartoon series, *Archer*, who is a fictional character similar to James Bond, characterised by his sardonic humour and comical disposition. The choice of Archer's pseudonym reflects an aspect of his character – he understands that attributing 'failure' to circumstances is not conducive to productivity; thus, humour is one mechanism to dissuade and disenthral doubt, and imbue a sense of control. It can be said that Archer's attitudes around productivity stem from his parents' generation around capitalistic productivity, a stance borne from the historic perpetuation of labour equating to the amassing of material success which spurred his family in the first place to migrate to South Africa for better economic prospects. As someone who has been childhood friends with his brother, I have learned that Archer's family initially struggled with a lack of resources. This aspect of his earlier life is reflected in his real reassigned name derived from a classic novel portraying the universal archetype of the 'Orphan'..

4.2 Self-reflection on stylistic choice

In reflecting on my stylistic choice of writing, Greek mythology is a common theme as representative of being part of the geek subculture. I explore this mythological theme in the following participant-observation excerpt on the 23rd of June 2019 describing a braai in Magaliesberg:

> *With the sunlight receding, we convene around the bonfire as if acolytes to its flame. Twilight had given way to dusk which gave way to night. Archer had fed timber to the fire which grew sentient with every handful. We had come to celebrate the name-day of our mutual friend and older brother to Archer. The land was gripped by the stranglehold of winter here in these hinterlands of farmland in Magaliesberg. As the flames explored the contours of Archer's masculinised facial features, his ginger beard blended with the amber exuded by the fire, the flames spiralled in his emerald eyes as illumination added an extra dimension to his activity – speaking passionately near the flame like a high priest to the fire and all who congregated near him. Winter may have*

invaded these lands, but the heat staved off the cold spell. The libations served at this banquet in commemoration of Archer's brother's birthday added a Bacchanalian layer as revelry ensued – amicably and mirthfully – reminiscent of Dionysian cults. The wintry zephyr carried the scent of the braaied meat on which we feasted. My friends and I, Archer, in particular, happen to fit into the geek/nerd category.

This excerpt shows how geeks celebrate. Instead of beers, we consume libations and a bonfire becomes a space to imagine other fantastical worlds like the *Harry Potter* book series or *The Elder Scrolls* video game series.

Once again, the Baroque style of my writing and allusion to mythology forms part of the narration of events that transpire in the field site. These mythological references are part of my emphasis on creative practices such as the visual arts employed by Archer, along with the more literary artworks Kahless and I use to explore aspects of our identity. Hence, the use of diaries as artefacts of self-narration or identity. The use of mythology is a reflection or projection of my interests and an extension of my identity as a literary artist. Not only that, but this highlights the development of my voice as an auto-ethnographer especially one who empathizes with my participants and relates to gender dysphoria. What this has revealed is the extension of my (transgender) being where I attempt to etherize or project my mind outward because my male body is inherently contradicts who I am therefore I cannot stay embodied. I intuit my Baroque ornate style as my embodied subjectivity of what it means for me to be androgynous; it alludes to the genre of Baroque, romanticism, or Rococo as encompassing feminine and masculine aesthetics in equanimity (Reilly and Blanco 2019). The depersonalisation and existential anxiety, as phenomenological of gender dysphoria, creates an affinity and sense of belonging between my participants and me because of common understanding, and a deep feeling of kinship. This is a glimpse into my positionality in the study and the nature of my relationships with Archer and Kahless, and a reflexive approach to the overall ethnography.

The following excerpt, extracted from my fieldnotes, briefly describes the activities Archer and I perform as part of the community of geekdom:

After we became friends, we started LANning, LANning (Local Area Network) being a PC gaming activity that connects computers on one network that does not require access to the Internet. At first, it was FPS (First-Person Shooters) like Call of Duty with our gaming clan, then we dabbled in RPGs (Role-Playing Games) and RTS (Real-Time Strategy)/Turn-based games. RPGs are usually our main genre of choice because of their versatility in creating characters we create bonds with as well as making decisions in-game that actively shape the gaming world. LAN 'spheres' or spaces often occur in either bedrooms or garages depending on how many people were there, and as such are usually planned. At the beginning of every LAN we usually copy games onto external hard drives and pass them around so that everyone has the relevant files. Sometimes when the games fail to launch, or present errors we usually trouble-shoot until we find a resolution. For example, we use the internet to find CD keys to games that require authentication. When deciding the order of games to play, a democratic consensus prevails although classics like Call of Duty or Age of Empires usually take first precedence as they represent childhood nostalgia. During interludes of breaktime we often make runs to shops to resupplies. Our interactions are usually comical, sharing inside jokes and Internet memes with music playing in the background. These types of LANs usually consist of a group of 6 or 7, including Archer and I.

The excerpted passage highlights the life history of Archer intertwined with my own and shows how shared communal spaces and closeness as neighbours contributed to initiating our friendship. Shared interests such as those found in geek culture as illustrated by choice of video game 'genres' – FPS, RTS/Turn-based, and RPGs – embeds hybridity in identity, as Nyamnjoh (2017) elaborates in his concept of 'incompleteness'. Our incompleteness as co-researchers is derived from geek culture artefacts – Japanese manga and American comics as well as video game series. In these virtual/digital spaces, designed avatars are used as players' key representations when interacting with each other (Kafai, Fields and Cook 2010, 23), often in conformity with our perceived gender and other identifiers.

4.3 Video games and avatars as doppelgangers

As a part of geek culture, avatars are considered personas of users in online or virtual environments such as Massively Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs) and other computer-generated media. According to Trepte and Reinecke (2010, 171), avatars are seen as visual representations or proxies of people, whilst Chan and Vorderer (2006), extend the definition to include avatars as characters that encompass users' identity, characteristics, and sense of belonging in virtual environments and communities. Thus, in video games like *The Sims* series, players can not only customise their avatars' appearances but also choose their characters' personality traits as well as their avatars' skills and in some MMORPGs, their ancestry and race (Trepte and Reinecke 2010, 171). The term 'avatar' has a religious origin referring to an incarnation of a deity on Earth, thus the term was re-appropriated into gaming nomenclature for the descent of users into cyberspace (Bayliss 2007, 2).

In displaying the role of avatars in expressing the fluidity of identity, Kahless, through the precarity of his shifting gender identity, expresses:

> When I did identify as a man, I did briefly explore this [video games as vehicles of gender identity] through having masculine avatars in *Stardew Valley*. They would be dressed in overalls or jeans and other work clothes for farming, mining, fishing, etc. Even though these explorations would have what I would consider gender non-conforming expression, I would often pick an unusual hair colour like teal or purple. Later I explored such expression for myself in real life and moved through non-binary identity to perhaps genderfluid or even agender, because the more I explore gender-whether through identity or expression or contemplation-the more I experience it as not just a constructed but a falsified category. It is not possible that we are just one or two things, for we are truly infinite.

As indicative of avatar creation and its simulacra, Archer, Kahless, and I use video games, and visual and literary art to imagine ourselves which also links to autogynephilia and gender dysphoria. For Kahless, especially, dressing-up helps to best approximate his fluctuating gender identity styled according to what he perceives as gender-fluid or agender. In defining autogynephilia, Blanchard (1989) describes it as a type of gender dysphoria wherein males embody, in thought or imagery, themselves as female and derive an alleviation of gender dysphoria in doing so. Often, I would imagine myself as an 'Asian woman' in mind (my Jungian anima) and try to emulate that persona and digitally embody said anima in video games through avatars.

I sometimes use this ‘empathic’ ability to ‘feel may way’ into a character at the cost of dysphoria – the embodied ‘sickness unto death’ (Stewart 1997) in my stomach – whenever conceptualising characters for my short stories . Fictional characters serve this purpose as ‘egregores’ – collective thought forms borrowed from video game franchises like *Final Fantasy* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This has personally broadened my gender and sex spectra, specifically fictosexuality.

I acknowledge that Asian women are a popularised trope in geek culture, specifically to objectification from the ‘geek’ or ‘weeabo’ gaze through racialisation of their positive and negative stereotypes. The term ‘weeabo’ refers to a [Western] person who is obsessed with Japanese culture, especially anime, often regarding it as superior to other cultures (Dictionary.com, 2023, *weeabo).* On the other hand, weeabo is contrasted with Japanophile which is a reference to someone who genuinely is interested in Japanese history, culture, and society (Merrriam-Webster, 2013, *Japanophile*). I am of the latter designation as someone who is sincerely interested in Japan, from consuming Japanese cinema to studying the language and country’s (cultural) history. Embodying my anima also relates to gender performance and performativity and the digitisation of personas, or gender reversal or swapping, through avatars, as a way of expressing and exploring identity. In addition, Konijn and Bijvank (2009) assert that in-game characters are perceived as role models or vehicles that enable players to perform their possible selves and experiment with different personalities. In the case of presenting myself as a Japanese female character in these virtual spaces, I explore aspects of my unconsciousness through a kind of hypothetical theatrical play, or simply a psychologised dramaturgy.

Moreover, I observe my present state of self through video game avatarisation as a tool of self-exploration. Similarly, Archer uses video game avatarisation to study new characters and versions of himself, specifically as muses for his digital and fine art. Fantasy games are one such avenue for original characters as Archer aspires to become a professional concept artist and work for animation studios. Surfaces and depths can be applied psychologically in how our social perceptions affect how we create characters, as artists and gamers, whereupon we assign personal meanings and project psychological or socialised attributes of ourselves into our characters. This can vary from avatars representing our gender identities or physical/psychological attributes we assign to ourselves.

I use the metaphor of ‘body as text’ (Kamler 1997) and the method of symptomatic reading to derive surface meaning and concealed meaning from ‘reading’ the body. The body, as a self-narrative text, is positioned within socio-cultural history and formed or moulded through ethnicity, race, gender and sex as well as partly construed through the historicity of the past and recreated in the present (Finney 2006, 177). Fantasy/role play suspends disbelief when we engage in performance through LANs. Impersonation is usually one technique Archer and I employ to ‘become our characters’ when playing as our avatars in video games. I will return to this dynamic later on in the ethnographic text.

To illustrate the avatarisation of my anima, as alluded to earlier, the screenshot below is a portrait of my character/avatar – GojuKannon, a *kunoichi* or female ninja, from a popular online game*, Black Desert Online (BDO);* a high fantasy South Korean-developed MMORPG heavily influenced by Korean mythology which incorporates guild, PvP (player versus player) and PvE (player versus environment) mechanics. *BDO* also allows players to focus on different aspects of the game, such as mining ore, and harvesting raw materials which one then can sell on the player-driven market thereby contributing to the in-game economy. Some players, building from those who specialise in raw resource acquisition, manufacture armour, weapons, furnishings, and clothing for other players’ characters. On the other hand, some players prefer to farm loot and better gear through raids or dungeons, which often require being a member of a guild. The game features an eclectic array of classes and a very detailed character creation system. Through such avatars, I explore different ‘guises’ of the self in cyberspaces along with other players. As GojuKannon I am thrusted into an alternate reality, a world of magic and fantasy. The term *isekai* comes to mind in describing this, an anime reference which everyday people are transported into an alternate reality or fantasy world (Yourdictionary.com, 2023, *isekai*).

Figure 1. “GojuKannon” *Black Desert Online* (Me)

4.4 Queer cinema and anime

In discussing Kahless’ other geek activities, consuming queer cinema is a means for him to explore different expressions of queerness, gender fluidity or gender non-binarism while seeking representations that he can best relate to in order to better understand his positionality as a transman or agender person embedded in the LGBTQ+ spectrum. The distinction of his geekiness resides in his extensive knowledge of queer cinema or auteur genres of film that explore the body as a site of creativity and self-exploration. As Richards (2016, 215) expresses queer cinema “represents the marginalised within the contemporary LGBT communities.” As such, queer cinema utilises the film format to communicate and make queer characters accessible to the LGBTQ+ community. Such films range from *Weekend* (2011), which challenges pre-existing stereotypes around gay men; *Pariah* (2011), which intersects race and gender in targeting Black lesbian social experiences; *and Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013), which is meta in its elucidation of the ‘male gaze’ or voyeurism of lesbian sexuality.

In analysing the historic use of the term geek and nerd, both have been used as a means to degrade and belittle intelligent outcasts – people labelled as such because of their eruditeness and overall social awkwardness (McArthur 2009, 61). On the day of Archer’s older brother’s birthday at Silver Stars on the 19th of June 2019, we

were accompanied by another mutual friend of mine whom I've known, along with Archer and his brother, since childhood to this day. The story behind our enduring friendship is one of gravitating to one another through the commonality of being gamer geeks or jokingly 'being weird together'.

The designation of 'weird' is derived from Old English *wyrd* (Merrian-Webster.com*, 2019, weird*) meaning 'destiny' which later changed in meaning progressively. Its intended use in this excerpt is to emphasize our shared and interconnected interests as friends who were *destined* to encounter each other in this lifetime. I draw parallels to mythology as part of 'destiny' to illustrate the constellations of our union and metempsychosis i.e. the interconnections. I use metempsychosis as a linguistic tool to showcase the continuity of social relations in linear temporality from 'childhood…to this day'. Incompleteness and 'composites' form identity genres and hybrids through cultural exchange. Geekdom was the pull factor that brought us together which snowballed around each other's families. Video games, anime conventions, and LAN parties were the *covalent agents that bound us together*. An example of *otaku* or geek influences is concealed in the following excerpt referring to avant-garde anime productions like *Serial Experiments Lain* and *Ghost in the Shell* – the former contains themes relevant to cyberspace whilst the latter explores Kantian concepts. These genres of anime influence our way of thinking in relation to existential questions:

> *The reason why Archer's interest in posthumanism as explored in anime like Serial Experiments Lain, Ghost in the Shell, and Ergo Proxy is so provocative is that they all question why they question and how they know what they know in order to expand their awareness or din of perception. I reflect that I too occasionally suspend my embodied human-ness and engage in fantasy play to provoke certain responses, hence role-playing and avatar creation much like Archer. What would happen if I was an avatar controlled by someone or something else? This evokes imagery of simulation theory and simulacra infused with the desire for meta-culture; a holistic synthesis of the great whole. Archer and Kahless mainly explore this 'dysphoria' in visual mediums of art whereas I, mostly, in writing and poetic prose.*

In reflecting on my gender dysphoria, I trace my line of thinking or self-reflection in the following journal excerpt:

> *Somewhere in one of my past lifetimes, I feel I was too attached to being a woman. This attachment manifests in this lifetime as gender dysphoria – the inability to fully accept my current incarnation and the desire/yearning to be born female. Indeed, I resonate so much with divine feminine energy that I often have to hide my femininity from the world in order to protect myself…The social conditioning, I underwent as a male-recognised child meant enduring the trauma of not being allowed to be my true self and thus the unravelling and dismantling of those barriers may lead to embodying more of who I am, in fact, it is necessary for my mental health. And so, I feel a great need to undergo anti-androgens, at the most, to alleviate the plight.*

As can be read, I use spiritual reasoning, such as reincarnation and karma, and the role of social conditioning in order to understand the origins of my gender dysphoria. This has resonances with African notions of queer and trans identities as incarnations of different ancestral spirits (Nyanzi 2013).

4.5 Chapter conclusion

In conclusion, the term *geek*, synonymous with *nerd*, has historically been used to belittle and insult intelligent pariahs, but in contemporary times the term has shifted to one of endearment in referring to those who share expertise in certain fields, such as anime, video games and computers. The geek subculture accords different modalities of self-expression enabled by different entertainment genres. For Archer, Kahless and I, video games allowed us to create avatars or game characters that best represented our gender identity as well as permit different personas to emerge, and possible personalities to be explored. The embodiment of these avatars in online and offline spaces aided in alleviating a modicum of gender dysphoria as they enabled the exploration of gendered trichotomies, i.e., androgyny, masculine and feminine as part of the transgender continuum. Moreover, queer cinema played a large role in Kahless's exploration of his gender identity as a transman, or even as an agender person, in seeking relatability with representations of queer, gender-fluid or

transgender people. This ethnographic chapter revealed the impact of the geek subculture in helping coordinate self-expression, gender identity and modalities of creativity for my participants and me, through video games, anime, and queer cinema.

Chapter five: Art as therapy

In this chapter, I examine the role and function of art in the lives of my participants and me along with examples of our art. Art as therapy, as this section of the ethnography will demonstrate, is a vehicle or medium through which individuals embark on creative expression, through painting, writing, or any other creative art, with the intention to externalise emotions and mediate gender dysphoria. The themes I will engage with are catharsis, artistic flow and roleplaying as forms of psychic sleuthing) in order to show how participants engage with dissonance from societal expectations and their lived experience of their gender expression. In this section, I show how sleuthing can be a creative space for exploring one's identification practices without the pressure of embodying these forms of expression. Through a careful analysis of Kahlesss art, I argue that sleuthing can be both freeing and inhibitory. The core argument of this chapter is the role of art in fostering self-awareness and contributing to personal development through sense-making.

Additionally, artistic creativity is a modality of self-expression for my participants and me, wherein gender dysphoria is partly alleviated by exploring subconscious and hidden aspects of the psyche that may yield insights into our gender identities. As such, art plays a therapeutic role in the lives of my participants in understanding and communicating gender dysphoria. As Rubin (1980, 6) emphasizes that "individuals caught in the turmoil of serious mental illness, threatened with a loss of contact with reality, have often found themselves compelled to create visual art as one way of attempting to cope with their confusion". In the context of gender dysphoria, art plays a therapeutic role in lessening the intensity of dysphoria and its cognate anxiety or angst. This implies that gender dysphoria and mental illness are aligned due to the severe anxiety and angst experienced in dysphoria but not necessarily as dysphoria may be an existential condition, that is, one of misalignment with one's true gendered self.

The methods and purposes of art therapy vary including the use of fine arts as a medium, such as painting, drawing, sculpting, and clay modelling with the intention of expressing memories, feelings, and emotions, developing new coping skills, and improving introspective skills through the process of creation based on associative

experience (Abbing *et al* 2018, 2). In this chapter, I examine the role and function of art in the lives of my participants and me along with examples of our art.

5.1 Kahless' Art

For Kahless, Archer, and I, art *as* a form of therapy better describes the function of art in our lives as we utilize techniques from art therapy for making sense of dysphoria and visualizing certain aspects of ourselves without the need for official art therapists. For example, Kahless uses the creative medium of painting to externalize his struggles with gender dysphoria and to explore his fluctuating gender identity. The following excerpt dovetails into the meaning of a painting containing his 'three personas' – masculine/androgyny/feminine – as a form of psychic sleuthing:

Figure 2. "Three Faces" (Kahless)

The oil painting depicts three faces, symbolising synergy between masculine, androgyny, and feminine. The painting features the face splitting into two with another face – more ethereal – centered in the middle. The half faces are indigo blue in colour and the middle one is goldish but almost transparent. When I asked him what the painting is about, Kahless said it represents three personalities that reside in his psyche, very much akin to having multiple personalities. He derived such an understanding through tarot card readings a little while ago. Interpretively, the painting is like a mirror reflecting Kahless' inner world and the three selves he harbours within. In our discussion of the painting he further added that the three faces represent his masculine, feminine and androgynous aspects

In observing his behaviour, and body language towards the painting, I note that Kahless cannot stop looking at it as if he is lured into it, this is an intimate and deeply personal creation. Kahless provided a walk-through about how it made him feel in the below interview response when I asked him why he paints. He referred to his synesthesia, a sensorial condition he has been living with since adolescence, immersing him in a sensorium of dysphoria:

Painting is something I took up purely because I wanted to…When I started painting I was really severely dreadful at it. I just did it purely as a form of self-expression so yeah I tended to shed sketches more than my paintings and then my paintings got good. But then I realised they can be both good AND explanatory. How about that?! My most recent piece here, I haven't been that sharp with the technical side…so, it's just freedom to, you know explore, Who am I? I can't … I can't give myself the face I run to yet. It's like I see it's there under the surface. I can only see it in the mirror here but I can start putting up symbols of it, you know? I have these images basically to reflect me back to myself… I wanted something that showed me what is inside that I'm always trying to imagine. Always trying to see it. I close my eyes and I see light patterns. Sometimes I hear a fully formed piece of music. Why?. What is inside me?!

Kahless struggles with an acute and severe sense of gender dysphoria – one worse than my own – and explores the depths of his depersonalisation or dysmorphia

through his art so as to realign himself with his inner-self. Due to the lack of HRT as a means of alleviating his anxiety, art stands in as a surrogate for this role. The above excerpt confirms findings drawn from the literature review namely art therapy. In Kahless' case, art *as* therapy is typified by the technique of 'flow' coinciding with his Aristotelian method of self-inquiry and requiring purgation/clarification/catharsis, borrowed from his postgraduate education in philosophy. When used therapeutically, art serves as a conduit to navigate and reconcile one's inner and outer realities into existential comprehension. My symbolic reading into Kahless' painting offers a vignette of his imagination where self-study is turned inward then outward unto canvas and elucidates the realm of phantasy made visceral and manipulatable through colours and the symbolism of the subject matter. He mentions three personalities that coalesce with his gendered trichotomy of the preferred pronoun when being beckoned, namely 'they' as indicative of his man/woman/they assemblage. The inner face in the middle remains a mystery but charting out his psychology through art allows him to explore aspects of his transgender identity and imaginative embodiment. The surface of the painting reads like an artifact of surrealism and phantasy and the depths reveal a *duende* – a movement of his memories and a portrait of his innermost being as a hybridized, complex transperson who uses modalities of existence and expression through the human sensorium and visual arts. In this case, the use of phantasy is apropos referring to Kahless's "wish-fulfilment arising from instinctual frustrations due to repression" (Bohleber *et al* 2015, 96) of his true gendered self. Art and dressing up aid in this expression.

The desire to externalize is evident in how paintings stand in for outward embodiment complemented by how one reasons the process. Kahless' questioning of "what is inside me?" parallels with Nyamnjoh's (2017) concept of 'incompleteness' whereby painting aids in bringing clarification and thus a sense of reconciliation as a form of completion, or at least the procession of completion and wholeness. Art is thus a form of therapy to ease dysphoria. One may reasonably argue that paintings act as a force field pulling 'discarnate parts' into wholeness.

In our discussions, Kahless uses Jungian psychology as a tool to make sense of his experience but that is not within the scope of this research project due to the plurality of anthropological discourse on the subject of archetypes. The value of using Jungian archetypes for Kahless is that they provide templated personae for him to experiment with, such as archetypes of the anima and animus, in order to do shadow

work; a nomenclature for healing the inner-child and integrate his masculine and feminine aspects (Jung, 2012). Instead, surfaces and depths work as a concept whereby the canvas itself is the 2-dimensional surface revealing his artistic style, subject matter, colour palette, and composition, whereas the depths stem from a deeper reading of the psychic tug-of-war or permutations of his shifting gender identity and the inward contestation between his femininity/masculinity and androgyny. As a co-researcher, Kahless guides the reader through his articulation and interpretation of the painting, further aiding in the symptomatic reading of his embodied experience.

5.2 Archer's Art

In informal conversations with Kahless and Archer, the topic of speech as therapy emerges especially in communicating one's embodied gender dysphoria to others. When speech is exported or incorporated into video games, impersonation of feminine and masculine voices emerges. Such impersonations, arguably, assist transpersons in modulating or training their voices to resemble the gender with which they identify as.

For example, during LAN parties, Archer and I usually play the grand strategy PC game, *Sid Meier's Civilization 6* which is based on historical figures, and extinct and extant civilizations. I almost always choose to play as Egypt with Cleopatra as the avatar who represents The New Kingdom. My avatars usually change in the types of games I play. In almost every one of them I play as female protagonists who share in common roles traditionaly considered male dominated such as leading a kingdom, as in *Civilization 6*; saving the world from the Apocalypse, as in *Tomb Raider* as Lara Croft*;* or saving the galaxy by fighting machine-alien invaders as Commander Shepard in the *Mass Effect* video game series. Archer, in contrast, experiments mostly with civilizations that have male leaders, especially the Maori headed by Kupui, or the male protagonist variants to my own. The inherent 'geek talk' or aural emulation in this is found in our impersonations where voice-acted AI leaders repeat certain phrases in-game which we emulate out of humour. An interrelation of this can be found in Kahless' commentary on voice pitch where masculine and feminine voice pitches can configure one on the gender binary which accentuates the subtleties of how we perform gender. This also resounds with olfactory gender markers such as fragranced goods including

make-up, perfumes, cologne, and apparel as heteronormativities that predicate what women and men should wear according to cultural practices.

Archer elucidates how his masculinized voice (due to ongoing HRT) affirms his gender through the medium of online voice chats using the software *Discord.* Such fluidity of voice modulation is most easily expressed or accommodated in video games where aural recognition of gender is usually the only signifier of another's gender.

In conversing about the teleology of art, for Archer, the role of art is multi-pronged or hybridized in its intent and utility, as the following interview excerpt reveals:

> Art in my life has many roles, away from any professional aspects, art acts as a way for me to express myself through my interests and unique ideas. While it can be difficult and stressful at times it also acts as a method of relaxation.

Resonating with Archer's comment, Abbing *et al* (2018) assert that art (as) therapy develops new coping skills and improves introspective skills through the process of creation based on associative experience. In Archer's case, digital art pieces, like the one in Figure 2.1, proffer a visualisation of how he perceives himself as a transgender man and so therapeutically grounds him in his gender identity in conjunction with growing as a professional artist.

Figure 3.1 “ID Test” (Archer)

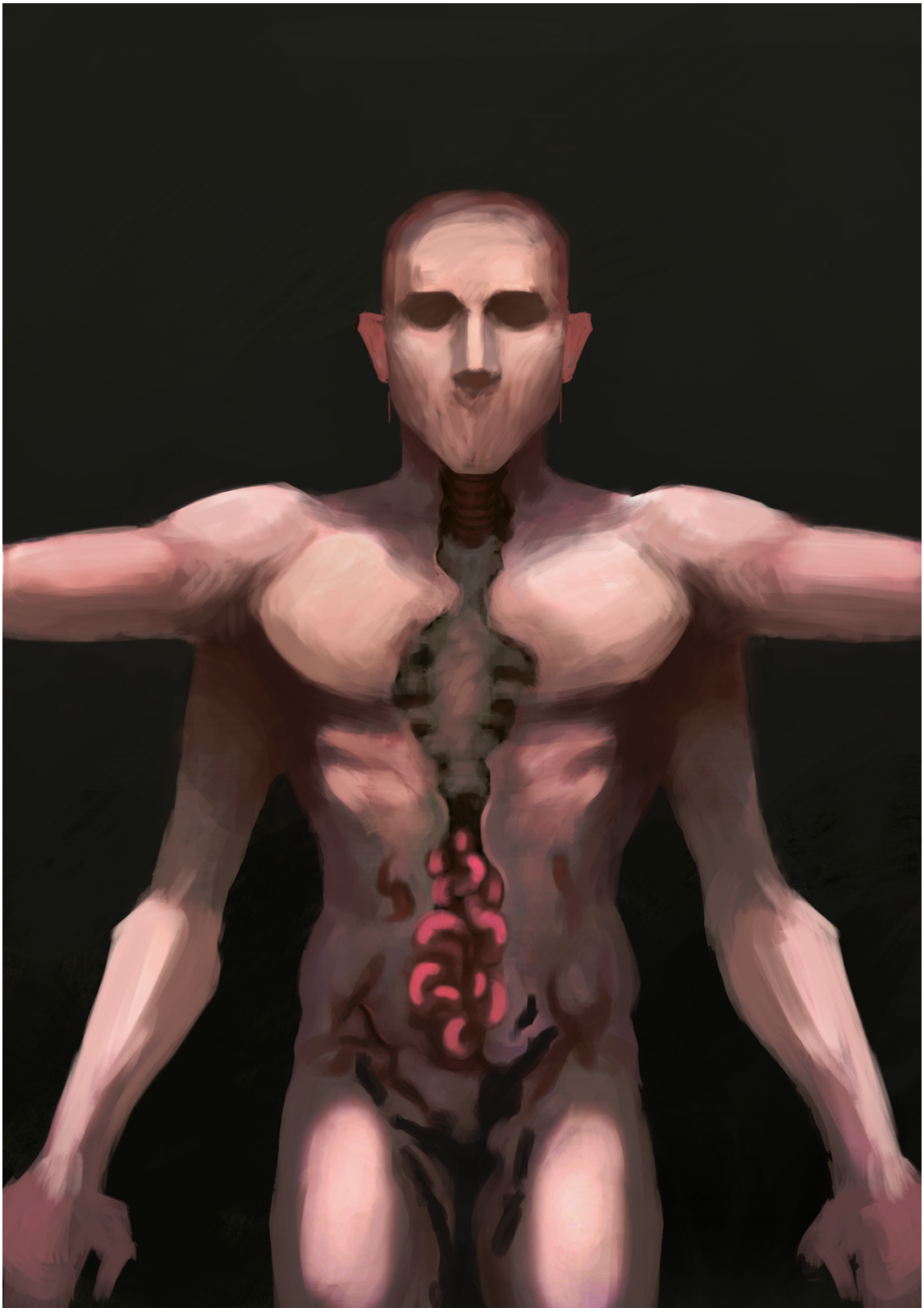

Figure 3.2 “Shitty Feelings” (Archer)

Archer further expresses, in verbatim, how art has helped give shape to how he expresses his gender identity as well as assuaging some of the felt dysphoria:

> I do explore gender identity from time to time in my art. At first, earlier in my transition it was by drawing and painting myself with a more masculine-aligned body, this helped ease my gender dysphoria at times and became essential in picturing a future for myself as a trans individual. Now whilst I still do the occasional affirming self-portrait my focus has shifted more to creating and depicting characters in different genres, some of which are transgender or are outside of the standards of gender conformity. I do explore gender identity from time to time in my art.

A synergy between art therapy and phenomenology can be identified in how art therapy emphasizes the examination of feelings through imagery, whereas phenomenology attempts to reveal the unconscious, through descriptiveness, to the surface and thus study such material as they appear (Silverman 1980). For instance, the digital painting displayed in Figure 2.2. picturesquely portrays the seat of anxiety as residing in the abdominal viscera, a site of anxiety or angst emblematic of a dysphoric embodiment. Archer, moreover, illumines how art is central to his existential life in the following interview quote:

> I often make what the Internet labels as "vent art" where I focus more on conveying the emotions behind a piece rather than focusing on any technical aspects, whilst I don't often share this type of thing with anyone it helps me deal with the emotions that often accompany my gender dysphoria. This can extend to character creation as well. Sometimes when I create characters, I like to embed a piece of myself within them and help explore emotions by putting them in different scenarios, or I like to envision how people either in the future or other different settings would deal with their transgender identity.

As illustrative of the above quote, one can say that, for Archer, digital or ‘vent art’ as well as embedding pieces of himself in his characters, is an integral project for passing in society or at least simulating said passing. Art as a vehicle for self-expression allows for the emergence of different personas and personalities when exploring one’s gender identity as Archer has alluded to.

5.3 My Art

In referring to my own creative process, I engage in ‘fan art’ illustrating my favourite video game and anime characters. This practice is also a form of sublimation harnessing my sexual energy and converting it into creative expression. The drawing below (Figure 3.3) is an illustration of the character Lightning from *Final Fantasy XIII*, a video game series made by the Japanese video game studies Square Enix which incorporates mythologies from cultures around the world in a high fantasy setting. This drawing communicates my resonance and attraction to virago characters, the term virago (archaically) denotes a woman who is heroic or warrior-like in her appearance and deeds (Merriam-Webster, 2023, *virago*) evoking historic imagery of Amazons in Greek mythology or Viking warrior-women.

Figure 3.3 “Lightning” (Me)

5.4 Chapter conclusion

In summary, art serves as a means to navigate and find compatibility between one's inner and outer realities, and when applied in psychotherapy it becomes a vehicle to address negative emotions, trauma, and anxiety, and making sense of conflicts as well as fostering personal development and improving self-awareness. Therefore, art *as* therapy is helpful in alleviating gender dysphoria, namely, in the explorations of one's unconscious and hidden aspects of the psyche, which, in Kahless' case, reveals concealed personae and integrates schisms of the psyche expressed as the trichotomy of masculine/androgyne/feminine. Whereas for Archer, art serves myriad purposes such as addressing and externalizing his embodied sense of dysphoria, for relaxation and recreation as well as expressing, through his created characters, transgender or gender non-conforming identities. The alignment into masculinity is achieved through Archer's male characters as proxies or templates to build upon his own transgender identity. Art also plays a pivotal role in catharsis, characterised by Archer as 'vent art' which seeks not technical mastery but expressing emotion and the intensity of feelings. This is evident in the visualisation of anxiety, embodied through Archer's artwork on figure 3.2. As for me, drawing is a hobby I engage with purely out of creative expression, an expression that is inspired by video games which often takes the form of fan-art within fandom.

Chapter six: Conclusion

In concluding my research study, I provide an overview of the permeating (sub-) themes that have revealed how art functions as a form of psychological sleuthing in addressing and articulating gender dysphoria. Transgender geeks have a menagerie of ways or methods in expressing their dysphoria mostly through video games and queer cinema. In such online spaces, avatars function as second selves or digitised selves often representing alignment with the person's desired bodily aspects, either through race-swapping or gender-reversal. Gender, race, and class often intersect in forming specificities of experience for transgender communities across the racialised spectrum. More so, for transgender geeks cyberspace is an arena where the likelihood of recognition from other-selves fosters a sense of belonging by connecting individuals who share similar narratives of their transgender and geek affiliation. In my case, the sub-niche around 'blerds' or Black nerds conspires a space of belonging occurring in the background of the wider Black community that otherwise perceives the combination of nerd and Black as running in contradiction with what is considered 'Blackness'. Indeed, Archer's and Kahless' experiences differ from those of mine as a Black transgender person in South Africa, a country historically segregating along racial lines. However, following post-1994 South Africa, integrated schooling has pooled a multi-ethnic and racial array of people in forming interracial friendships which is the temporal foundation of my relationship with my participants as friends. The role of art as therapeutic in alleviation gender dysphoria is a part and parcel of our everyday lives but more so as a vocation or hobby for some of us.

6.1 Concluding remarks

According to the medical community, gender dysphoria is a condition characterised by an embodied incongruence between one's natal sex and desired gender identity. Often the treatment for gender dysphoria is a combination of gender reassignment surgeries and/or hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Due to the de-medicalisation of gender dysphoria, many medical aid insurances categorise HRT and

other pertinent gender reaffirmative medical procedures as cosmetic which limits accessibility for some marginalised transgender people. Relating to marginality, the theme of the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in the broader South African context converge in predicating and situating transgender people in precarious transitioning and difficulties in passing mainly through lack of access to transgender healthcare, experiences of ill-treatment and discrimination in healthcare settings, as well as a paucity of informational resources and even violence. In discussions with research participants, the motif of normality or wanting to be perceived as normal challenges the stereotypical depictions of transgender people in the mainstream media.

The concept of surfaces and depths utilises symbolic reading of the trans body as *text*. This means that on the surface, gender is presented through apparel and appearance, i.e. what kind of clothes are considered masculine or feminine; what gestural and body languages are regarded as male or female in performance; what types of bodies are male or female. These are aspects of gender that are taken for granted in everyday social life as they are ingrained in how people configure what is 'normally' or traditionally regarded as belonging to men or women. On the other hand, in-depth reading of the trans body as text stems from the recognition that gender is internalised and socially constructed especially with hybrid forms of gender such as cisgender, bigender, pangender, genderqueer or gender-fluid, agender and transgender. The prefixes position gender orientation and complement their sexual identity counterparts, i.e. bisexual, asexual, etc. although not necessarily synchronously. Surface and depth readings of the trans body also helps to reveal or unmask the stereotypes or generalisations of gender based on grounded ideas of identity. In such cases, 'passing', as a strategic tool used by transpersons, is used in navigating social reality, in order to align with presenting and performing their embodied or desired gender. Thus, the 'body as text' entails that the self is a living, corporeal embodiment replete with social, political, and experiential meaning in a world of social vitality where lifeworlds intersect. In this instance, the trans geek body as text produces other texts that communicate dysphoria, texts that come in the format of video games, fantasy play, artworks, auteur and queer cinema and literature.

What's more, the trans body as a *text* is presented in the biomedical world through a synthesis of medical disciplines or genres such as crossovers of endocrinology, gynaecology, and psychotherapy in treating gender dysphoria.

Hybridities or composites are a part of this medicalisation seen in biologized sexes – chromosomal, gonadal, hormonal and genital. In the broader context, there are specialisations of bodies such as: The corporeal medicalised body, the legislated body, the body that is seen by the state, and the body that is read by other members of society. Germanely, the trans body is overdetermined by time and the experience of waiting as a part of the process of gender reaffirmative transitioning. In a sense, transpersons, while waiting for their new gender markers and names in IDs, and physiological changes during HRT, wait for recognition of their true gender from others, wait for completeness as transmen and transwomen, and wait for a sense of normalcy in their everyday lives where their gender is not in question.

Regarding geekdom in trans experiences of embodiment, the virtual body as shown in video games, represents or serves as a proxy for different types of play and performance. The element of choice in avatar customisation reflects forms of self-representation unmoored from non-virtual life where the virtual body is read by others which configures the nature of social transactions in co-play. Thenceforth, race and gender reversal, and other forms of social identification are experimented with in presentations of one's personae and personalities which illustrates a dimension in how virtual worlds collide with nonvirtual worlds. Video games present different forms of sociality such as guilds which bring different gamers together to challenge difficult parts of the game, to PvP (player versus player) which allows players to compete with one another based on skill and mastery.

In referring to art, the process of painting or writing acts textually where one can read depths. Art making is self-driven therapy and resolves an aspect of dysphoria, i.e. the chaos it creates in the mind which can be sorted or organised through externalising the emotions and feelings gender dysphoria creates. In the case of avatars, creating characters as proxies of us is a form of autogynephilia or autoandrogyny which, simply, is the process of psychologically embodying one's desired or true gender. In virtual spaces, playing as one's avatar and socially interacting with other people allows for instances where the self can be perceived as is. Both participants treat their relationship with art as purely one of artistic creation with the alleviation of gender dysphoria as an accompaniment but altogether complemented by avatarisation in cyberspace. It has been found, through ethnographic and narrative analysis that the therapeutic value of art lessens the impact of gender dysphoria for my research participants with its utility being diverse from self-

expression and exploring possible selves, to increasing self-awareness. This is how art-making offers trans geeks more agency/different forms of agency over their bodies.

6.2 Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study mostly consist of a paucity of perspectives and data from transpersons of colour as both the research participants are white transmen, both middle-class South Africans, and so their experiences with identifying as transgender differ from transpersons who have experienced discrimination, violence, and other transphobic behaviour in healthcare and public settings. Additionally, due to my closeness to the participants as my friends, there is a chance for researcher bias which, however, I have attempted to minimise through autoethnography and self-reflection when analysing field notes and interviews. My positionality as a Black transgender-identifying person meant that my experiences with living with gender dysphoria differed from that of my white participants in the way that my presence or existence in general social spaces is marked with vulnerability, precarity, and marginalisation especially when race, class, ethnicity, and other social positions, intersect in influencing or shaping how my body is read or reacted to. The research has also indicated that both participants treat their relationship with art as purely one of artistic creation with the alleviation of gender dysphoria as an accompaniment but altogether complemented by avatarisation in cyberspace. It has been found, through ethnographic and narrative analysis that the therapeutic value of art lessens the impact of gender dysphoria for the research participants with its utility being diverse from self-expression and exploring possible selves, to increasing self-awareness.

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