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Exploring Experiences of Gender Euphoria for Transgender and Gender Diverse Individuals

by

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### **Abstract**

Transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals have experiences that are varied and complex, including that of gender euphoria. Gender euphoria refers to the joy, peace, or comfort of living as one's gender and can involve internal and social factors. To date, there is little research exploring gender euphoria, particularly the in-depth accounts of the experience. A narrative inquiry, an approach which centres the lived experience and knowledge people hold, was employed to explore gender euphoria for three TGD people of colour. Their narrative accounts are presented, as well as narrative threads that resonated: cultural (inter)connections, representation and role models, community and support, and the use of metaphors to articulate and represent one's experience of gender euphoria. To conclude, an exploration of recommendations and ways forward for counsellors, research, community, and policy will be provided.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Narrative Beginning

*Tomorrow when the farm boys find this  
freak of nature, they will wrap his body  
in newspaper and carry him to the museum.*

*But tonight he is alive and in the north  
field with his mother. It is a perfect  
summer evening: the moon rising over  
the orchard, the wind in the grass. And  
as he stares into the sky, there are  
twice as many stars as usual.*

- *Two-Headed Calf* by Laura Gilpin (2017)

In this narrative beginning, I wanted to start with the *Two-Headed Calf* to illustrate my experience and perspectives that are central to my being – as a person, psychologist, researcher. This poem feels like an appropriate entrance into the work as it resonates with my personal philosophies and with how I, and so many others, feel when we navigate the world. I recognize that there may be many interpretations of poem, as it is an art form that welcomes such interpretations. I interpret this poem to mean that there is nothing inherently wrong with us; it is the external voices and pressures that make us feel wrong. And what we may be told is wrong or “unnatural” – two heads, for instance – can in fact be a gift. When I read this poem, it also gives me a sense of nostalgia and hope. I find myself reconnecting with old feelings, one where I navigated the world with simplicity and enjoyment, not yet so heavily influenced by external voices. This poem also gives the promise of possibility; the possibility of reclaiming these parts of ourselves, what we already have and what we already know. We can return to a place of knowing and seeing the gifts that we possess. We felt it once, and we can feel it again.

As I have been immersed in the process of writing this dissertation, I have grappled with many things, including how to start. It is a great responsibility to put forth and represent the experiences of the participants in this study, but also my own which I often keep private. I often find I lack the ability to articulate myself well, and so I frequently turn to the words of others when I fall short.

Much of my personal, research, and counselling work involves “digging deep” and finding the person that disappeared amidst the pressure of conformity and sameness. When I both reflect on my own story and the stories of others, there is often nostalgia when thinking about the days that are long gone; times when there was a comfort or sense of peace or untainted joy that somehow got lost. The cumulation of all the judgments, exploitation, criticism, and disdain often makes one lose sight of what makes us unique, different, and just *us*.

And yet, this “difference” is a gift that allows us to see things in beautiful ways. Unfortunately, sometimes this gift gets lost or forgotten over time. Sometimes we are forced to see the constellations that others see. Sometimes we get to a point where we do not see all the stars that we used to. Or sometimes we stop looking at the sky altogether. I think we owe it to ourselves and to each other to help uncover some of what was lost and bring it back to life.

I thought again of this poem during a recent conversation. I was questioning myself and feeling weighed down by the voices of others. Regarding my identities, I told this person that I sometimes think I am “making it up” or that I have an “avoidant” disposition and so I am unable to live in a way considered “normal.” She asked me if this was me talking, or if these are the voices of others. I was struck by the irony of the situation, as this is something I have said to my own clients who have been questioning the validity of their identities. It also struck me how persistent these external voices can be – the ones that tell me I am wrong, odd, stubborn,

avoidant, disappointing – and how far I have moved from recognizing what *feels* right for me. Afterwards, they pulled out some cards and asked me which one stood out to me the most. A few interested me – ones that said, *Begin again*, *Trust* – but one hit home so deeply: *Permission*. The picture was of doors opening, dozens of little dots pouring through, and the sun on the other side. I told them that I so often feel I do not have permission to be me, that the external voices and pressures keep me stuck. She asked me, “what can you give yourself permission to do? To be?” It was a question to reflect on, not have an answer to. But as she asked me this, I thought of the little two-headed calf; I can give myself permission to see what has always been there and to quiet those outside voices. I also thought of this research, and how so many trans and gender diverse people are told they cannot and should not feel joy. Perhaps this research is one way – however big or small or anything in between – that we can start to give ourselves permission and know that we are *allowed* to feel joy in ourselves.

In honouring experience and holding it close, I will lay the groundwork for this study. In this introduction, I highlight some of the existing literature and experiences expressed within it, language considerations, the significance of this research, and my own positionality. Each area will be discussed in further detail in subsequent chapters.

### **Language**

Growing up in Hungary, the concept of gender was not something that ever truly crossed my mind. The language is perfectly gender-neutral, which means that it was never an issue to correct assumptions in conversation or run the risk of getting a pronoun wrong. Really, the only time gender came up in life was when my father would sigh, “Oh, my son. My daughter. My whatever,” to express light-hearted disappointment. I don’t think

he ever realised how spot on he was, because he did end up with three children: a son, a daughter, and a “whatever” (Dale, 2021, p. 82).

Language and the way we describe experience varies from person to person, and across cultures. Given that this dissertation is, of course, written in English, a language which often draws upon nouns/labels and gendered pronouns, and participants explored their stories in English, it is important to discuss language. Therefore, to begin, I will delve into language and terminology that are relevant to this research. Language is particularly important as this is often how we express our experiences and stories, and convey our knowledge. Exploring terminology will help provide a common ground for articulating and exploring these experiences. Certainly, experiences and stories can be expressed in many ways, but as words as central to the stories expressed in this dissertation, it is important to delve into it. Further, it is important to differentiate experience, stories, and narratives. An experience is something that occurs and something which provides us with knowledge. A story is often a person’s account of the experience, knowledge, or other phenomena. Stories can involve additional meaning and interpretation, and are influenced by the storyteller, as well as the time, place, and the relationship in which the story is being told (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Narratives are broader and can involve overarching tones or messages conveyed from a story or stories about people or peoples.

Regarding specific terminology, *transgender*, broadly, describes someone whose gender identity (personal sense and/or experience of one’s gender) does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth (GLAAD, 2007). It is an umbrella term that encompasses transwomen, transmen, non-binary, and genderqueer (e.g., genderfluid), among other terms that capture the identities of those who do not identify as cisgender (i.e., those whose gender identity and

assigned sex align). The term used to speak more broadly to the experiences of transgender people is *transgender and gender diverse* (TGD). The word *queer* can also be used as an umbrella term for 2SLGBTQIA+ (Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, etc.) people. Since these terms are broad enough to encompass the experiences of transgender people, this dissertation will use TGD and queer throughout. *Two-Spirit* is also an umbrella term, specifically to refer to the experiences and identities of Indigenous 2SLGBTQIA+ people. People may express their gender in various ways, including physical appearance (e.g., hair, clothes, makeup), behaviours, mannerisms, voice, and so on. Expression is personal and depends on what fits for the individual.

*Gender dysphoria* is also often discussed when exploring the experiences of transgender people. Gender dysphoria refers to the distress or unease due to a mismatch or misalignment between gender identity and assigned sex at birth and/or with how they are socialized based on assigned sex<sup>1</sup>. Gender dysphoria is a common, but not essential or universal, experience for transgender individuals. Conversely, gender congruence is the alignment of one's outward gender expression and internal gender identity. Similarly, gender euphoria, which will be discussed further, refers to the joy, comfort, neutrality, or peace of living, or the thought of living, in alignment with one's gender identity. Domínguez (2024) provided a definition of gender euphoria, "pleasure-based meaning-making process that is often attributed to gender identity, gender expression, and gendered individual and social experiences" (p. 1). Domínguez further noted that gender euphoria emerged as a way to challenge traditional, pathologizing narratives of the experiences of transgender people, and reflects an empowering experience. Further,

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<sup>1</sup> Gender dysphoria is included as a diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) to replace Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the previous addition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Domínguez described gender euphoria as a movement; one that signifies a future in which the joy in one's gender is normalized, celebrated, and supported. A similar term that is often used is *trans joy*; this may be used interchangeably with gender euphoria, or it may be used to refer to the joy of holding the identity of a transgender person (Westbrook & Shuster, 2023). Westbrook and Shuster also noted that embracing trans joy improves well-being and connection, and, importantly, described it as a form of resistance against singular, deficit-based narratives.

To address gender dysphoria and facilitate the exploration of one's gender and the ways in which one can experience gender congruence or euphoria people may seek gender affirming interventions and expression. Gender affirmation is the process by which TGD people explore and integrate ways of experiencing gender congruence or euphoria; these processes can include medical (e.g., hormone therapy, surgical procedures, voice training), legal (e.g., name change), and social (e.g., using their pronouns and name publicly/in certain social settings, clothing) factors.

It is also important to consider terms such as transphobia and cisnormativity due to their impact on the experiences of TGD individuals and communities. Transphobia refers to the prejudiced beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and systems that work against TGD people. Recently, the term *transmisia* is being used instead since “phobia” refers to fear, while “misia” refers to hatred, and therefore *transmisia* more accurately refers to the discrimination and harmful attitudes towards TGD people (Planned Parenthood, 2024). Cisnormativity refers to the societal and cultural belief that being cisgender is the norm, and positions TGD people as “other” or “deviating” from this norm (LGBTQ+ Primary Hub, n.d.). It is similar to binarism, which is the belief that there are only two genders and dismisses and erases the identities of non-binary people (Planned Parenthood, 2024). As will be discussed in the literature, these issues of

transmisia and cisnormativity impact the experiences and spaces of TGD people and communities.

In this brief overview of language, it is important to understand that “labels” or terms may be meaningful and validating for some, but it is not necessary for everyone to have a word for their experience. For some, it may be freeing to not have to label their experience or identity. It is also worth noting that, in the English language, these terms are often nouns that represent identities. In some languages and cultures, including Cree and Siksika (Blackfoot), gender (or Two-Spirit) is defined, conceptualized, or understood as a way of being or an action that is done, versus an identity (Filice, 2023). In addition, in English, we have gendered pronouns (e.g., she/her), whereas many other languages, such as Persian and Tagalog, are gender neutral in that they do not have gendered pronouns, but rather neutral pronouns. Points around the cultural significance of language will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, as it emerged for some participants as a way of conceptualizing and articulating their experiences of gender and gender euphoria.

### **Narratives of TGD Individuals and Communities**

Much of the existing literature exploring the experiences of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals has focused on mental health challenges, pathology, and general negative outcomes or experiences (e.g., increased rates of suicide; e.g., Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016; Moagi et al., 2021). While it is very important to consider these factors, it is also important that narratives do not solely focus on pathologizing and deficit-based stories. Furthermore, it is important to situate these negative experiences, such as mental health challenges, within larger systems (e.g., institutionalized transmisia, discrimination, barriers to employment and housing). It is critical that we – as a community, at a societal level, in the field

of psychology and research – expand our view and hold space for multiple experiences since there is growing evidence that gender euphoria is a significant experience and counter-story for TGD people. In addition, existing literature (e.g., Budge et al., 2013) has advocated for future research to consider gender euphoria and identified it as a critical missing piece in understanding the complexities and nuances of the lived experiences of TGD folks.

### **Research Problem**

While it is important to attend to and validate challenging experiences and provide supports for these challenges, it is also important to acknowledge and highlight the complexities and layers of experience. Much of the existing research has focused on mental health concerns, dysphoria, trauma, violence, and suicidality (e.g., Klemmer et al., 2018; Lev, 2013; Rodríguez-Madera et al., 2017; Witcomb et al., 2018). It is important to acknowledge that not every TGD person has these experiences, and that it is possible to experience some/all of these *and* experience moments of joy, contentment, and peace. Gender euphoria has emerged as an alternative and additional narrative regarding the experiences of TGD people. Gender euphoria is a highly personal experience that can refer to joy, comfort, and contentment with one's gender; alleviation and/or absence of gender dysphoria (i.e., the distress or unease from the disconnect between assigned sex at birth and gender); and has various layers, including internal, social, collective, and contextual (e.g., how gender is defined and viewed within a person's culture; Austin et al., 2022; Jacobsen & Devor, 2022; Skelton et al., 2024; Tacit, 2020). Research on experiences of gender euphoria is still in the early stages, and so little is known about the unique and personal experience of this phenomenon. More specifically, there is no research exploring the stories of people's unique experiences of gender euphoria, and the potential role of layered, intersecting social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality orientation etc.) in these experiences.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Research**

The purpose of this research was to explore and gain a deeper understanding of gender euphoria for TGD individuals. With this purpose, I explored the following research question: *How do transgender and gender diverse people understand and experience gender euphoria?* I used narrative inquiry to explore and address this research question. In narrative inquiry, the narrative accounts of each participant are considered and valued to make space for experiences to be explored. Three participants who identified as TGD participated in this study. I facilitated four semi-structured and open-ended interviews with each participant. Participants were asked about their life stories, experiences of gender euphoria, and the interconnection of various identities as it pertains to gender euphoria.

To date, the literature on the experiences of TGD individuals has been largely negative and focused on pathologizing their lives and experiences. This form of telling and centering pathology can create and lead to a deficit storytelling wherein these partial stories contribute to continued marginalization and denigration. More research is emerging that is exploring positive aspects of being transgender; however, research inquiring into gender euphoria is notably sparse. The research investigating gender euphoria has, thus far, been exploratory and sought to provide general definitions and broad understandings of the concept, which are a critical foundation in this topic area. To my knowledge, no research to date has conducted an in-depth exploration of the experiences of gender euphoria with TGD individuals. Research that delves into gender euphoria, and the meaning and significance it holds for TGD individuals, is critical. Exploring gender euphoria is a strengths-based, hopeful approach, versus deficit-based, when in an appropriate context. Given that much of the existing research has provided extensive evidence for potential concerns TGD people may face, it is important that the next step considers what and

how more hopeful experiences can be explored and fostered. Doing so challenges existing deficit-based narratives and demonstrates possibilities and positive futures for TGD folks. Therefore, the proposed study will contribute to a knowledge gap in the gender euphoria literature by exploring personal stories and the unique factors that contribute to this experience.

### **Positionality**

I was originally introduced to the term “gender euphoria” in my master’s research, where one of my participants expressed hope that research would begin to explore this experience for TGD folks (Lefebvre, 2020). I began exploring the literature and found very few articles at the time. It is exciting that there is much more research on gender euphoria now than there was then as this indicates a shift in a promising direction.

Throughout this dissertation, I will integrate aspects of positionality in line with the personal, storied, and experiential nature of narrative inquiry. Specifically, I will discuss my experiences in relation to what participants mentioned, in addition to reflections on personal reactions and experiences expressed in my research journal. I will weave in my own identities and experiences where appropriate. But, to begin, it is important to note the significant presence of gender in both my personal and professional life. In research, I explore people’s experiences of gender and the influence of various systemic and cultural factors. In counselling practice, I work from a feminist and systemic orientation to consider the various ways in which gender and other identities are connected to a person’s experiences and self-concept, as well as how people have interacted with them based on these identities. Personally, I am strongly aligned with feminism (broadly, the belief in and advocating for political, economic, and social equality; Brunell & Burket, 2024), and gender is something which I have spent much time exploring for myself. This exploration has brought about feelings of confusion, denial, contentment, and peace.

I would describe myself as both a social constructionist and constructivist in that I believe we create meaning, “artifacts” (constructs), and understanding through our interactions with each other, and we learn from said interactions. As humans, we are not meant to exist in isolation, and we also make meaning of our lives and experiences through our interactions with others. As such, I found that I resonated with narrative inquiry due to its positioning of experience and the relational sharing of stories at the forefront (Caine et al., 2020). I also have a great love of stories, whether told to me directly by someone, or through the pages of a book. Stories challenge and broaden my mind, contributing to my growth as a person. When someone shares a story with me, it feels like a gift, and I similarly feel a deep sense of gratitude when I share a personal story with another person and they treat it with respect. In my own experiences, I have found a great power and respect in this type of interaction, and it is therefore something I wanted to bring into this research.

In terms of my own awareness of gender, it is constantly changing as I learn and grow and is something that I hold close. In fact, I would say I experience euphoria when I can hold it close – when I can define for myself what it means, what it looks like, and how it feels. It is currently like a baby bird – growing, developing, and not quite ready to hatch and be exposed to the world. And I find this is also a part of storytelling – the parts that are not told, those pieces that the teller wants to keep private, to save for a future story. It is also about the time and the place, and about respect for my own stories. And, like that little two-headed calf, I want to look at the moon and stars a little longer, to live in the safety of the field a little longer, shielded from the prying eyes of the outside world.

### Chapter Summary

In this Introduction chapter, I have reviewed the background of this research project, gaps in the existing literature, and the significance of this research. In Chapter Two, I examine the literature on the experiences of transgender people, including the articles exploring the experience of gender euphoria. In Chapter Three, I describe the study's method, theoretical foundations, and process of the research. Chapter Four will include each participant's narrative account of gender euphoria, as well as the narrative threads from across participants' experiences. Lastly, Chapter Five will discuss the research findings, implications, and recommendations.

It is my hope that those who read through this dissertation, or any publication or presentation based on it, that the spirit of reflection, meaning making, and openness be kept in mind; there is no expectation to have a perfect understanding as such a thing is arguably impossible. It is a space to wonder and challenge ourselves, and so I hope those who read this can enjoy the journey of exploration and amazement as much as I did.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

...I have thought a lot about the importance of celebrating the fact that stories of transition are not all just about doom and gloom, as much as it may sometimes feel that way. I've experienced countless moments of elation, pride, confidence, freedom and ecstasy as a direct result of my coming out as a trans woman the better part of a decade ago, and I know I am not alone (Dale, 2021, p. 3).

Honouring the ontological commitment to experience in narrative inquiry, this section will begin with experience. Specifically, the research on the experiences of TGD people, and particularly why a sole focus on pathology and negative experiences can be harmful, is explored. The existing research on the experiences of gender euphoria will also be discussed. This discussion of experience will be followed by an overview of relevant theories to detail the histories of research with TGD people thus far. Throughout, I will also identify gaps in the literature and how the proposed study will contribute uniquely to the growing body of research with transgender individuals.

### **Research with TGD People**

Existing literature often emphasizes that transgender individuals experience a variety of mental health concerns (Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016; McCann, 2015), including depression, suicidal ideation (Budge et al., 2013), eating disorders (Gordon et al., 2015), and gender dysphoria (Lev, 2013). Supportive counselling, hormone therapy, high self-esteem, and social support can be protective factors against the aforementioned mental health concerns; however, not all transgender people have access to or experience these (Witcomb et al., 2018). Furthermore, transgender people also often experience discrimination and violence on the basis of their gender at alarming rates (e.g., Bradford et al., 2013; Rodriguez-Madera et al., 2016),

indicating a strong need for better support of transgender people, as well as structural and societal change.

Transgender people also frequently experience discrimination and barriers in medical care, housing, education, and employment (e.g., Bradford et al., 2013; Factor & Rothblum, 2007; Winter et al., 2016). For example, when comparing transgender individuals and their cisgender siblings, transgender people were far more likely to experience discrimination and violence, and in general, received less support from family members (Factor & Rothblum, 2007). Bradford et al. (2013) further explored discrimination based on intersecting identities, such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES), and these factors were associated with even less access to support and healthcare. Winter et al. (2016) illustrated that the discrimination and barriers transgender individuals face perpetuates a cycle that further marginalizes transgender people. For example, transgender people are less likely to seek support in the future when they experience discrimination in healthcare settings.

It is important to consider a broad context for the mental health concerns of transgender people. Though societal attitudes towards transgender people appear to be improving, in large part due to greater awareness and less emphasis, and less need, for strict gender roles (Hackimer et al., 2021), the discrimination and violence they face remains very real. Such discrimination and violence are often related to mental health concerns and greater overall distress (e.g., Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016; Klemmer et al., 2018). The (gender) minority stress model helps conceptualize this (Hidalgo et al., 2019; Meyer, 2003). The minority stress perspective posits that individuals who are marginalized by society often experience distress and mental health concerns at a greater rate than those of the dominant group due to experiences of oppression and stigmatization. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated that social rejection, anticipation of

rejection (Rood et al., 2016), and misgendering (McLemore, 2018), contributed to greater mental distress. In addition, when transgender people experience barriers to social support, basic needs, and community, their well-being and perceptions of their health is negatively impacted (Griffin et al., 2019). Therefore, rather than situating distress within the individuals, the literature should be interpreted within a larger scope of an oppressive environment.

### **Shifting Perspectives**

It is important to consider and validate these harmful experiences, including that of dysphoria and depression; however, singular narratives such as these often paint a very negative, pathologizing, and medicalized image of transgender people and their lives. Koenig (2011), for instance, stated, “the ‘medical model’ is the understanding of trans identity as a psychological condition – Gender Identity Disorder (‘GID’) – that requires medical treatment...” (p. 619). Koenig went on to describe the harmful consequences of this medical, deficit-based model, wherein the “requirements” for transgender people (e.g., diagnoses, approval from psychologists to access gender-affirming services) are detrimental to their well-being and ability to live as themselves. Though GID is no longer in the DSM-V, the medical view holds great power and overlooks the diversity of the transgender community. For instance, cisnormative narratives influence this medical model and advocate for transgender individuals to transition in certain ways at certain times (e.g., requiring them to live as their gender before being given “permission” to access services, requiring proof of certain procedures to change one’s name, only providing two gender options). Those who do not wish to follow this path are often seen as “deviant.” In addition, the medical model is constricting in that it requires medical interventions, but those procedures are often costly and have long wait times. Thus, an individual’s transition, and often their suffering, is frequently prolonged due to barriers in accessing gender-affirming

procedures. Often, the medical model asks transgender people to “prove” their identity and distress to provide a case as to why they need certain services. If they are not considered “distressed” enough, they will not be able to access services that could greatly and positively influence their well-being. Conversely, if they are *too* distressed, they will not be deemed psychologically well enough to access certain services, such as surgical intervention (Koenig, 2011).

Therefore, it is important to also explore other narratives and experiences of being transgender. In doing so, the intent is not to dismiss or diminish the challenges transgender people may face, but to acknowledge that multiple narratives exist – within societies, communities, and individuals – and it is important to make space for ones that highlight the strengths and positive experiences of the transgender community. Riggle et al. (2011) similarly acknowledged this needed shift. They explored what transgender people viewed as the positive aspects of being transgender. Several themes emerged, including confidence and congruence with the self, improved interpersonal relationships, resilience, and open-mindedness. Singh and McKelroy (2011), similarly, found that transgender people are resourceful and resilient, including after traumatic life events. In addition to the many strengths, Koenig (2011) explored the stories of several transgender individuals, with consideration of the medical and legal factors involved. They acknowledged that many transgender people may not receive a diagnosis or approval from a psychologist. This is because transgender people may not want to detail their distress or childhood experiences, or they may not “fit” certain criteria, despite their desire to receive gender-affirming procedures. These are aspects that are not frequently discussed in dominant societal narratives about the transgender community; therefore, research should draw attention to significant, and often overlooked, experiences.

### **Gender-Affirming Care (GAC)**

As briefly discussed in the introduction gender-affirming care refers to the processes by which a person explores or works towards experiencing a sense of comfort or joy in their gender (Restar, 2023). This may involve medical surgeries (e.g., Djordjevic & Purohit, 2023), hormone therapy, physical expression (e.g., clothing, hair), and so on.

There are countless studies that have demonstrated the mental, physical, and social benefits to receiving GAC, repeatedly demonstrating the necessity of affirming care. For example, Tordoff et al.'s (2022) study on the mental health outcomes in transgender youth (ages 13-20) demonstrated that participants had 60% lower odds of experiencing moderate or severe depression and 73% lower odds of experiencing suicidality a year following GAC. Gender affirmation and affirming care can foster experiences of gender euphoria which have a significant impact on the wellbeing of transgender people.

In a systematic review of research exploring the connection between hormone therapy and mental health and quality of life of transgender people, it was found that gender-affirming hormone therapy increased quality of life, and decreased depression and anxiety across age groups and gender identities (Baker et al., 2021). Similarly, another found improvements in emotional well-being and social functioning, as well as a decrease in gender dysphoria following gender-affirming hormone therapy (Foster-Skewis et al., 2021). For youth, similar effects have been found with one review demonstrating that gender-affirming hormones are associated with improved mental health and overall quality of life (Mahfouda et al., 2019; Tordoff et al., 2022). A longitudinal study examined the long-term effects of gender-affirming hormone therapy and found a significant decrease in depressive symptoms over time (Aldridge et al., 2021). All of these studies indicate the benefits to receiving gender-affirming hormone therapy.

There is also evidence that demonstrates the benefits of various gender-affirming surgical interventions when it aligns with the individual's personal transition goals. For example, in a survey of 27,715 TGD people, Almazan and Keuroghlian (2021) found that gender-affirming surgery was associated with lower psychological distress and suicidal ideation, compared to TGD people who did not receive gender affirming surgery. Similarly, in another large study of 3,135 TGD individuals diagnosed with gender dysphoria, Kilmer et al. (2024) found that those who received gender-affirming surgery showed significant decreases in depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and attempts, and substance abuse. Finally, a systematic review of fifty-three studies examining the effects of gender-affirming surgeries on well-being demonstrated that gender-affirming surgeries lead to a decrease in depression, anxiety, suicide attempts, and gender dysphoria (Swan et al., 2021). The researchers also found that TGD individuals who received gender-affirming surgery had higher quality of life, life satisfaction, and happiness. Although studies exploring the effects of gender-affirming medical care indicate significant and important findings, it is also important to note that many of the authors stated that there is also a social and interpersonal component, as well as a need for societal, systemic, political, and cultural shifts, to better support TGD people and communities.

In terms of the social component to gender affirmation, being correctly gendered by others is often experienced as validating as gender identity is being recognized. In Sevelius' (2013) study, they explored the experiences of transgender women of colour specifically in relation to gender affirmation and found that gender affirmation was a key source of social support, and that psychological distress, oppression, and threats to one's identity increased the need for affirmation. In addition, Marx et al.'s (2023) study exploring the experience of transgender and gender-expansive (TGE) youth of colour found that parental gender-identity-

specific support (e.g., using correct name and pronouns, educating themselves) was connected to the youth's well-being.

Given the current climate, particularly in Alberta, and the increasingly politicized nature of GAC, it is necessary to foreground and problematize these tensions in this dissertation. Many opponents to GAC, particularly for youth, reference negative outcomes of gender affirmation. It is certainly important to consider potential medical side effects following gender affirming procedures, such as hematomas, but researchers note that these side effects are the exceptions, not the norm (Bekisz et al., 2022; Ferrin et al., 2024). Articles on potential complications are published to provide feedback and future directions for improving GAC, not to prevent care altogether. It is also worth noting that these procedures are continually being improved and post-surgery protocols are being perfected as evidence grows.

Regarding mental health outcomes of gender affirming procedures, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of positive outcomes following affirmative care. Several reviews, including those listed above, have demonstrated benefits of GAC including decreased depression, suicidality, substance use, and gender dysphoria (e.g., Tordoff et al., 2022; Shelemy et al., 2024), and increased well-being, gender congruence, and interpersonal functioning (e.g., Doyle et al., 2023; Tordoff et al., 2022). Shelemy (2024) and Doyle et al. (2023) note that there are some inconsistencies in the literature in terms of findings, and that the next step for GAC research is to emphasize rigour and larger sample sizes. Many studies have been conducted looking at the effectiveness of GAC, and this had led to the opportunity to conduct systematic reviews. Following these reviews and the recommendations provided, researchers can fill in the gaps identified to improve quality of GAC and add to the growing body of evidence for these interventions.

In addition, many articles that question the benefits of GAC cite the prevalence of suicidal ideation and completed suicides as evidence of lack of effectiveness of gender affirming interventions (e.g., Levine, 2023). However, it is important to consider the pervasive discrimination and minority stress that transgender individuals experience. Evidence suggests that gender affirming procedures improve mental health and congruence as it relates to gender, and that continuing mental health concerns and suicidality should be considered within the context of systemic transmissia (Jackson, 2023). In addition, Jackson (2023), states that there are many additional factors to consider in suicidality, include comorbid disorders, substance use, and risk-enhancing and reducing factors, and that it is difficult to directly link suicidality to gender affirming care. It is also important to note that Levine (2023), whose article states there is a lack of evidence for the benefits of GAC, is an opponent of GAC, particularly for youth, and holds harmful perspectives, including anti-trans beliefs, support of conversion therapy, and the belief that gender diversity is a product of mental health concerns. He has further sought to deny transgender youth and prisoners the right to access gender affirming care (James, 2024). When considering the literature opposing or questioning GAC, it is important to consider the positionality of the researchers.

In sum, the literature suggests that GAC is beneficial for transgender individuals. There is still progress to be made, both in terms of perfecting the affirming procedures and conducting additional rigorous research, but the existing research is strongly in support of GAC. The research has also demonstrated that there are multiple factors involved in gender affirmation, including medical and social components. In addition, it is important to consider broader cultural factors at play, including access to gender affirming care, systemic transmissia, and so on.

In this literature review, I have tried to provide a balanced perspective; however, it is important to note that, when reviewing the literature on the outcomes of gender affirming care, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates the benefits of said interventions. In addition, I actively had to search for research that indicates no effects or negative effects of gender affirming care as it is not the norm in the existing literature. Therefore, it is important that we consider gender affirming care as well rounded and support the diversity of experiences of affirmation and euphoria that can and do exist.

### **Gender Euphoria**

Research exploring gender euphoria for transgender individuals is still in its nascent stages, with most research emerging within the last few years. Even in the short time in which I have begun this dissertation process, several studies have emerged. In addition, there are two key books that have been published in recent years – *Gender Euphoria* (Dale, 2021) and *Gender Magic* (McDaniel, 2023) – which demonstrate the growing attention and value that is being placed on gender euphoria. Interestingly, another recent advancement has been the development of the Gender Euphoria Scale (GES; Blacklock et al., 2024). This scale was developed through deductive (e.g., previous research) and inductive (e.g., expert feedback, focus groups with trans individuals) methods. It has also been through pilot testing with trans participants who are part of the TRANSform longitudinal study. The intention of the GES is to better explore, understand, and examine the likely relationship between gender euphoria and gender affirming care (e.g., surgery, hormones). As this scale has only recently been published, the likely next step is for research to test and explore its use.

Furthermore, in the recently published book, *Euphoria in Gender, Sex, and Sexuality Variations* (2023), Jones provided the following definition of gender euphoria:

“Gender Euphorias”—though poorly established in theoretical or empirical research literature — can in practice be used especially by transgender and gender diverse (TGD) people to describe metaphoric or somatic positive feelings and excitement about oneself, one’s body, and/ or one’s gender identity or gender. Euphorias are sometimes discussed in relation to ‘dysphorias’—feelings of distress around incongruences between one’s experienced or expressed gender, and assigned gender. (2023, p. 3).

In recent years, significant studies on gender euphoria have emerged. Bradford et al. (2021) explored the experiences of transgender participants following gender affirming procedures. The authors surveyed transfeminine (transgender person who identifies as feminine) adults who received hair removal procedures. They found that receiving these procedures lead participants to experience greater overall well-being, including decreased distress. The authors defined gender euphoria as “increased subjective well-being associated with gender affirmation” (p. 635). Gender euphoria has often been discussed with gender affirmation as the procedures or behaviours help transgender people feel more aligned with their gender (Cleveland Clinic, 2022), which, in turn, allows transgender individuals to feel a greater sense of gender congruence (i.e., feeling that their body matches their gender identity) and body satisfaction (Jones et al., 2019). Similarly, Ashley and Ells (2018) discussed the importance of gender-affirming procedures, specifically facial feminization surgery, for transgender people. They advocate for accessibility of gender-affirming procedures and challenge the misconception that these procedures are simply “creative transfigurations” (p. 24) for aesthetic reasons. Rather, Ashley and Ells emphasize that gender-affirming procedures are critical for decreasing gender dysphoria and supporting transgender people’s experiences of gender euphoria. Furthermore, they discuss the harm of gatekeeping and the medical regulation of transgender people, similar to Koenig’s (2011) article.

Beischel et al. (2021) explored people's understanding and experience of gender euphoria. Online qualitative surveys were sent to 47 participants (cisgender, transgender, agender, etc.) who had heard of gender euphoria and their responses were categorized into themes, including defining gender euphoria as the joy of living as one's gender and experiencing gender euphoria externally (e.g., physical presentation), internally (e.g., the feeling of connection to one's gender), and socially (e.g., being correctly gendered; Tacit, 2020). Beischel et al. (2021) noted that their study was exploratory and sought to better understand and define gender euphoria, and they acknowledged that it was a highly personal and unique experience. Potter's (2024) thesis noted similar findings in that gender euphoria is a multi-faceted experience, with internal and external factors. Importantly, Potter also found that, for their participants, gender euphoria was connected to a more positive outlook on the future. In Austin et al.'s (2022) study, photo elicitation interviewing was used to explore gender euphoria for 30 transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals. Participants shared several photos that represented their experiences of gender euphoria and discussed them further during an interview. Using grounded theory, Austin et al. (2022) noted the process by which participants came to experience gender euphoria: 1) being exposed to a gender-affirming antecedent, 2) having an affirming thought, 3) feeling a positive emotion (i.e., emotional response to gender-affirming experiences), and 4) experiencing enhanced quality of life. The findings highlight that gender euphoria can occur in several ways, including externally through gender affirmation and internally by feeling the connection to their body and their gender. Notably, the researchers also found that experiencing gender euphoria had immensely positive effects for participants' overall well-being and quality of life, indicating that gender euphoria is significant for the positive well-being of transgender people.

Another key study by Reisner et al. (2023) conducted a large-scale study with 2,165 TGD individuals who received care at community health centres. Over a third of participants reported experiencing gender euphoria (i.e., endorsing “strongly agree” on scale items related to gender euphoria). Other factors were also correlated with experiences of gender euphoria – participants who were Black had higher reports of gender euphoria compared to White participants, and transgender women and nonbinary individuals had higher reports compared to transgender men. Experiencing gender euphoria was also related to a lower levels of gender dysphoria and higher resilience. Reisner et al.’s (2023) study also reiterated that, while gender euphoria can be an absence or alleviation of dysphoria, for many it is not simply the opposite of gender dysphoria (Beischel et al., 2022). In addition, their study, along with others (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022), highlighted gender euphoria as an area that is as important, if not more important, than gender dysphoria when considering the care of TGD individuals. One participant, Higgs, stated,

Euphoria tends to be the rule instead of the exception. Like the exception is the bad hard things that are part of transness, and most of the time, 99% of the time, I am so elated and happy to be trans and nonbinary. And I think that’s the rule for most trans people I talk to, at any stage. Like the early stages are pretty rough because self-discovery is rough, but there’s always this undercurrent of joy and love and self-love and love of others that is fundamental to what being trans is for me and for a lot of people that I talk to. And I don’t think people get that (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022, p. 131).

Furthermore, a study exploring gender euphoria among Australian trans youth (Skelton et al., 2024) found that gender euphoria can emerge from “self-understanding, receiving affirming medical care, close interpersonal relationships, and interactions with people in the

broader community” (p. 470). Their study highlights the importance of social support and connection in fostering a sense of gender euphoria. In another Australian study, Grant et al. (2024) surveyed 1,359 trans adults and found that experiencing gender euphoria was connected to access to gender-affirming care, and those who were experiencing gender euphoria reported lower levels of psychological distress and suicidal ideation. Interestingly, they also found that gender euphoria was connected to other identities and factors (e.g., sexual orientation, residential location), highlighting the complexities and intersectional nature of gender euphoria.

These research studies demonstrate that gender euphoria is a significant experience for many transgender people, and there is still more to be understood about this phenomenon. Given that their research has shown the positive potential of gender euphoria and its effects on well-being, it is critical for researchers to gather rich and meaningful accounts. Beischel et al. (2021) noted that there is little research on gender euphoria and the experiences of gender euphoria for transgender people are still largely unclear and lacking in depth and richness. Furthermore, Beischel et al. (2021) and Austin et al. (2022) suggest that it will be beneficial for future research to gather data from a variety of sources – or “field texts,” as in narrative inquiry – such as interviews, journals, photographs, and other art forms, to illustrate the experience of gender euphoria. Beischel went on to highlight that gender euphoria is complex and involves physical, social, contextual, and psychological components that are unique to each person and, generally, cannot be given a universal definition. Skelton et al. (2024) stated that future research should involve interviews that specifically ask about gender euphoria and provide flexibility and openness for diverse experiences. In addition, they stated that future research should consider intersectionality, with consideration of how a person’s other identities intersect and relate to their experiences of gender euphoria. Similarly, Reisner et al.’s study (2023) recommended that future

research utilize an intersectional framework to demonstrate the interconnection between gender and various other identities. Domínguez (2024) further stated that research on gender euphoria is currently lacking in consideration to cultural, social, and political context, which are all important factors in the experience of gender euphoria. Thus, researchers should explore these individual experiences in-depth and with consideration of multiple factors, given that gender euphoria is a complex and personal phenomenon.

### **Relevant Theories**

Following the discussion of the experiences of TGD people above, I will now explore existing theories and the foundational work that these theories have provided. Central to narrative inquiry is the understanding that knowledge and experience are storied in nature (Clandinin & Caine, 2013) – they have a past, present, and future – and so an exploration of existing theories will demonstrate the communication of research thus far and lay the groundwork for the use of narrative inquiry. Time, or temporality (Clandinin, 2007), is a component of story and narrative, and, as such, stories of trans experience and treatment have historical, social, and contextual aspects that provide context for this dissertation. Existing theories have already told certain stories, including the stories of those who are transgender, and so it is important to acknowledge the stories that have come before. In addition, existing theories have made some stories more “tellable” and accessible than others. Some stories that are more “acceptable” as they are in line with dominant discourses tend to receive more attention and credence than others. Rather than using the theories to inform or dictate the findings of this study (i.e., establishing a conceptual framework for the study), an exploration of these theories is for the purpose of outlining the existing literature and its connection to this research. In other words, this exploration for theories is to establish a narrative landscape upon which I have sought to

conduct trans positive research that explores the diversity, individuality, and fluidity of gender. Doing so will provide context and elucidate the historical changes in research and theories that have informed the existing literature prior to this project. A brief overview of the key elements and principles of each theory is provided, rather than a comprehensive overview. Each theory has its own detailed history and stories that is beyond the scope of this literature review.

### **Critical Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory was initially developed to prioritize the voices and experiences of women in a traditional, male-dominated society. Feminist scholars seek to criticize systemic and institutional structures of oppression, devaluation, and exploitation of women (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). Feminist theory has and continues to change and adapt over time and across contexts, depending on the needs and emerging issues in feminist movements. In recent years, with the emergence of fourth-wave feminism, feminist theory has grown to incorporate the connection of gender to other identities, such as ethnicity and religion. In addition, feminist theory is typically understood to be social constructionist in nature and views gender – and therefore oppression based on gender – as something we are socialized into. In a study by Nagoshi et al. (2012) that explored perceptions of gender and sexuality among transgender people from a feminist lens, participants echoed this central point to feminist theory, with one stating,

I identify as gender queer, it's the closest thing I can find that can really identify me.

Some days I feel more male, some days I feel more female, but for the most part I feel I'm really neither or both ... I feel it's such a socially-constructed thing, and I feel that it's not something that's as stable as a personality, I feel like it's always changing with every year, I feel like I'm becoming more of who I am. (p. 415)

Critical feminist theory extends feminist theory by centering intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and recognizing the multi-layered nature of oppression and identity. Geisinger (2011) highlighted the key components of critical feminist theory: (a) gender oppression is normative and prevalent, (b) challenging gender oppression and norms is essential, (c) social justice, (d) women's experiences are varied and critical for social change, (e) intersectionality is central, (f) context is important in understanding issues, and (g) critical feminist theory is interdisciplinary in nature.

Singh et al. (2013) emphasized that feminist theory lends well to research with transgender communities. Specifically, they noted that feminist-oriented participatory action research can empower transgender individuals and address the needs of the community. The authors noted the importance of intersectionality as it relates to privilege and oppression (for both the researchers and communities), humility, and understanding histories as important in conducting feminist research with transgender communities. The authors also highlighted that the focus of advocacy and social change in feminist theory lends well to research with transgender individuals.

### **(Critical) Social Justice Theory**

Similar to critical feminist theory, social justice theory focuses on relevant contextual issues and seeks to facilitate social change. Specifically, social justice has been defined as:

... a state of affairs (either actual or ideal) in which (a) benefits and burdens in society are dispersed in accordance with some allocation principle (or set of principles); (b) procedures, norms, and rules that govern political and other forms of decision making preserve the basic rights, liberties, and entitlements of individuals and groups; and (c) human beings (and perhaps other species) are treated with dignity and respect not only by

authorities but also by other relevant social actors, including fellow citizens. (Jost & Kay, 2010, p. 1122)

This definition speaks to distributive, procedural, and interactional justice, respectively, and social justice research must therefore incorporate at least one of these components. Specifically, social justice theory incorporates various identities and social circumstances (e.g., financial security), as well as the intersections between these components. The goal of social justice theory, and social justice more broadly, is to strive for social equality and lessen social disparities, oppression, and discrimination. Critical social justice theory brings to light power dynamics, and scholars engage in critical reflection of harmful social structures (McGibbon & Lukeman, 2019). Critical perspectives posit that research is political and the political climate is interwoven with a person or community's experience, thus critical social justice research is inherently political.

Wesp et al. (2019) developed Intersectionality Research for Transgender Health Justice (IRTHJ), a framework that integrates intersectionality and social justice to guide research with the goal of benefiting the transgender community. This framework centres consideration of intersecting identities and power relations, the importance of disrupting the status quo, and "center embodied knowledge" (p. 287). As is the intention with my dissertation, inquiring into and disrupting the status quo is important; the status quo maintains power imbalances and social inequities, as well as maintains normative or dominant narratives that do not fit for everyone. Wesp et al. (2019) state that the pathologization of transgender identities and the positioning of transgender people as unwell is a dominant narrative that reinforces and maintains power imbalances within the status quo. Indeed, Sevelius' (2013) study highlighted factors of intersectionality and societal norms, and found that structural racism and sexism imposed

harmful norms on transgender women of colour. In addition, in Morgan Brooks' (2022) dissertation, they used critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) to explore research that used critical social justice theory with transgender populations. Brooks noted that, common to the studies they found, was the importance of attending to power, acknowledging and highlighting complexity and intersectionality in experience, and working towards social change. From this investigation into critical social justice literature, Brooks proposed the Web of Transformative Trans Resilience Research (WTTRR) model which integrates social justice action and liberation work to conduct research that is empowering and leads to social change for transgender people. Therefore, in sum, critical social justice theory research with transgender individuals works to address societal norms, integrate intersectionality into research, and disrupt harmful narratives and power imbalances that exist to the detriment of transgender communities.

### **Queer Theory**

Queer theory was developed in the early 1990s in response to traditional, heteronormative and cisnormative approaches to and perspectives of research, as well as advocacy movements of the time (Minton, 1997). Queer theory emerged from the intertwining of queer and feminist scholars (e.g., Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990), as well as Foucault's (1978) conceptualizations of power. Power, as Foucault stated, is relational and ever-present; he posited that it is not possible to be entirely *free* from power and so *resistance* to negative uses and forms of power is central. Queer theory was thus positioned as a resistance to homophobia and transphobia, as well as heteronormativity and cisnormativity. These systemic issues have emerged from power imbalances and often harmful uses of power by systems and certain privileged individuals and communities, and so resistance against the structures is important. Its goal is to reclaim the narratives about queer folks, rather than having heterosexual and/or

cisgender people make claims or put forth false and/or harmful narratives about the queer community (Riggs & Treharne, 2017).

Queer theory is frequently understood as social constructivist in nature and criticizes social constructivism and the essentialist view of gender and sexuality. In other words, queer theory rejects the view that gender is binary, and that heterosexuality is the “default” or “natural” sexuality. Rather, in queer theory, the perspective is that heteronormativity and cisnormativity are rooted in cultural socialization. Queer theory has been described as flexible and constantly changing depending on societal needs and political movements. Judith Butler (1993) stated that “queer” should not be “fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (p. 228).

### **Transgender Theory**

Transgender theory seeks to integrate feminist and queer theories with activism and practice. It draws upon the fluidity and non-essentialist views of feminist and queer theories and puts the experiences of transgender individuals at the forefront. As Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) stated,

Transgender theory encompasses and transcends feminist and queer theory by explicitly incorporating ideas of the fluidly embodied, socially constructed, and self-constructed aspects of social identity, along with the dynamic interaction and integration of these aspects of identity within the narratives of lived experiences. (p. 432)

Queer theory, and often critical feminist theory, operate using a social constructivist perspective in which both reject the essentialist views of the gender binary and focus on the significance of socialization and culture. Transgender theory scholars agree, to an extent. Transgender theory posits that an essentialist biological view of gender (i.e., that certain physical traits are connected

to gender) is problematic and harmful to transgender people. Transgender theory scholars also emphasize that gender can be experienced through the body. For example, Tauchert (2002) highlighted the tendency of Western society to separate the mind and the body, with the mind holding more power (i.e., identity). Instead, Tauchert suggested that there is continuity between the mind and the body in terms of the gender identity and experience. Though the mind is often given greater attention and importance, the mind needs a body in order to navigate and perceive the world. Knowledge for how to live is therefore embodied and the sense making of the mind is reflected in embodied experience. This is certainly the case for gender. Our gender – and how others gender us, whether correct or not – influences how we interact and navigate the world. Our bodies are often representations of our inner experiences, and also allows us to perceive the world in a way that becomes stored in our minds. As such, this cyclical relationship – environment, mind, body – influences and is influenced by gender.

Taken together, Transgender Theory incorporates the “fluid, embodied, and socially and self-constructed” (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 437) aspects of gender, as well as other intersecting identities. In a follow-up paper, Nagoshi et al. (2023) explore the role of embodiment in gender and sexual fluidity, intersectionality, barriers to gender affirming care, ethical consideration in research with and care of transgender individuals, and policy issues within the context of transgender theory. The goal of transgender theory is, therefore, to improve our understanding of gender, privilege the experiences and stories of transgender people, and translate this information into practice.

In sum, these theories comprise an ongoing history of research with TGD people. They have provided stories and foundations to explore these stories and experiences. In addition, the

research with TGD people that has been done has provided insights into what constitutes respectful and considerate research with TGD communities.

### **Qualities of Trans Positive Research**

To extend the theoretical discussion further, in this section, I will explore important qualities of trans positive research based on the existing literature and perspectives of transgender people. Historically, much research, including and especially psychological research, has failed to respectfully articulate the experiences of transgender people or has explicitly harmed the transgender community.

As previously mentioned, being transgender has, and still is, often pathologized and medicalized, and this is the dominant story that is often heard and presented about TGD individuals (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015). In previous editions of the DSM, the term “gender identity disorder” was used as a diagnostic label for transgender individuals experiencing distress. This diagnosis was problematic as it considered the *identity* as the pathological and problematic component. The DSM-5 has revised this label to “gender dysphoria” which focuses more on the distress of being assigned a gender that does not align with them (APA, 2013). Though this is a shift in a positive direction, many transgender people do not want to be given a diagnosis to receive support as it serves to further stigmatize them and pathologize their experience (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015). Therefore, researchers conducting trans positive research need to be respectful of this perspective; participation in research studies should neither be dependent on nor prioritize diagnoses (unless it is central to the participants’ experience), but rather their self-identification as a transgender person. In addition, pathology should not be the dominant narrative of transgender people as a whole as this further stigmatizes the community and frequently translates into healthcare practices (e.g., transphobia in healthcare, lack of access to services). An

individual may position themselves or frame their experiences from a lens of pathology if this is particularly relevant to them at that moment in their life and/or in their narrative of their experience; such experiences should be honoured and respected. And, it is also important that this is not the only narrative about them and of TGD people as a whole. TGD are complex and multi-storied, and holding this perspective allows for their varied and diverse experiences to be heard.

Second, it is important for trans positive research to shift away from perspectives of gender as biologically innate, binary, and determined by physical appearance (APA Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance, 2009). This includes shifting away from the centrality of cis-normative and heteronormative narratives of gender. For example, participants in Jacobsen and Devor's (2022) study expressed the sense of freedom in moving out of cis-normative and heteronormative "scripts" It is important to offer alternatives to traditional, conventional, and dominant stories about what genders look like or how one should act in accordance with their gender. Researchers should seek to avoid oppressing people further by not confining participants to specific forms of expression and roles. Transgender people also should not be "studied" for their "deviance" from norms of cis and heteronormativity. Rather, researchers to seek ways to collaborate with participants in ways that honour and respect their voices and experiences.

Similarly, it is important for researchers to understand that gender is complex and often fluid. As discussed in transgender theory, one's experience of gender is multi-faceted. People may experience gender both mentally (as an identity) and physically (e.g., through physical presentation). There are also socially constructed elements of gender, such as prescribed roles and associated physical attributes (APA Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance, 2009). People construct their own gender and expression depending on their preferences and

comfortability. Therefore, researchers should respect the complexities of gender and should not dismiss or oppose individuals' identities or expressions.

It is critical for research to avoid being exploitative in nature, particularly when working with marginalized populations. In some research, participants may feel studied like “specimens” or investigated because of their “deviance” from societal norms. It is important not to frame trans research in such a way (Bauer et al., 2019). Research should be conducted with hopes of facilitating positive change and supporting the community with whom they work. One such way of ensuring this is to focus on the research relationships. Researchers should aim to engage in more ethical, sustaining research relationships and connections centered on building trust and interacting genuinely with the community. Research may, at times, not be applicable, relevant, or pressing for communities and so it is important for research to reflect the needs of the community. This could involve improving access to needed services, shifting societal narratives, or addressing policies.

The research relationship, in addition to the previous point, should also involve active listening (particularly in qualitative research), self-reflection, and transparency with participants. The relationship should be based on respect and collaboration (APA Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance, 2009). The research should also be co-constructed – drawing upon the participants' personal expertise and experience as well as the researchers' expertise in the research process and method.

Another key component of trans positive research is ensuring that the findings of the research are aligned with and representative of the participants' experiences (APA Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance, 2009; Bauer et al., 2019). Participants should feel comfortable with the stories, findings, and/or conclusions of the research. Again, the participants'

stories should be honoured, and the researchers should utilize their own research expertise to present and disseminate the results appropriately. The research is therefore a collaborative process that honours the expertise both participants bring to the relationship.

In sum, research on the experiences of TGD individuals has typically been deficit-focused, as well as centering narratives of pathology. In recent years, the amount of research exploring positive and more hopeful experiences, such as resilience and gender euphoria are emerging. In addition, researchers, particularly those who have investigated gender euphoria, have advocated for more in-depth exploration, with greater consideration of intersectionalities (e.g., Austin et al., 2022) which is missing from the literature. Therefore, the proposed study will contribute to the sparsely researched area of gender euphoria by exploring the following research question: *How do transgender people understand and experience gender euphoria?*

### **Chapter 3: Research Design**

In this study, I explored the lives and experiences of gender euphoria for three TGD individuals. In this chapter, I discuss the method used in this research (narrative inquiry), the theoretical foundations of narrative inquiry, ethical considerations within this research, and the procedure through which the research was conducted.

#### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a relational and experiential approach to qualitative research and is grounded in the idea that experience is a storied phenomenon (Clandinin 2014; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, knowledge is constructed, co-constructed, acquired, shared, and modified relationally through stories. In narrative inquiry, researchers inquire into participants' experiences and explore the knowledge gained from experience to explore the meaning embedded within it and beyond. The goal of narrative inquiry is not to search for an objective truth or generalizable outcome, but rather to explore individual experience as it relates to given phenomena and encourage reflection for the participants, researchers, and audience (Bell, 2002). In the case of this research, the phenomenon is the experience of gender euphoria.

Narrative inquiry is a context-bound and relational research approach. As a result, narrative inquiry researchers value experience as a legitimate site of knowledge (Dewey, 1938) and story as a portal into the world of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In narrative inquiry, stories that are lived and told within the research process are an invitation to engage with experience in ways that open spaces for reflection and critical thinking. Narrative inquiry is an opportunity to identify, explore, and confront singular narratives as well as our biases and assumptions. For these reasons, narrative inquiry aligns well for exploring experiences of gender euphoria.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings of Narrative Inquiry**

Personal experiences are at the heart of narrative inquiry, and these experiences are told through stories. Further, knowledge in narrative inquiry is believed to come from experience. In this sense, people *are* knowledge, and they share this knowledge through stories of their experiences (Clandinin, 2014). In “traditional” research, a theory or theories is selected at the outset and is used to interpret participants’ experiences. In narrative inquiry, researchers begin with experience, and theory can be used to think alongside participants and their stories. This is to avoid reducing participants’ experiences or forcing their stories to fit within specific narratives or perspectives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The phenomenological and epistemological orientations are important to narrative inquiry and how it is conducted; however, pre-existing theories (e.g., minority stress model, queer theory, etc.) are not necessarily used at the outset to avoid skewing participants’ stories in a particular direction. There is value to using theory to guide certain types of research and enable the telling of certain stories. However, theory can also constrain stories or allow certain stories to slip through the cracks (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Some stories are less explored and given less attention because they do not fit with theoretical guidelines or dominant narratives. Theory has typically been used in this way: theory becomes the source of knowledge, and people’s actions are interpreted within the theory’s particular way of looking at the world. Rather than using theory to think about and interpret people’s experiences, narrative inquiry considers theory as a story to think *with* or *alongside* people and their stories if it is deemed appropriate and relevant (Clandinin, 2014). Narrative inquirers, therefore, begin with experience as told through stories instead of a theory (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Theory, in narrative inquiry, co-exists with the stories shared, rather than dictating or informing them.

With regards to the contextual and relational nature of experience and knowledge (ontology and epistemology), John Dewey, a pragmatist and educational reformist, has perhaps had the greatest influence on narrative inquiry. In Deweyan philosophy (1938), experience is central and understood to be heavily influenced by and connected to context and relationships. Experience, and thus the knowledge that comes from experience, is contextual (Dewey, 1938). This means that participants' experiences are influenced by the context in which the experience occurred, events that preceded and succeeded the experience, and the context in which the story of the experience is shared (i.e., with the researcher). Dewey also emphasized two intertwined criterion for experience: continuity and interaction. Due to the complexities and nature of experience, narrative inquiry researchers, informed by a Deweyan perspective, understand that stories, experience, and people are continuous and always in the midst (Caine et al., 2022; Dewey, 1938). In other words, people are not "finished" their experiences or journeys, but rather continue to experience, negotiate, tell, and retell their stories. As stated in Caine et al.'s (2022) text,

In [Dewey's] view of experience, there is always a sense that life in in the midst, that experience is always evolving and that experience builds upon experience. Experience, then, is something always in the making, being shaped and reshaped over time as new situations are encountered. Experience is neither fixed nor certain. (p. 15)

Related to Dewey's position of the contextual nature of knowledge and experience is also *how* and *what* stories are shared with *whom* (i.e., with me and subsequently the readers). Stories may be shared and told differently depending on who the story is being told to (i.e., the audience). The same story can be told a thousand different ways, and one version is not more important or better than another. Because of this, it is important to consider the context in which the story is

shared. In addition, the interaction component of experience discusses the “objective and internal conditions of an experience” (Caine et al., 2022, pp. 20-21). This aspect also involves a consideration of the “objective conditions” (e.g., context, environment, what is occurring) and the person (e.g., individual desires, hopes, needs, wants, tensions, views, and so on) and the interaction between these components.

In terms of theory, narrative inquiry sometimes receives the criticism of being too atheoretical. “Good” research is often thought to be centered on a theoretical framework to interpret the data and meet several criteria (Yadav, 2021). However, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) stated, “... experience is “the fundamental ontological category from which all inquiry—narrative or otherwise—proceeds” (p. 39). Narrative inquirers acknowledge that life experiences do not exist in isolation, nor do they necessarily have a clear beginning and a clear end. Rather, narrative inquirers understand that people are always *in the midst* of experience – a key touchstone in narrative inquiry. As Caine et al. (2019) stated, a Deweyan approach (1938) focuses on the interactional nature of knowledge and stories, wherein people think, share, and respond, all within a particular context (e.g., physical environment, social and cultural context). Narrative inquiry, in this way, is therefore an active process that requires engagement with the participant and in the field. This has implications for the positioning of stories – of participants, researcher, research – and, given the active nature of narrative inquiry, it is important for researchers to position, frame, and tell stories in a wholistic (versus fragmented) way.

Another key component of the ontology of narrative inquiry is the shift away from explaining or seeking to understand experience. Trying to explain an experience to convince others or get others to understand can constrict the experience because we are focused on framing it in a way that will appeal to an audience. Rather, narrative inquirers strive to encourage

curiosity, wonder, insight, and reflection, and not the drive for answers or certainty (Caine et al., 2019). With regards to epistemology, narrative inquiries reduce “the distance or ‘gap’ between what happens in the world and how people think about, and thus know, it” (Caine et al., 2019, p. 3). Experience and what occurs in the world is a source of knowledge that helps us understand how to navigate and live “in the midst” of our lives and occurrences in the world. Dewey further posited that knowledge and experience are strongly related; our knowledge comes from our experiences as we navigate and adapt to the world (Dewey, 1938). Thus, narrative inquirers understand the significance of experience and honour the telling and retellings of the stories through which we detail those experiences.

Since narrative inquiry begins in experience, the experiences explored can offer insights into the theoretical positions a narrative inquiry can exist alongside. Therefore, as Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) stated, narrative inquiry often shares “borderlands” with other approaches or perspectives such as post-structuralist, Marxist, post-positivist, constructionist, and critical social. Borderlands exist between narrative inquiry and other perspectives, as well as within those who use narrative inquiry. These borderlands are not clear distinctions but are rather blurry. Narrative inquirers are therefore allowed to exist in various positions and “landscapes” when conducting narrative inquiries so as to not constrain the stories that are shared. This narrative inquiry shares borderlands with critical social justice and constructionist perspectives as they intersect with the experiences of participants. For instance, in narrative inquiry and in this study, knowledge was co-constructed between myself and participants, and stories were shared within a particular context (time, place, context; Clandinin et al., 2007). In addition, participants’ stories often integrated intersectionality, and acknowledgement of existing systems and contexts (e.g., transphobia).

Narrative inquiry research also does not have a set structure as in many research methods; however, there are loose “steps” or moments that occur in the research. First, a problem, topic, or gap in the literature is identified from which a research question emerges. In narrative inquiry, this question or focus is often referred to as the research puzzle. The research question or topic is often framed as a puzzle to shift away from thinking about participants or experience as things to be studied to provide us with an answer. Framing the question as a puzzle also allows narrative inquiry researchers to work and explore alongside participants. Further, a research puzzle gives space for the researcher to “consider who they are, and who they are becoming” in the research (Caine et al., 2013, p. 577). For this dissertation, the research puzzle centred on the experience of gender euphoria. The question was deliberately kept as open as possible to allow for flexibility and diversity in responses. Since the intention of narrative inquiry is to obtain personalized stories and experiences, it was important to keep the question open to refrain from “nudging” participants towards certain responses (e.g., only focusing on physical expression in gender euphoria).

Following the development of a research question or puzzle, the researcher engages with the community (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). Engaging with the community involves forming and maintaining respectful, non-exploitative relationships to ensure that the research will be beneficial to the community (Clandinin et al., 2018). It is possible, at this stage, that the research puzzle or question may be revised if needed as the purpose and hopes for the research are (re)negotiated (Caine et al., 2019; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My engagement with the TGD community will be detailed below.

In narrative inquiry, interactions with participants and data collection can take many forms, and the intention is to explore participants’ stories. These different forms of data collection are

referred to as “field texts,” and are any source of data in the study. Field texts can include interviews with participants, researcher notes and reflections, and artifacts, such as works of art – by the participant or another artist – music, media, poems, and photographs (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Rationale**

Narrative inquiry was deemed appropriate for this research study for several reasons. Perhaps most importantly, narrative inquiry deliberately makes space for all narratives, not simply the ones that “fit” with dominant narratives or perspectives. Given that transgender people and their experiences are still highly stigmatized and are largely seen as negative, it is critical to make room for alternative narratives. It is for this reason that narrative inquiry is particularly beneficial in research with marginalized communities (Bauer et al., 2019). In addition, a common belief is that transgender people have an end goal, where they “achieve” their gender. However, there is far greater complexity and holding this perspective constrains and limits transgender people. Narrative inquirers do not ask participants to have their lives figured out or to have a concrete answer to provide for the research. Rather, the intent is to explore participants’ experiences and co-create stories together in the research relationship. To further this point, narrative inquiry is also non-exploitative in nature, in large part due to the relational ethics (detailed in Ethical Considerations below) at its core (Clandinin et al., 2018). Research with transgender people, and marginalized populations more generally, should not exploit participants, nor should it attempt to sensationalize or capitalize on the experiences of those marginalized (Bauer et al., 2019). The research relationship is, therefore, highly collaborative and relies on the expertise of both the participant and the researcher (Josselson, 2012). In this sense, the research relationship is central to the research as it provides a space for collaboration,

and the sharing and co-creation of stories. As I mention this, it is important that I do acknowledge my own positioning in many privileged communities, including White, educated, English-speaking, and able-bodied. Since I am a part of the research relationship I do – and did – need to consider how my privilege influenced the research and participants. I am speaking of the importance of narrative inquiry to support all voices and giving space to discourses that do not align with dominant narratives. It is important to consider that my own privileged identities influence what I see, hear, and understand. To ensure that participants' voices and stories emerged, rather than my own privileged understandings, I closely followed the narrative inquiry research process and touchstones (detailed below).

I chose to explore gender euphoria using narrative inquiry in my dissertation as it touched on personal experiences in many ways, including and especially the way in which narrative inquiry research allows for all experiences and voices, not just those which align with dominant discourses. While I, in many ways, experience privilege as a white person and someone who typically blends in physically, there are also ways in which I differ that, within dominant discourses, would be considered “odd” or “deviant.” For instance, the indifference I hold towards my own gender (i.e., feeling that it has been something thrust upon me instead and not something I wanted) and the way I wish to live my life (e.g., unpartnered), has often led people to refer to me as “stubborn” and “difficult,” and subsequently led them to try to force me into things and change who I am. In a narrative inquiry approach, I found an opportunity to give space to all experiences, something I had wished would have been – and be – a part of my experience. Narrative inquiry and gender euphoria resonated with me because of the opportunities both allow for, as well as the welcoming of all forms of knowledge and experience. The topic and method allow for rich exploration of personal stories and experiences. Focusing on gender euphoria

challenges dominant discourses about TGD folks and resists efforts to confine us to a box. I have also found that research can be a wonderful way to give space to voices and encourage reflection and growth. I was drawn to narrative inquiry for these reasons – it situates people’s stories and encourages the readers to wonder and reflect. In this approach, people’s experiences, stories, and accounts are not about being “right” or “perfect,” but about broadening our minds and shifting away from privileging one way of being.

### **Research Design and Procedure**

#### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

To obtain rich and detailed stories from participants, the goal was to recruit 3-5 participants for the study, as per the recommendations in the literature (Wells, 2011). A smaller sample size is recommended for narrative inquiry research as it allows for richness and depth in the narratives of participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A large sample can cause the uniqueness of experiences to become lost and may result in a reduction of participant experiences.

Community engagement is critical in narrative inquiry and is one of the touchstones of narrative research, (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). In conducting this research, I respectfully engaged with the transgender community, through existing relationships and new connections. My engagement with the TGD community – locally and more generally (e.g., online groups, organizations) – began around ten years ago, though I have been more closely involved since 2018. I have been a member of various groups centered on community and the experiences of gender and sexual minorities. I have and hope to continue to approach the research from a place of humility and openness with participants about my own identities experiences to help foster a sense of understanding, community, and trust. For example, some participants wished to know

more about my gender, sexual orientation, and experiences of gender euphoria. This open approach ensured that the research relationship did not feel "one-sided" or exploitative in nature, but rather mutual and respectful (Bauer et al., 2019; Josselson, 2012).

Ethics approval was granted by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) at the University of Calgary. Participants were recruited through the University of Calgary research website, which contained a brief description of the study, criteria for participation, compensation for participation, and my contact information. If the initial plan for recruitment (i.e., the University of Calgary research website) was unsuccessful, I intended to connect with pre-existing contacts to distribute the study information. The recruitment documents (e.g., research description, research poster) can be found in Appendix A.

The inclusion criteria for the study were as follows:

- Transgender and gender diverse individuals aged 18 and over. This included individuals who identified as transgender men or women, non-binary, genderfluid, genderqueer, demigirl, and so on.
- Comfort with discussing personal experiences, including their life story and experiences with gender euphoria.
- Comfort sharing other potential sources (e.g., artwork).

Participants received a \$100 gift card(s) to the place(s) of their choosing (e.g., Amazon, Starbucks, local shops that offer online gift cards) for their participation in the study due to the number of interviews involved and engagement following the interviews (e.g., reviewing the research texts). The form to receive their gift card can be found in Appendix B.

## Participants

Thirty-seven people responded to the advertisement on the University of Calgary research website. Due to the volume of interested participants, the first five who responded were emailed with an offer to participate. The remainder were emailed, expressing my appreciation for their interest and having to decline them due to the number of responses. Four of the five responded and expressed interest, and interviews were scheduled via Zoom in accordance with their preferences. Three of the four attended the interviews and completed the consent forms (see Appendix C), and constituted the final sample size for this research study. The fourth and fifth were followed up with several times, but they did not respond. After having several interviews with the three participants, I determined that this sample size would be sufficient. This was because the interviews provided an abundance of information and, to fully go into and articulate these experiences, I opted to remain with the three participants.

As part of the interviews, participants were invited to explore various social identities (e.g., sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation) if they felt these identities connected to their gender. Participants were not required to share certain identities, but rather were welcomed in sharing what they felt was significant. The participants' demographics, along with their pseudonyms, are shared in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Sam	Late 20s	Genderqueer	He/him	Black-Haitian
Solar	Early 20s	Genderfluid	Any	Chinese
Steven	Mid 20s	Non-binary	He/they	Black

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

For this study, four open-ended interviews (1-2 hours each) were conducted with each participant. I then reviewed the interviews extensively to support in generating further questions and collaboratively creating research texts with participants. There were about 2 weeks to one month between interviews with participants to allow for a review of the interview recording and to generating questions and prompts to further explore in subsequent interviews. In addition, briefer (around 30 minutes) meetings were set up as needed to review the research texts (process detailed further below).

### ***Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews obtain qualitative data through an interview guided by broad, open-ended questions pertaining to the topic. This allows participants to speak about what is most relevant to them without the researcher leading or directing participants (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Specifically, a life story interview(s) (Atkinson, 1998; Clandinin, 2007) was conducted to explore contextual factors and key moments or journeys in the participant's life that they felt was relevant. In addition, within the interviews, questions centering participants' experiences with gender euphoria were integrated. In line with the "structure" of narrative inquiry, these were not separate interviews, as stories and experiences of gender euphoria were often woven throughout participants' life stories, but the purpose of both the life story and gender euphoria specific questions will be discussed below. The interview process began with an exploration of participants' life stories, and questions of gender euphoria were interspersed throughout. At all stages, participants were encouraged to share their experiences through other means (e.g., art, music, etc.) as they saw fit. This involved sharing artists they were drawn to, songs and lyrics that resonated with them, and so on.

**Life Story Interview(s).** Life story interviews are considered important in narrative inquiry research as it “[seeks] to bring forth the voice and spirit within a life-as-a-whole personal narrative” (Atkinson & Clandinin, 2007, p. 2) and explore the inner life of the person. It further serves the purpose of allowing the researcher to step inside the world of the participants and live alongside them as they share their stories. The life story interview can be a factual recounting of events, can use analogies, and be presented as a story or poem, or anything that resonates most with the individual (Atkinson & Clandinin, 2007). Atkinson (1998) provides several questions and processes in terms of approaching the life story interview. He highlights the importance of understanding *why* one is conducting a life story interview. Given that narrative inquiry is a contextual method (centering time, place, culture) and emphasizes a whole of life perspective (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), a life story interview was deemed appropriate. In terms of specific questions, Atkinson (1998) proposes beginning the interview by asking, “Where would you like to begin the story of your life?” (p. 9). This allows the participant to speak to events in their life that are most relevant to them and avoids “forcing” participants into specific events. In these interviews, it is also important to explore the meaning of the participants’ experiences, which helps maintain the commitment to a whole of life view. Atkinson (1998) suggests asking, “What did that mean to you?” (p. 9). It is important to note that having a pre-set interview guide can constrict what the participants feel able to share and so Atkinson does not advocate for having an interview guide for the life story interview. In contrast, he suggests that researchers should have questions, such as the ones listed above, that are broad and allow the participant and researcher to delve further into an experience. This is also aligned with narrative inquiry research, which aims to explore meaning and experiences in depth by giving participants space to discuss what is most pertinent and meaningful to them. Atkinson (1998, 2007) does not state

how many life story interview(s) should take place, and it will depend on the participant, their stories, and their needs. It is best for the interview(s) to occur naturally and can be broken down into several 1-hour interviews or longer and fewer interviews (Atkinson & Clandinin, 2007).

**Gender Euphoria Interview(s).** Exploring participants' experiences of gender euphoria followed a similar, open-ended approach. Specifically, the questions I asked were broad and open-ended to avoid leading participants or narrowing their experiences. The overarching question of the interviews were: "what have been/are your experiences with gender euphoria?" A broad definition of gender euphoria was provided to give context; however, I emphasized that participants' experiences of gender euphoria may differ from the definition provided by the literature, and they may define or understand gender euphoria differently. Therefore, our conversations explored their personal understandings and definition(s) of gender euphoria. In addition, we discussed the various social, physical, and/or psychological components of gender euphoria as it related to their experiences. This depended on what emerged as significant and relevant to them. As in the life story components, the meaning and experience of participants' accounts were explored in depth through prompts and follow-up questions. Samples of the interview questions, including follow-up prompts, can be found in Appendix D. Due to the fluid nature of the interviews and in line with both a narrative approach and Atkinson's (1998) life story interview, there was not a set structure for the interview to allow participants to discuss what was relevant to them.

The explorations of participants' life story and experiences with gender euphoria worked together and complimented each other. The intent was to situate experiences, including specific experiences of gender euphoria, within the person's life, context, and intersecting identities. A person's life story and identities may influence what is felt, experienced, and (re)told regarding

their experiences of gender euphoria. To remain close to each participants' narrative, I reviewed the interview recordings prior to the next interview to generate follow-up questions. As narrative inquiry research heavily emphasizes that experience occurs within a temporal, historical, and social context, participants' experiences of gender euphoria were grounded in these understandings (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). For example, an event told in isolation could be interpreted or understood as minor or insignificant. However, when this event is understood in the context in which it occurred, including what may have happened before and after, the impact and emotion is felt more deeply, and the researcher and audience can better experience the event alongside the participant.

### **Research Journal**

Throughout the research process, including the interviews, I recorded my own thoughts and reflections in a research journal. This is also considered a source of data, or "field text," in narrative inquiry. The reflections in this research journal involved moments in the interviews with participants that stood out to me, emotions or reactions that emerged, and thoughts I had as I progressed through the research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I also included various poems, works of art, articles and research, and so on that resonated with me and that felt connected to participants' stories and experiences. Many of these reflections were shared with participants as the interviews progressed (e.g., poems, thoughts), while some reflections emerged later. Some of the reflections and components in my research journal are included throughout this dissertation illustrated through personal narratives, imagery, and/or intertwined with participant experiences.

### **Creating Research Texts**

Following data collection, the field texts (interviews, researcher reflections, artifacts shared) were brought together to construct and retell a story or stories – the research texts – of

each participant's experience. These stories explore participants' experiences of gender euphoria within the context of their lives. In co-constructing these accounts, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) advise narrative inquiry researchers to "ask questions of meaning, social significance, and purpose" (p. 120). This, the authors note, helps the researcher reconnect with the research puzzle and eases the transition from field texts to research texts. In constructing these research texts, the participants and I considered what kind of field texts they wished to have (influenced by the participants' stories, what fits for them), the voice of the narrative (of participant, researcher, audience), signature (*how* to say what the researcher and participant want to say), and audience when this research is disseminated (e.g., readers of this dissertation and publications, audience of presentations on this research). The researcher is to heavily immerse themselves in the field texts. To do this, I began by considering the setting, context, tone, and so on of the stories. This was followed by narrative coding of the field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which involved identifying the places where events occurred; the "characters" involved; and connecting or interwoven storylines (e.g., between their life story and gender euphoria), tensions, themes, or (dis)continuities. Throughout the construction of the interim research texts, which are early "drafts" of the research text (final product) based on the field texts (i.e., interviews), the researcher continuously moves back and forth between the field texts and research texts, continually negotiating and renegotiating to ensure the researcher stays close to participants' stories (Caine & Estefan, 2011). As I progressed to constructing research texts, in agreement and collaboration with participants, I regularly returned to the interview recordings to remain as close as possible to what participants discussed and identified. A research text may also use metaphors to articulate participants' accounts or may be a direct retelling of a story in their life. Solar chose to create a video game to illustrate the journey of exploring gender euphoria, as well as what

have been and may be potential barriers. Sam chose to create a story based on his experiences. Lastly, Steven decided to do a poem to illustrate his experiences with gender euphoria.

Once the initial research text(s) were created, they were shared with participants via email, and, if participants wished, we would arrange a brief meeting(s) to discuss the research text. Participants reviewed the research texts and provided any suggestions, edits, or additions they saw fit. These conversations, whether over email or in a face-to-face meeting, served to further co-construct and revise the research texts as necessary based on what the participant and I felt was necessary (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The interim research texts – the video game, story, and poem – are to capture both of our voices and so this stage of the research was to negotiate our places in the narratives and ensure the texts were products of these negotiations and conversations. In addition, several resonant narrative threads emerged in this research. These were developed by noting resonant comments and insights from the interviews (e.g., ones that evoked an emotional response from myself and/or the participant), aspects participants and I frequently returned to, and components that we felt would be significant considerations for a broader context (e.g., societally, within the 2SLGBTQ+ community). The final product (research texts), co-constructed through our conversations, as well as the narrative threads, is provided in the Chapter 4: Findings section of this dissertation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical considerations pertaining to the current study. Here, I will detail the relational ethics involved in narrative inquiry research and how I have and will continually work towards embodying these throughout the research process.

### **Relational Ethics**

The relational nature of narrative inquiry research invites its own set of ethical responsibilities and ethical concerns. Ethics in narrative inquiry differs in some key ways compared to more traditional research, which has led some to criticize narrative inquiry due to the belief that it does not rigorously ensure privacy and confidentiality of participants (Gottlieb & Lasser, 2001). Traditional scientific ethics focuses on privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, and avoiding harm. Narrative inquiry, of course, also upholds these principles with the participants' well-being at the forefront but is also complex given the relational orientation, "Ethics in narrative research [...] is not a matter of abstractly correct behavior but of responsibility in human relationship." (Josselson, 2012, p. 3). Ethics in narrative inquiry is not necessarily about following a checklist of "right or wrong" ways to engage in the research but is more about the commitment to a relationship. Due to this relational responsibility of narrative inquiry researchers, it is important to also adhere to relational ethics (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition, this relational responsibility incorporates protection of privacy and confidentiality. Researchers may "fictionalize" or anonymize aspects of a participant's story (e.g., pseudonyms, changing dates or places) to protect their identity. Fictionalizing has the added benefit of supporting creative and imaginative engagement with the research and stories without altering the participants experiences (Caine et al., 2017).

The ethics of narrative research is complex and evolving (Josselson, 2012). As stated, narrative inquiry draws upon core elements of traditional ethics – that of confidentiality, privacy – as well as the circumstances of the research and experience of the researchers. Particular ethical issues or principles may emerge with one participant, but not with another, or may change throughout the research relationship. It is therefore difficult to predict what may arise;

participants consent at the outset, but it is difficult to consent to the changing processes in a close, dynamic relationship (Josselson, 2012). Therefore, consent is ongoing throughout the research, and participants are made aware that they can withdraw or decline to answer a question or participate at any time, and debriefing interviews and encounters with participants is important (e.g., how does it feel talking about this with me?). Caine et al. (2020) highlight that this respectful relationship is important in ethics of care (Noddings, 1984). In narrative inquiry and ethics of care, it is important to be attuned to those with whom we are in a relationship, consider that the relationship is also reciprocal, and demonstrate a deep caring and respect for the other person. Josselson (2012) goes on to describe the explicit and implicit ethical contracts we enter with participants. The explicit contract refers to more traditional ethics, including informed consent. Implicit ethical contract speaks to the research relationship and the ethics within that relationship. In other words, our responsibility to the participant and our relationship with them. We, in a sense, occupy a “dual role” as a researcher with professional responsibilities and as a human being in a relationship with relational responsibilities (Josselson, 2012, p. 3), and we must therefore uphold the responsibilities of both roles. As ethical narrative inquiry researchers, we also exist and live alongside our participants, and occupy a shared space together (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This means that we will need to be flexible and responsive to changes as they emerge throughout the research process (Josselson, 2012).

In relational ethics and narrative inquiry research, it is also essential to consider the researcher as they are part of that research relationship:

The researcher’s self, with its fantasies, biases, and horizons of understanding, is the primary tool of inquiry. Therefore, self-knowledge and self-reflection become necessary to the project to tease out what aspects of what is “observed” derive from the researcher,

what from the object of observation (the participant), and what from the interaction between them. A full understanding of this is, of course, only an ideal, but an ethical stance in narrative research requires that such an exploration be undertaken as completely as possible. (Josselson, 2012, p. 9-10)

Relatedly, there is a balance between ensuring the narrative is not stifled or altered, either by being too reductionistic or formalistic. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note the importance of *wakefulness*, or being aware of and alert to contexts, relationships, questions, and field texts. The use of *wakefulness* is particularly important: “A language of wakefulness allows us to proceed forward with a constant, alert awareness of risks, of narcissism, of solipsism, and of simplistic plots, scenarios, and unidimensional characters” (p. 182). This also addresses the previous point and ensures that wakefulness in our research will lead us away from a narcissistic, researcher-centered, or suppressed story.

As narrative inquiry researchers, we are not objective observers studying a specimen or phenomenon from a distance. We are very much immersed in the research process and the relationship with our participants. They tell us stories, and we respond. We may latch on to some things they tell us, and gloss over others without realizing. It is therefore important to engage in self-reflection to avoid dominating the participants narratives and unintentionally telling our own stories instead. As mentioned, there are limits to this and we are likely unable to “fully” self-reflect, but the objective is to engage with ourselves as much as possible and ensure the narratives presented are respectful of what was shared.

In sum, relational ethics in narrative inquiry aims to honor and prioritize commitment to the person and the relationship, honouring and respecting the stories shared, and being flexible as changes arise. At its core, narrative inquiry and relational ethics emphasize a respectful, non-

exploitative relationship. In other words, narrative inquiry researchers do research *with* people, not *on* them as research “subjects” (Josselson, 2012). In line with the pragmatic origins of narrative inquiry,

...one must work from the conviction that the research carried out is, at least, not exploitative – that is, we study people to better understand them or the society in which they live; it is unethical to study people out of curiosity about what seems to be different or exotic with the intention of voyeuristic engagement. (Josselson, 2012, p. 19)

The relational ethics of narrative inquiry shift away from sensationalizing people’s concerns or experiences and viewing research as the studying of “specimens.” We are not to dig into people’s lives for our own personal gain and then “abandon” them once we have what we need. As previously stated, this is an integral part of conducting research with transgender individuals (Bauer et al., 2019). This speaks to the inherent drive to respect the stories shared with us as researchers and to exist *with* our participants to (re)live the (re)told stories with them.

### **Informed Consent**

The current study also adhered to “traditional ethics.” Participants were made aware at the outset of what the research will entail, including the interviews, compensation for participation, and privacy and confidentiality. Written and verbal consent was obtained prior to any data collection. Participants were made aware that the research will be published, and they were notified that they are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. To protect their privacy and confidentiality, participants were given the option to use pseudonyms, which they either decided or requested I assign them a pseudonym. Given the personal and storied nature of narrative inquiry, fictionalizing of details, such as dates and places, was done at times to ensure participants could not be identified through their stories (Caine et al., 2017).

As with all research, there were some associated risks. Participants were made aware that they may experience distress from speaking about their lives, personal experiences, and identities. As mentioned, participants were free to withdraw from the study or stop the interview(s) at any point. If they did not wish for their data to be included in the final product, then their data was not to be included up until 4 weeks after the final conversation regarding the co-constructed research text(s) and/or 4 weeks after they approved their research text(s). A list of community supports and resources were also provided to participants. To mitigate risks, I established a supportive, non-exploitative relationship with participants (further detail provided in Research Design). This involved sharing of my own identities and stories if participants wished to know more about me, meeting in a space that was convenient for them (e.g., a public yet private space, over the phone or Zoom), and remaining open and non-judgmental about their experiences. Participants were also made aware of the benefits of the research, which included but was not limited to, being able to share their experiences, having their voice be heard, and contributing to the shifting narratives surrounding the experiences of transgender people.

### **Research Quality and Integrity**

Due to its personal and relational nature, narrative inquiry has sometimes been criticized for not adhering to traditional measures of “good” quality research such as reliability, validity, causality, truth, and generalizability. As seen thus far, many of these critiques emerge from traditional, quantitative ways of doing research and the attempt of some qualitative research methodologies to follow similar criterion. Certainly, there is a time, place, and significance of traditional approaches, and the same is true for relational approaches like narrative inquiry. Some critics express concern about the “accuracy” of the stories presented (Atkinson & Delamont,

2007; Trahar, 2009). However, narrative inquiry does not search for a single truth, generalizations, or focus on the factual components of a story. Bell (2002) notes,

...the inquiry goes beyond the specific stories to explore the assumptions inherent in the shaping of those stories. No matter how fictionalized, all stories rest on and illustrate the story structures a person holds. As such, they provide a window into people's beliefs and experiences. (p. 209)

As we tell and retell stories, our current perspectives, contexts, and ideas will influence what and how we present it (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This does not make the story less valuable as narrative inquiry explicitly considers the contexts in which stories are experienced and shared.

Narrative inquiry also has several strengths in terms of being good quality research. Narrative inquiry utilizes criteria, such as apparency, verisimilitude, and transferability, all of which are important to quality research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Apparency means remaining true to the participants' stories. In this research, apparency not only refers to the accuracy and appropriateness of participants' accounts, but also striving to not "override" their stories with my own biases, narratives, or assumptions of what gender euphoria means or looks like. Rather, the narratives were co-constructed and remained respectful and aligned with participants' experiences through conversations, checking with participants, and obtaining agreement on the final research texts. Verisimilitude emphasizes authenticity. In this research, verisimilitude pertains to authenticity to participants' stories and experiences to the research relationship and to my own experiences. The individuality and uniqueness of participants' experiences of gender euphoria were not overlooked in favour of providing broad, generalizable themes or stories that only mirrored dominant narratives. Similarly, transferability is considered important in narrative inquiry research. Transferability refers to how the research encourages

readers to engage and reflect on possibilities, alternatives, and practical implications of the research (Kerney, 2014). In this study, this could (hopefully) mean inspiring a sense of hope for readers that it *is* possible to experience joy and euphoria in one's gender. Narrative inquiry also uses particular language and criteria more relevant to this kind of research. For instance, narrative commonplaces are more frequently considered. Narrative commonplaces refer to "checkpoints" for a narrative inquiry researcher to focus on. The three narrative commonplaces are: temporality (experiences have a past, present, and future), sociality (the research relationship, personal conditions), and place (location and context; Clandinin et al., 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Clandinin et al. (2007) acknowledged the importance of exploring these narrative commonplaces in the research. With regards to temporality, it is important that the narrative inquirer considers that there are contextual factors which influence the meaning and significance of an experience. For instance, as will be explored in the stories, participants identified several contextual factors and identities that were strongly interconnected with their experiences of gender euphoria. Further, temporality allows the researcher to consider that everything – people, places, things – are "in the midst". Everything is a process; everything is in transition. Sociality takes into consideration "personal conditions" (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 23), which are the participants' and researchers' hopes, journeys, values, and circumstances. Sociality also refers to environmental and relational factors in which the experience occurred and in which the story is told (i.e., within the research relationship). Lastly, place can refer to the literal place of the research conversations and geographical location. This allows the research to be thoughtfully considered in a particular context. Of particular relevance, and something that will be discussed in further detail later, is the current political climate in Alberta, in which myself, Sam, and

Steven live. There have been many problematic changes and beliefs at a governmental level related to and heavily impacting the lives of transgender people in Alberta. As such, the significance of this context was not ignored in the research. From when this research was first proposed, to its completion, there have been many changes regarding the rights and freedoms of TGD folks in Alberta. There were whispers to changing legislation at the start of this project. Then, part way through, it was announced that the Alberta government would discuss whether TGD youth would be able to access gender-affirming care and if their gender would be disclosed to their parents. At the conclusion of this research, the Alberta government decided to limit access to health care, education, and sports (i.e., which team TGD youth can play on) for TGD youth. TGD students would also require parental consent to change their name and/or pronouns, would have to play on sports teams based on their assigned sex at birth, and teachers would not be allowed to teach about gender and sexual diversity unless parents “opt in” for their child to receive this education (Bartko, 2024). Therefore, a related hope of this narrative inquiry – and in line with the intentions of narrative inquiry – is to invite the readers to think, reflect, and ask questions about themselves and the stories presented here, while considering the political and cultural climates in which they live.

To ensure a high-quality narrative inquiry was conducted, I continued to address the narrative touchstones put forth by Clandinin and Caine (2013). A touchstone is a “quality or example that is used to test... excellence or genuineness” and it ensures that narrative inquirers are approaching the research respectfully (p. 169). There are twelve touchstones: (1) recognizing and fulfilling relational responsibilities, (2) being in the midst, (3) commitment to understanding continuity of lives and stories, (4) negotiating relationships, (5) narrative beginnings or narrative self-stories, (6) negotiating entry into the field, (7) moving from field to field texts, (8) moving

from field texts to research texts, (9) acknowledging temporality, sociality, and place (narrative commonplaces), (10), engaging with communities, (11) explaining justifications of the research, and (12) acknowledging multiple audiences (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These touchstones will be addressed throughout the project and will continuously be negotiated as issues, stories, and needs as they emerged. See Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*Addressing Narrative Inquiry Touchstones in the Current Research*

<b>Touchstone</b>	<b>How it was addressed</b>
Recognizing and fulfilling relational responsibilities	See section on Relational Ethics. This will be pertinent throughout the research process. This included respecting the stories shared, engaging in mutual and non-exploitative research <i>with</i> transgender people (e.g., by sharing my own experiences and identities when appropriate), and being responsive to the needs of participants (e.g., meeting at a time and place convenient for them).
Being in the midst	I continually maintained the understanding that the research, participants, and I are in the midst of our own lives and contexts. I did not search for people who have “achieved” gender euphoria, but rather considered that many are negotiating and learning about themselves within a social, historical, and institutional context that is ever-changing and continually shaping their lives.
Commitment to understanding continuity of lives and stories	By using life story interviews, I was better able to understand the context of people’s lives and situate their experiences of gender euphoria within their context. I also explored my own context in which I am doing this research, and the various components (e.g., political climate, personal experiences) associated with this. In doing so, I acknowledge the continuity of experience – participants’ and my own.
Negotiating relationships	Negotiating relationships occurred at every stage – as someone already a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, building respectful relationships with participants, negotiating the research relationship (e.g., boundaries, dynamics, hopes, mutuality), and the (co)constructed narratives/research texts.
Narrative beginnings or narrative self-stories	My field of study (Narrative Inquiry as a Trans Positive Research Method), proposal, and this dissertation began with narrative self-

	<p>stories and personal accounts. In addition, my own stories, experiences, and reflections will be woven throughout this dissertation, particularly the results, to detail my own experiences in relation to the topic and conversations with participants.</p>
Negotiating entry into the field	<p>I worked with my existing community membership to further build and foster trusting relationships with participants. I have worked to maintain awareness and understanding that people may not want to participate, had particular hopes in participating, and are in different places with regards to comfort. Part of this touchstone also involved accepting uncertainty at various stages as I negotiate my place within participants' lives, as well as in the field (research, psychology) and TGD community (Clandinin et al., 2018).</p>
Moving from field to field texts	<p>This stage allowed me to move back and forth between closeness with participants and distance (e.g., recording personal experiences, memories). It was important, at this stage, that I was fully involved with participants, and then step back to reflect on my own stories, the participants' stories, and the temporality of these experiences and stories. The interviews and research journal allowed me to be engaged with this touchstone.</p>
Moving from field texts to research texts	<p>In order to approach the construction of research texts, the participants and I reflected upon the questions posed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000): What should I consider when creating these research texts? Who is the audience? How will this benefit participants and the community? In what context were these stories shared? What consequences will these research texts have? Once a draft of the research texts was created, participants had the opportunity to review and edit them as they saw fit.</p>
Acknowledging temporality, sociality, and place (narrative commonplaces)	<p>Throughout, I revisited this consideration. In the research texts, I continually acknowledge and highlight the context in which stories were shared (e.g., the research relationship, social context), the time in which the stories occurred, and the context in which the research texts were written and, later, disseminated. The narrative commonplaces were woven throughout the stories, as will be seen in the Results sections.</p>
Engaging with communities	<p>This occurred throughout the research and before, which supported in building trusting relationships with participants.</p>
Explaining justifications of the research	<p>Throughout my proposal, field of study, and this dissertation, I discussed the justifications of using narrative inquiry and the importance of exploring gender euphoria further. The implications are many and wide-ranging, and include implications for practice,</p>

participants, the community, the audience, and myself, as a person, practitioner, and researcher.

Acknowledging  
multiple audiences

I considered the potential audiences throughout this research. The audiences include the participants themselves, the research community, the general population, and the transgender community. It is therefore important that I am respectful of these audiences, particularly the participants and transgender community, as they will be most directly involved and affected by this research.

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### Chapter Summary

This research aimed to inquire into the experiences of gender euphoria for transgender and gender diverse individuals and explore the research puzzle: *How do transgender and gender diverse people understand and experience gender euphoria?* Narrative inquiry was used to explore the stories participants shared of their lives and gender euphoria through four semi-structured interviews. As I discussed in the literature review, there are several gaps in the literature. Much of the existing literature begins with theory as a lens to interpret participants' accounts; this can cloud the experiences and stories that are shared. In addition, much of the existing literature – and societal perspectives more broadly – regarding the experiences of transgender people are largely negative and highly pathologized (e.g., Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016). While it is important to validate these experiences and provide needed supports, it is also equally important to consider and explore alternative narratives. This narrative inquiry on gender euphoria attended to a needed shift in the narratives surrounding transgender people and their experiences (Beischel et al., 2021).

A total of three participants were involved in this narrative inquiry, and four semi-structured interviews were conducted with each person. The interviews centered on their life stories, experiences of gender euphoria, and any relevant and significant factors, identities, and connections woven within this. Throughout the research, I sought to build strong relationships with participants and follow the twelve touchstones of narrative inquiry. In doing so, I strove to

build a high-quality research project that emphasized relational ethics and respect, and that centered the participants' experiences and stories.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The findings of the current study will be presented in the following way: in the first section, I will detail each participant's narrative account of gender euphoria. Subsequently, an exploration of common threads to synthesize aspects of participants' accounts will be provided.

### Narrative Accounts

In this initial section, I will provide the accounts of gender euphoria for each individual participant. Participants selected the way they wanted their experiences to be presented: Sam chose a story format, Steven chose a poem, and Solar chose a video game format (the link and video game script will be provided).

#### **Sam (genderqueer, he/him)**

The conversations between Sam and I were rich and enlightening. Throughout our conversations, Sam and I often returned to threads of community and connection, contextual factors (e.g., politics), persevering amidst challenges, and his coming out experience. I was immediately struck by Sam's openness; I had entered this work with the assumption that it would take time for participants to feel comfortable openly sharing with me, but with Sam, it was immediate. I quickly came to realize that this openness was integral to him and his way of being in the world. This was something I admired, and also grappled with in our conversations and personal reflections in between. I often oscillate between a desire to be completely open and wanting to keep certain aspects private. I did experience some tension with this as Sam and I got to know each other; I heard and understood what he was saying, that being open to everyone can be freeing. And yet, I also know that there are many factors involved in this decision that make it a deeply complex one. I have also come to realize that this process of letting people in and sharing one's knowledge and experience cannot be conceptualized as being at one extreme or

another; rather, it can be gradual, scattered, or partial. Just as we are in the midst of our experience, we can also be in the midst of sharing this experience.

Throughout the conversations with participants, including Sam, I was sure to leave space and room for them to ask questions of me. Sam wished to know about me, who I am, and why I am doing this research. We connected over a shared hope of shifting narratives of TGD people to ones that give space to joy, celebration, and connection. I also shared with him my identities, and we discussed what this means. I was worried as many people do not understand these identities and have misconceptions about them. I have also had people respond in strange and invalidating ways – “would you be open to ...?”, “that’s fair” – which I am sure has contributed to my desire to keep these aspects of myself private. I feared Sam would respond much the same, despite his open-minded and non-judgmental way of thinking and speaking. However, he first said, “wow, that’s cool!” and then he said something that surprised me: “since you are not attracted to people, maybe you are trusted more by God.” This is something I have sat with for a long time. Though I am not particularly religious, Sam described me and these identities that I often have internalized shame for, as something to be revered and, on a higher spiritual level, respected. I also did some digging of my own after this; I looked up what it could mean to be “trusted by God” and found that it could mean one is entrusted with God’s plans and that God believes in these people believed to hold specific talents or gifts. I also remembered that my name (Danielle) means “God is my judge” and represents compassion, strength, and defiance. I wondered – and have been wondering – if I have put too much of a distance between myself and spirituality, and perhaps this is something to open myself to more. This was an unexpected revelation and I, too, realized from Sam that a lot can come from being open with those who are safe.

During our first meeting, started with a conversation about artists and media that Sam connected to. He expressed deep appreciation for artists like Lil Nas X and Sam Smith, whom he credited for helping him understand his gender and sexuality, and his coming out process to people in his life. Sam said he appreciated how both artists “don’t care what other people think” and are their true selves. He also mentioned how them existing in this way sends a message, to those in the 2SLGBTQ+ community and to critics; Lil Nas X and Sam Smith, for Sam, have sent a message that it is a wonderful thing to live as oneself and there is great freedom in this. Also, Sam said that in doing so, these artists are also conveying that they will not be silent and that they are here to stay. Regarding media, Sam also spoke about movies that he connected with – *Moonlight*; *Call me by your Name*; *Love, Simon*; *Happy Together*; *The Colour Purple*; *But I’m a Cheerleader*; and others. *Moonlight*, in particular, provided Sam with representation of Black masculinity and Black queerness that he could connect with. The film offered an alternative narrative to Black masculinity and queerness that has been sorely missing from much of existing media and, in general, societal discourses. Later in this chapter, in the narrative threads, I will delve into media and representation further due to its significance to Sam and the TGD community more broadly.

When Sam and I discussed how he wanted his account of gender euphoria to be presented, he expressed interest in having a story of his life presented. The story below was co-constructed by us both; I supported in weaving together a narrative that fit for Sam, and included his own words directly from our conversations. To lay the groundwork for the final research project, I mentioned at the beginning of our conversations for Sam to consider what story he wanted to present, messages he wanted to convey, and how (format) to do so. As we progressed through our conversations and explored Sam’s life story, Sam decided on a story format.

Between conversations, we would both reflect on the presentation of Sam's story. I would often pull direct quotes, themes, messages, and "artifacts" (e.g., artists, song quotes) that Sam shared and emphasized. Sam would bring forth ideas to elaborate on, as well as topics for us to discuss and come together on. I would share my ideas and points that I drew from our conversations, and we would discuss what would be included in the final research text. When I asked what parts of his life he wanted to tell and what messages he wanted to convey, Sam expressed wanting an overall theme of hope. Sam wanted to express that he experienced challenges throughout his life, and wanted to highlight that he overcame these and has been able to experience great comfort within himself and his gender since.

I admit that, initially, I felt a tension in co-writing this story. As I mentioned earlier, I tend towards caution and privacy instead of openness regarding some of my identities. The thought of co-creating a story that centres on speaking out and being open to others made me wonder if I was a hypocrite and suitable to help write this account. However, as we created this story together, I realized I was too black-and-white in my thinking; it is not either being completely open or completely private, but there are many complexities and shades of grey. I realized, throughout our conversations, that Sam and I were indeed on the same page; yes, sharing oneself can be liberating, *and* there is also consideration to who, what, where, when, and how much we share. I was reminded of the narrative commonplaces – time, place, relationship – and its role, not just in this research, but also in the importance of sharing stories in general. In sharing our stories, we continuously think of who we are speaking to, the context (e.g., political climate) in which we are sharing, and how the other(s) will react to what we say. I share about myself within trusting relationships where I know it will be kept private and where I know they will allow me to define myself, instead of pushing expectations and assumptions on me. Furthermore, Sam and

I discussed that sharing about oneself is not an all-or-nothing experience; it is not sharing everything or nothing, but rather a negotiation of sorts – we determine what we will share and what we want from that sharing (e.g., acceptance, support, openness, etc.). Similarly, the experience of gender euphoria for Sam was not all-or-nothing either. Sam described his gender identity and experiences of gender euphoria as something he gradually came to as more and more people gave him the space and safety to do so. For Sam, not feeling silenced and being able to live openly and freely *is* gender euphoria. The following is Sam’s story, co-written from his perspective.

*Soro soke – “speak up”*

Sam began his story with his experiences as a child and young teenager. At that time, Sam identified as both a boy and a girl, and often wanted to dress as a girl. His parents and family, who are strongly rooted in Christianity, opposed this. It is also considered taboo in Sam’s ancestral home – Haiti, Africa – for a man to dress like a woman, and so many queer and trans folks must live in the shadows. The family frequently went to church, and Sam’s dad often told him he was to be a reverend – a man of God meant to represent and live out the traditional values of the church. Sam felt his parents were not listening to him, but instead deciding for him who he would be and imposing their own expectations on him. Later, Sam became disenfranchised with religion and the “fake prophets,” instead praying and believing on his own terms. He also began to believe *himself* more; not just realizing but believing. It is one thing to know oneself – identities, interests, histories – it is another to believe and accept them. Sam knew about himself early on, but the acceptance and the belief that his identities are a gift that would help him and others navigate the world came later.

At the time, Sam felt that he was the only person in this strange world he had come to realize and gradually accept. It was a world that clashed with the one he had to live in everyday – at home, work, in public. Sam tried to fit with what society and his family wanted of him: dressing like a boy, going to church. But he couldn't help feeling like

an island  
apart from everyone else.

Sam gradually came to understand himself and his gender. However, he did not feel able to tell people in his life as there were silences in the family that made shadows of things not able to be spoken about. Many family stories were hidden. And this silence appeared to follow the family for generations. Sam's Haitian culture, including the music, Vodou, and folklore, was kept from him. The stories of his parents' lives were also left untold. In contrast to how Sam's family lived – in and through hidden stories – his father also taught Sam the importance of *soro soke* – “*speak up.*” *Soro soke* is a term in Nigeria, from which Sam's family also hails, and holds great significance to him as he has progressed on his journey of self-recognition and self-acceptance.

Later on, in college, Sam found community as well as a mentor. This mentor, a neighbour, helped him in many ways. She came to him when he was struggling, and told him she had been watching over him, silently looking after him. It was this mentor who took him in when he could not stay with his family, and introduced him to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. She gave him clothes, a place to stay, and unconditional support, which had been missing for him until this point. It was also this mentor who also helped him come out; “If it hadn't been for her, I'd still be hiding in my shadow.”

When Sam, with the support of his mentor, came out to his family as bisexual and genderqueer, he confidently told them, “This is who I am, you guys have to deal with it. I'm not

gonna change myself because of what you think or maybe what the world thinks about people like me.” Unfortunately, Sam’s parents were not accepting. Today, they have a strained relationship, though Sam continues to speak with them and take care of them as family is deeply important to him. Despite his parents’ initial and ongoing reaction to Sam’s coming out, Sam felt the euphoria of being out, being open, and not hiding his true self in the shadows. Sam felt a sense of invincibility. Coming out was a way for him to identify himself to others, and expressed, “the truth will set you free.” On a more humorous note, Sam remembered what his father used to say, “if you talk, you die; if you don’t talk, you still die.” Sam’s father’s advice held a truth for him, and so, he chose to *talk*.

For Sam, being out and being open about himself and how he feels, is gender euphoria: “the taste of freedom... this is my happiness.” Speaking about himself and his identity turned it into something that could not be taken away from him and that, no matter what happens, he has himself and he knows who he is. It is, in Sam’s experience, the euphoria of *being*.

In this way of *being*, Sam found community. Being out lead him to community, and this community, in turn, made it easier for him to be out. Sam found family in this community. Sam came to understand that *family* should be a safe haven of unconditional love and support. Though he experienced love from his biological family growing up, he also felt that, to be a part of a family meant changing oneself to fit the their expectations and plans, and to not question the way things are. Silence had therefore become a part of his family growing up. In his found family, Sam came to realize that family is instead something that celebrates and supports all ways of being. And instead of passing on silence to the next generation, Sam passes on euphoria by mentoring 2SLGBTQ+ youth and providing them a sense of safety that may not exist elsewhere

for them. Sam strives to show the upcoming generations that joy is not only possible but inexorable. In sharing these messages, Sam seeks to shift the narratives of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, particularly for those within the community, from a narrative that emphasizes deficits and bleak outlooks, to one that highlights connection, celebration, and euphoria. Challenges are inevitable, but they are not the only part of the story nor are they the end of the story. In the midst of the struggles, Sam did not give up. This was another aspect of gender euphoria for Sam; the euphoria of *victory*. Victory over challenges, over silence, over the shadows, over external voices. Victory over the narratives and identities pushed onto him. “This is who I was made to be right from the start. It was just a matter of time. I had to develop into it.... I’m not going to stop here. I’ll make sure to tell everybody.”

*Soro soke.*

In writing this story with Sam and throughout our conversations, I was struck by the spiritual aspects. Not just how early experiences of religion impacted and continue to impact him, but also the events that occurred felt almost mystical. The emergence of a mentor when he needed her most, the ever-present intergenerational shadows within his family, the presence of his family and culture’s histories within him, and the deep sense of connection to himself and community all lent an air of spirituality. Indeed, in co-creating this, I felt something like this as well. I felt something flow through me with ease as I stepped out of my logical, “by the book” way of doing things and into something more intuitive and deeper within myself. I think back to earlier in this dissertation when I spoke of a (re)turning home, back to oneself. I felt that here. It was also in this narrative inquiry process – of going between texts and listening to myself and Sam – that I could go about writing and reflecting with greater ease. And, in doing so, this powerful story of *soro soke* came to fruition.

**Steven (non-binary; he/they)**

Steven and I had many lovely conversations. They were very hopeful, and I often left with more energy and excitement. Though the world is so often in turmoil, Steven's words led me to feel hopeful for the future and motivated to make change. This is sorely needed in these tumultuous times. Though my intention with this dissertation was to encourage a shift in narratives, I also had not expected my conversations with participants to be so hopeful and uplifting. Throughout this narrative inquiry journey, I have also started to realize that I am easily swept away by news stories and certain discourses that fill me with fear and dread. I myself fall victim to the narratives that I am actively striving to change. But when I talked to Steven, I realized that, on an individual level, there are often many moments of joy, excitement, possibility, love, and hope. And so, I am continually working to shift my own internalized narratives.

Throughout our conversations, I also appreciated Steven's humour and openness. Despite our somewhat frequent technological difficulties, our conversations flowed naturally. Steven was easy to talk to and he said such profound things that I often scrambled to my research journal afterwards to write all the metaphors, ideas, and reflections that emerged. Throughout our conversations, Steven and I also discussed how he wanted his story and experiences of gender euphoria to be presented. Initially, he considered a short story to articulate his experiences. But as we progressed, Steven felt a poem would be the best fit for him as it was an artistic form that could beautifully present himself and his stories. Due to circumstances in his life at the time, he was not able to be as active in the writing process and requested that I write the bulk of the poem and share with him to get his feedback. We discussed what the poem would entail, the messages he wanted to convey, and particular aspects he wanted to emphasize. I wove together Steven's

words from our conversations, and drew upon the themes (e.g., family, love and support, hope) and metaphors (e.g., army, nature) he often used. Steven also mentioned that he wanted his poem to be hopeful and convey “good vibes;” he wanted a poem that would be encouraging and foster feelings of joy, in line with the focus of gender euphoria. After the poem was created, it was sent to Steven who approved it as is. And so, after watching many YouTube videos on poetry writing, excessive use of a thesaurus, and constantly Googling “words that rhyme with \_\_\_,” this poem took its shape.

*Euphoria's Embrace*

In the quiet depths of self-discovery,  
Where courage thrives, and so, recovery,  
There exists a better life, one that is mine,  
Of being my true self, so beautifully divine.

No chains can bind us, no one can quell,  
I am my own, to you I will tell.  
With every step forward, our spirits ignite,  
For we are here, bringing warmth and light.

Laughter echoes through our hearts and minds,  
Joy springs eternal, in all of its kinds.  
Unwavering, unfaltering, we are here to stay,  
To the young ones, “Live freely, don't sway.”

For gender is woven into our core,  
A tapestry so vibrant, rich with lore.  
It is something within us, something we can't hide,  
A journey of dignity, of spirit and pride.

We live for our own hearts, not the rest,  
If you are willing, come be our guest.  
Those who love us see us, no masks to disguise,  
They embrace us for who we are, our allies.

Mom – my world – you hold my hand, stand by my side,  
With dad coming around, there's no need to hide.  
Your warmth is a beacon, a kind embrace,

Guiding us home, a safe, sacred place.

Gender euphoria, a gift to behold,  
Not a fleeting moment, but stories (re)told.  
From storms that once raged, the sun breaks the sky,  
Together we flower, no longer shy.

Hope keeps us moving, through shadows we tread,  
Like soldiers, across the world we spread.  
We'll walk together, a shield, we'll fight –  
Our kin, our relations – with all our might.

Every battle need not be won,  
But this army is second to none.  
An unmovable mountain, standing strong,  
“Don't worry now; it won't be long.”

So, here's to the journey, it will be alright,  
For in being ourselves, there is great delight.  
Together we flourish, happy as we are,  
Our lives are our canvas, we need not go far.

With every step, we create our own way,  
In the beauty of being, we choose to stay.  
Let's love one another, let's rise, let's be bold,  
For the stories of us are the treasures we hold.

So let the world see, let the colors beam,  
In this life, let this be our dream.  
For in the mirror, I find my home,  
In this life, I am never alone.

I often come back to this poem – I feel it “clicks” with Steven's and my own experiences. It feels like a testament to our relationship and conversations by emphasizing love, unity, and hope. I also love poetry (hence the starting poem of this dissertation), but I have often assumed that I am unable to write poetry. I was terrified when Steven first said he wanted to do a poem as a representation of his story. I started to retreat into my head and was flooded with worries about representing his story accurately, conveying the messages well, and generally writing a poem

that would not be complete garbage. But, I kept Steven's words and messages close and, to my surprise, this poem naturally flowed through me, just like with Sam's story. As I reflected on *why* the writing flowed so comfortably, I realized Steven and his words put me at ease and allowed me to connect with this deeper, more intuitive side of myself. Once I had put my worries, insecurities, assumptions, and expectations aside and allowed *us* to come through, this poem quickly took its shape. I had initially given myself two weeks to write this poem, but it instead only took me two hours. I drew strength from Steven's words which resonated with me and brought me a greater level of understanding so I could write these words from my heart. I was also comforted by the fact that Steven expressed support of *me* in writing this poem and in this research in general. He was relaxed and excited about it, and so I channeled these emotions into the writing process. It was a strange but welcome experience to step out of my mind and put trust in the process.

### **Solar (gender-fluid; any pronouns)**

Solar and I got along very well. We had a lot of similar interests and experiences, and spoke in similar ways. Our conversations were often filled with jokes and meme references, though I also admit to experiencing a bit of a generational difference when they would use particular Gen Z slang or reference a new artist. She is also a psychology student, so we talked a lot about the field, courses, and research in general. And perhaps most importantly, we also shared a deep love of cats.

From the beginning, Solar was brimming with ideas and insights; it was clear that, even before we met, she had been thinking deeply about her experiences with gender and gender euphoria. She was open to sharing her thoughts and experiences, and spoke openly about her journey. Major components of this journey for Solar have been creativity, art, and media. Solar

and I were both drawn to characters and media that involved shapeshifters; the idea of being able to change one's appearance at will was appealing to both of us. This is also why we are drawn to art; since literal shapeshifting is impossible, art allows for endless possibilities and the physical creation of what resides in our minds. For Solar, this often involved drawing, music, video games, and other forms of art. For me, it typically involves books, films, and extensive daydreaming. It used to also involve drawing, and perhaps this is something to return to as it was a great love of mine. This form of expressing oneself in a creative way was a form of euphoria for Solar; there are no limits or boundaries as to what can be created.

As we discussed a final research text, we bounced around several ideas; a virtual exhibition of art that resonated with Solar, a comic, or a video game. It was important to Solar that the final project be interactive and artistic, as this aligned with both of us. For the depiction of Solar's narrative account, they opted for a video game which they called *Beyond the Tides*. We collaboratively worked on the script (below) and the artwork. Solar took the lead in developing the video game due to my general lack of knowledge of technology and video games – the extent of which is limited to Pokémon Go and Animal Crossing – and I created a Tumblr page for people to submit positive messages following the video game. I was secretly relieved by this; as a millennial, I grew up with Tumblr and it is one of the few social media sites I actually know how to use. In addition, Solar created the characters in the game, and I drew the lighthouse. The purpose of the video game was to convey hopeful messages and be a positive experience for players. Solar expressed this was an opportunity for her to combine her experiences of euphoria and her love for video games. Also, Solar felt it would be a way to bring people together and offer a chance for connection – the hope was for the video game to resonate with people and to offer a chance for players to share hopeful messages with others.

Similar to the process of creating Steven's poem, I was petrified of having to draw something since I was very much out of practice. I searched through many, many pictures of lighthouses and tried to draw one that would not look terribly out of place next to Solar's wonderful drawings. It took several drafts until I finally put together a lighthouse that I was content with. Again, I was surprised that this was something I could do, having been out of practice and distant from art for a while. Solar then put the video game together at a speed that surprised me, and it only took a short time for "our baby," as Solar called it, to come together. And it is certainly a lovely baby. I have played the game a few times as it is exciting to see all our work come together; it truly does feel like a representation of our relationship and our shared vision.

The video game centres around the main character, a black cat, who becomes stranded at sea. Throughout the game, the cat encounters and interacts with several characters who guide them on their journey back home. The player chooses which direction and which character they want to interact with next. After interacting with each character, the player receives a puzzle piece. Once collecting all of the pieces, the player completes the puzzle, and the cat is able to return home. The script below details the interactions with each character throughout the game.

<https://beyondthetides.itch.io/beyond-the-tides>

<https://beyond-the-tides.tumblr.com/>

## INTRODUCTION

### THE JELLYFISH

[Player chooses to sail towards distant glow]

Cat: "I wonder where that light is coming from!"

Cat steers their little boat towards the glowing waves, feeling hopeful that they are nearing shore.

As they sail closer, the glow gets stronger but the horizon is just as endless as before.

Cat: "Maybe I am headed the wrong way?"

Nevertheless, they sail forwards until suddenly, the glowing disappears.

Dumbfounded, Cat glances in every direction.

Cat: "It's gone?"

Defeated, they curl into the corner of their boat.

The sun paints the sky in shades of blues and pinks.

Cat: "Maybe I was just imagining things."

They close their eyes as the night takes over.

Or...

At least they try to.

Cat: "Who left the lights on?"

Cat quickly open their eyes to see their boat aglow with hundreds of jellyfish bobbing up and down like apples at a fair.

Cat: "Oh what pretty things they are!"

Cat: "Can you hear me?"

The jellyfish do not answer.

Cat: "I guess you don't understand me. That's fair..."

Cat: "I've been sailing and sailing for who knows how long. My boat got caught up in a storm and now I don't know how to get home."

Silence.

Cat: "You are all so lucky...floating about. You just have to...exist...and you're already home."

The glow dims slightly.

Cat: “Sorry, that was rude.”

Cat: “Maybe you had to swim a long way to get to where you are.”

Cat: “Wait a minute...”

Cat: “Do you understand me?”

The jellyfish circle the boat as if they are creating a portal to another dimension.

Cat: “Oh wow! You are all so pretty!”

Cat cannot see their faces, but they imagine that the jellyfish are blushing.

Cat: “Ah...if you can, could you please show me the way to land?”

As if on cue, the jellyfish swim ahead of the boat, illuminating the path forwards like magic lanterns.

Cat: “Thank you!”

Cat steers the boat towards the light until the sun rises.

As the moon slips away, so does the glow of Cat’s new friends.

Cat: “Where did you all go? Is this it?”

Clink!

Cat: “A glass bottle?”

Cat: There appears to be a piece of paper inside.

[A puzzle appears on the screen]

Cat: “Maybe it’ll be important later.”

Surrounded by an endless sea, Cat is alone again.

But wait...what are those sounds?

SHARK:

[Player chooses to go towards frantic splashing sound]

Cat: “What’s that frantic splashing sound?”

Cat steers towards the sound of the struggling.

???: “Help! Help!”

A pointy fin...a shark? Is someone getting attacked by a shark?

Cat takes a deep breath. They survived a storm, they still have 8 lives left right?

As they approach the fin, it becomes clear that there isn’t anyone there besides them and the shark.

Then who needs help?

???: “Is someone there? Please help me! Over here!”

Cat’s eyes widen as rows of sharp teeth flash before their eyes.

Cat: “A...a...A SHARK!”

Cat cowers into a corner.

Shark: “Oh shoot! Sorry did I scare you?”

Cat slowly opens their eyes.

The great white shark is trapped in what appeared to be a fishing net.

Shark: “H-hi!”

Shark’s dark eyes stare back at Cat’s.

Shark: “Could you please help me? I’ve been stuck in this net for hours. I’m tired and I wanna go home.”

Shark’s teeth glint in the sun.

Cat: “Uhhhhh...”

Cat: “Okay! One sec.”

Cat takes a deep breath and then tries to lift the net off Shark.

Shark: “Hahaha that tickles!”

Cat: “Try to hold still! My claws are sharp!”

Shark: “Oh, okay.”

Cat reels the net onto the boat as Shark swims out with glee.

Shark: “Wahoo! I’m out! Thank you! Thank you!”

Cat: “Er...you’re not going to eat me are you?”

Shark widens their eyes.

Shark: “Whaaaat? Why would I eat my saviour?”

Shark’s stomach rumbles.

Shark: “Err....”

Cat: “Hmmm...I wonder why?”

Shark: “No no no! I won’t eat you!”

Cat’s stomach rumbles.

Shark: “You won’t eat ME either, right?”

Cat: “No...”

Shark: “Okay! Wait right here!”

With that, Shark swims off.

Cat: “That was...a strange encounter.”

Cat glances at the fishing net.

Cat: “A fishing net...That means...”

They smile.

Cat: "There's land...somewhere."

A fin in the water appears in the water.

Shark's head emerges and in their mouth are two poor fish.

Shark: "Mmm hwun"

Cat: "Pardon?"

Shark throws a fish into Cat's boat and gobbles up the other one.

Shark: "Ah that hits the spot. Here, that fish is for you! As a lil thank you for saving me."

Cat: "Oh thank you!"

Cat eats the fish happily.

Cat: "You know, you're not really how I imagined sharks to be."

Shark: "What do you mean?"

Cat: "Well, I thought sharks would be...you know...scary and blood thirsty."

Shark: "Me? Scary? Blood thirsty?"

Shark: "I think I'm pretty cute! And as for being bloodthirsty, I just hunt when I need to.

Everyone needs to eat."

Shark: "Do you think I'm scary now?"

Cat: "To be honest, yes."

Shark: "It's the teeth isn't it?"

Shark: "I swear I have way more fun dancing than hunting"

Cat: "Dancing?"

Shark: "Dancing!"

Shark: "Want to see?"

Cat: "You know what? Sure!"

With that, Cat's new friend dives into the water and leaps over their boat, a rainbow forming as the water droplets glimmer in the sun.

Cat covers their head as water rains down.

Cat: "Woah! Be careful!"

Shark: "Oops!"

Shark emerges and twists and twirls in the water before finally stopping and smiling at Cat.

Cat claps.

Cat: "Bravo!"

Shark: "Thank you! Gosh. I've been waiting to dance for someone else for a long time. The other sharks think it's silly."

Cat: "I don't think it's silly. It's neat."

Shark: "Right? You get me, Cat. I wish more people knew me as someone who just liked dancing instead of ...what did you say earlier?"

Cat: "Blood thirsty and scary?"

Shark: "Blood thirsty and scary! That's far from the truth."

Shark circles the boat before nudging it.

Shark: "By the way, aren't you far from home? I don't see many cats around here."

Cat: "Yes...I got caught up in a storm."

Shark: "Really? Oh no. Hmm...Oh wait! If you're from the land, maybe this will help!"

Shark swims off and when they return, they have a glass bottle in their mouth.

Cat hesitantly takes the bottle from Shark's mouth and opens it.

Another piece of paper.

[Another puzzle piece appears on the screen]

Shark: "I found it when I was looking for fish for us to share!"

Shark: "It's not much use to me but maybe it means something to you?"

Cat: "Thank you! I'm not sure what it's for either but I appreciate it."

Shark: "Awwww. I appreciate YOU! Anyway, I gotta go home now. It was nice meeting you, Cat!"

Shark: "I hope you'll make it home soon!"

Cat: "Thanks, Shark!"

Cat waves as their finned friend dramatically disappears into the sunset.

Cat: "How poetic."

Cat: "Well now I know what the noise was. I wonder what the other noises were coming from?"

## ALBATROSS

[choose to look up]

Cat sits in their boat, feeling defeated.

They have sailed so far already.

A break can't hurt.

Cat: "You know...I've looked right and left and spun in a circle, but I haven't looked up. Maybe there's a plane that might be able to help me?"

Cat gets on their tippy paws and looks up to see what appears to be a bird with oversized wings circling their ship!

Cat: "Oh my! A bird! Down here! Could you please help me?"

The bird seems to hear Cat and swoops down and...crashes into the sail?!

??? : "Ouch!"

The large bird rolls out clumsily and plops onto the floor.

Cat is bewildered by their guest's massive grey wings and sharp dark eyes.

???: "Ahem...I meant to do that haha."

The bird quickly gets up extends his wing to Cat's paw.

Cat shakes it and the bird grins.

Albatross: "My name's Albatross. And you are...?"

Cat: "You can call me Cat."

Albatross: "Cat! I haven't seen a cat since..."

Albatross counts by tapping his beak on the boat.

Albatross: "50 moons ago!"

Cat: "Moons...that's an interesting way of counting days."

Albatross: "Oh is that what you landlubbers call moons? Days?"

Albatross shakes his head.

Albatross: "Anyway, what's on your mind, my friend? You seem tense. Worried."

Cat: "Well, I think you can tell but...I don't belong here. I'm trying to get to land but I'm lost at sea."

Albatross: "Aw, poor thing. At least you have your boat right?"

Cat: "Yes, but it doesn't help that I don't know where to go from here."

Albatross: "Don't know where to go? Well I'd go wherever the wind takes me!"

Cat: "What? You mean...don't steer the ship?"

Cat: "How do you know you're going the right way?"

Albatross chuckles.

Albatross: "You know, you remind me of myself when I was younger."

Albatross: “Well, I mean I am still quite young and handsome if I do say so myself!”

Albatross: “Anyway, you see, back in the day, it was a weird time when my friends started settling down. You know, find a mate for life sort of deal.”

Albatross: “And I tried. I really did. I was worried about what others would think if I was the only single one. Gosh. Imagine being a third-wheel forever.”

Albatross: “But the truth was, I could care less about finding a mate. Staying in one place for a long time doesn’t sit well for me either.”

Albatross: “One day, I was flying to distress and a HUGE gust of wind went against the direction I was going.”

Albatross: “So I fought and fought. It was quite tiring and I was more stressed than I was before.”

Albatross: “But then, I took a chance and I decided to relax and let the wind guide me where to go.”

Albatross: “I ended up landing on a small island. Quite beautiful. There were some books laying around written by someone called Zhuangzi.”

Albatross: “Very interesting stuff. I learned something pretty valuable.”

Cat: “What did you learn?”

Albatross: “Do not struggle. Go with the flow of things, and you will find yourself at one with the mysterious unity of the Universe”

Cat: “That’s beautiful.”

Albatross: “Right? There’s a big world out there. A whole universe to explore. Isn’t that exciting?”

Cat: “Yes...I guess so.”

Albatross wraps a wing around Cat.

Albatross: “That’s a long winded way for me to say that wherever you are on your journey, Cat, follow where the wind takes you. Fighting against what feels true to you will only wear you down.”

Cat: “That’s a very kind thing to say.”

Albatross: “I’m a very kind bird. I’m really good with directions too! I was definitely not lost when I found you, hahah!”

Albatross sweats. (Cat thought birds couldn’t sweat.)

Cat: “That’s great and all, but there isn’t any wind right now.”

Albatross: “Ohohoh, that’s where I can help you.”

Albatross lifts off and flies behind the sail.

Albatross: “Good bye, Cat! Good luck on your journey!”

Cat: “Oh! Wow! Thank you so much! Good bye!”

The large bird flaps his mighty wings, blowing Cat’s boat farther and farther until Cat can no longer see him.

## THE BLUE WHALE

Cat is lying down on the boat, drifting aimlessly. They look a little defeated as they feel lost and uncertain what to do next.

Suddenly, something bumps the bottom of their boat. It feels huge and Cat is knocked around.

Cat: “What was that?!”

Cat looks over the edge of the boat and sees something giant beneath the surface. Cat starts shaking out of fear.

The creature underwater turns around to look at Cat.

Whale: “Oopsies! Sorry about that! Didn’t see you there. I was just basking in the light! I look lovely in the sunlight, don’t I, little one?”

Cat is still shaking.

Cat: “Y-yes.”

Whale: “Haha yes, I know I do! You have a good eye!”

Cat is too scared to speak. Blue Whale eyes them curiously.

Whale: “Well, I’ve never seen someone like you around! What a cutie you are!”

Cat: “M-me?”

Whale: “Yes, you! What’re you doing out here? Going on an adventure?”

Cat: “A-actually, I’m lost. I don’t know how I got here... And I’m scared of water... And I don’t know how to swim!”

Whale: “Oh my, you poor thing. Maybe I can help you get back home?”

Cat blinks at the word “home” and lays down, looking sad.

Cat: “I don’t know... Maybe... maybe I shouldn’t go back...”

Whale: “What do you mean?”

Cat pauses for a moment.

Cat: “Well, you see, I’m a black cat, everyone thinks I’m bad luck. I think it’s better if I just... disappear. I don’t want to upset anyone. I’m scared that if I *do* take up too much space... well, I don’t want to find out what will happen.”

The blue whale is quiet for a moment.

Whale: “Well. They are *totally* wrong.”

Cat blinks.

Whale: “You have every right to exist! Just like everyone else! What gives them the right to say who can and can’t stick around? I say: take up as much space as possible and show them who’s boss!”

Cat: “What do you mean?”

Whale: “I mean, walk around with confidence! If you’re not feeling confident, fake it til you make it! That’s what I did. And look at me – I’m the biggest animal in the world! And there’s still plenty of space for everyone. If they don’t like it? Well, that sounds like an issue for *them* to sort out.”

Cat: “Hm... I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

Whale: “It takes time to get there. It even took me a while. But now, even if I could, I wouldn’t change myself for anyone. Everyone can deal with it or leave, I don’t care! If they dislike me or judge me for taking up space, that’s on them, not me. Look at me – I’m amazing! And so are you.”

Cat blinks then smiles.

Whale: “Peoples’ prejudices are their own problem. It’s not for you to accommodate or fix for them.”

The wind starts to pick up and the waves become more intense.

Whale: “Looks like the weather’s gonna take a turn for the worse! You should get back to land before a storm rolls in.”

Cat: “... I’m not sure which way to go. I’m not even really sure which direction I came from!”

Whale: “Not to worry! I’ll give you a good wave and you’ll reach land in no time. And if you don’t land in the right spot, I’m sure one of my friends can give you a hand. Or a fin haha!”

Cat smiles.

Cat: “Thank you... for everything. You’ve given me a lot to think about. I’m gonna- I’m gonna listen to your advice. At least, I’m gonna try my hardest.”

Whale smiles.

Whale: “That’s all you can do. Now, lemme help you get you back to land. Ready? Hold on tight!”

Cat grips the raft with their claws and Whale lifts their tail high in the air, then slams it into the water creating a huge wave.

Whale: “Bye-bye! And good luck!”

## THE HERMIT CRAB

Cat lands on a sandy shore, but they don’t recognize the place. It’s too small of an island to be where they’re from.

Bored, Cat paws the sand, thinking about what to do.

Cat: “I could get on the raft and go back on the water... or maybe I should rest here for a bit. I am feeling quite tired- OW!!”

Cat pulls its paw out of the sand after feeling a sharp pain.

Cat: “Something bit me!”

A small hermit crab with a spiky shell crawls out of the sand.

Crab: “Oops, sorry! I thought I found a worm. I knew it was too good to be true. But don’t worry, I just pinched ya, I don’t bite.”

Cat: “O-okay.”

Now that the hermit crab is out of the sand and dusted itself off, Cat gets a good look at it.

Cat: “Your shell looks a little different from the hermit crabs I’ve seen. I like it, though.”

Crab: “Oh thank you! It’s a murex shell. Not the go-to choice for a lot of hermit crabs. Everyone I know wants those round shells. Or sometimes the cone-shaped ones. Which look super nice, but it’s just not for me, you know?”

Cat nods.

Crab: “They think the murex shells are too spiky, too *aggressive*. But I think it looks cool!”

Cat: “It does! I like it a lot.”

Crab: “Thank you!! When I saw it, I just *knew* it was for me. I always had a round shell when I was little, but I just felt weird in it? It wasn’t comfortable. It wasn’t *me*. But *this* fits perfectly. It makes me feel like me!”

Crab looks at Cat curiously.

Crab: “Tell me, what makes you feel like *you*?”

Cat is quiet for a moment.

Cat: “I don’t think I have anything like that.”

Crab: “Oh that’s okay! It takes time. It took me a few years to find the perfect shell for me.”

Cat looks like they’re thinking for a moment.

Cat: “Was it hard for you to be different from everyone else?”

Crab: “Hm, a bit at first. But it was harder to be something that I was not. Besides, the way I see it, I’m the one who has to live in this body so I have to be comfortable in it. I want to make it mine!”

Cat: “You make a good point... I suppose I’ve just been so worried about what everyone else thinks that I just haven’t spent a lot of time thinking about who I actually am.”

Crab “holds” Cat’s paw.

Crab: “That’s normal. Just take your time. It’s a process. And the outer shell is just one piece of the puzzle, you know?”

Cat smiles.

## THE SEA SNAKE

Cat is drifting on the ocean. The water is calm with a few gentle waves.

Cat is suddenly startled upon seeing a long, striped snake. Cat worries that the snake will drown and goes to pull it out of the water. But when Cat touches the snake, they just pull out a thin skin.

Cat: “Huh?”

Sea snake: “Over here, my good friend!”

Cat jumps and looks to the other side of the raft. There, the striped snake is floating.

Cat: “Oh! Hello there! Are you okay? Can you swim?”

Sea snake: “Oh yes, I’m a sea snake.”

Cat: “Ooh, I’ve never seen a sea snake before. Sorry for, uh, mistaking your skin for you.”

Sea snake: “It’s alright. I’ve just shed it.”

Cat pauses.

Cat: “Does it... hurt to shed your skin?”

Sea snake: “Actually, no. It feels good. Sometimes it just gets too small for me and doesn’t work anymore. So, it gets time for a new skin. It’s like starting new.”

Cat, to herself: “Wish I could do that...”

Sea snake: “Hm?”

Cat: “Oh, ah, nothing. I just... I guess I wish I could do that sometimes. Shed my skin, start fresh.”

Sea snake pauses, considering Cat.

Sea snake: “You’re having a tough time right now, aren’t you?”

Cat sighs and lays down.

Cat: “A little bit. And, well, being stranded out at sea isn’t helping things. I’m trying to find my way back. If I even want to go back...”

Sea snake slithers closer to look at Cat.

Sea snake: “Hm. I’ve seen many lost ones like you before, my friend. I can’t promise that it will get easier or if you’ll ever reach a final destination, but as you go along in your journey, you’ll get a better understanding of your lack of understanding of yourself and the world around you.”

Cat blinks.

Cat: “I might... *not* understand?”

Sea snake: “Some things are hard to make sense of. Some things just aren’t tangible or achievable because it’s a process. It’s not always something you can see or hear or touch. Like when I shed my skin. It feels good physically of course, but I *feel* different. It’s like letting go of that skin, that past part of myself and continuing on to something better and more fitting of my current self. I’ve changed many times over my life, but I’ve never felt more like myself as I do now. And, the next time I shed my skin, it will bring a new feeling and a new start.”

Cat: “So... it’s more about how you feel? How will I know? What’s it like?”

Sea snake: “It depends on you, who you are and what works for you. Try not to think too hard about it; allow yourself to *feel* and allow things to happen as they need to. It’ll take some time and exploration, but that’s natural. It’s about the journey and finding what’s right for *you*.”

Cat: “Phew, it’ll definitely take some time to get out of my head like that! But that’s good advice. Sometimes I’m too stuck in my head and I miss things...”

Sea snake: “We can get so wrapped up *thinking* about who we are that we forget to simply exist. Give yourself the time and space, and let things *flow*.”

Cat is about to ask what they mean, when the sea snake starts to float away.

Cat: “Wait! I have more questions!!”

Sea snake: “That’s something I can’t tell you, my friend. You know more than you think. Listen to yourself and see where that takes you. I wish you well!”

With that, the sea snake dips below the surface and disappears.

### **Summary of Personal Narratives**

Co-creating the research texts above was the most enjoyable part of this dissertation. I enjoyed and appreciated the creativity that participants brought and how their experiences of gender euphoria came to light. It was also exciting to get in touch with my creative side which I admit has been largely neglected for many years.

Throughout the conversations with participants and the co-creation of their projects, I felt *changed*. I had anticipated that I would learn from them, but I did not realize that I would also experience a shift within myself. A piece of this shift was from returning to a previous love: art. I had moved away from art during my academic pursuits. I was influenced by broader discourses of art as only a “hobby” to turn to when one has free time, rather than viewing it as a valuable source of connection, expression, understanding, and self-care. In welcoming space for art, I could reconnect with different parts of myself that had been forgotten and left behind when I left art behind. I am beginning to view myself as a creative person. I often have my “head in the clouds” which I previously conceptualized as a “silly” trait that draws me away from the important day-to-day tasks, like academics and work. I realize now that my mind was trying to pull me into my imagination and creativity that it so longed for. In this narrative inquiry process

and connecting with my participants, I have grown in my ability to make space for art, creativity, and imagination.

This research was also a process of learning from others' inner knowledge and recognizing my own. I connected with the knowledge they shared with me and allowed myself to be affected and influenced by this. Often, I have experienced messaging around the importance of objectivity and not allowing oneself to be affected emotionally by others, that doing so is almost dangerous. However, in my conversations with participants and the creation of these narrative accounts, I felt their knowledge and my knowledge from our experiences weave together into something spectacular. In this journey, I also came to realize the importance of welcoming and greeting this knowledge – of myself, others – instead of shying away from it. In the past, the research I have done has, in a sense, felt partially removed from me. In doing this narrative inquiry, I initially set out to do the same though I was not entirely aware of this at the time. I had anticipated self-disclosure, but I had not recognized the depth to which I would be speaking. I also did not realize the deep, personal shift and growth that occurred. Throughout the research, this negotiation and tension I experienced became a back and forth, a tug of war at some points, particularly moments that required me to be open and vulnerable. In speaking with my participants, I became more and more comfortable with my own knowledge as I heard and learned from theirs. I returned to the knowledge that I once held – self-understanding and acceptance, creativity and imagination, and so on – and wove it together with the new knowledge I gleaned. As is often the case when I interact with people who are supportive and accepting, I felt that I had *permission* to get in touch with myself and, in doing so, I also felt that I was honouring and respecting my participants. It was important to me that they feel a sense of kinship and that they knew who I was and my intentions and so this warranted the self-

disclosures of identity, positionality, and intentionality. Furthermore, the moments where I would work on my parts of the research texts gave me a chance to privately dig deep into myself and recognize what I can offer. I have been learning to trust myself and the knowledge I possess. I *do* know who I am and what I want; I often sought permission to be myself, but I am steadily recognizing that I can offer this permission to myself. In welcoming, recognizing, and respecting the knowledge my participants and I shared, I experienced a shift. Though I am still in the midst of this journey of acknowledging and welcoming my own knowledge, this process has given me the space and permission to do so.

### **Narrative Threads**

In this next part of the findings, I will highlight narrative threads that emerged in the interviews. Namely, I will discuss the relevance and significance of cultural (inter)connections, representation, community and support, and the use of metaphors in participants' experiences of gender euphoria. These threads emerged from what Sam, Solar, and Steven directly brought up in our conversations, and integrated with the reflections from my research journal. In this research journal I noted key points, my own reflections and wonderings, and additional exploration I did around points that were brought up in our conversations, such as histories and interpretation of media (e.g., *Moonlight*).

These threads came to be in various ways. The threads were aspects that resonated and offered insightful reflections into the experience of gender euphoria. In my research journal, I noted moments in conversations with participants that evoked emotional responses from me and participants, offered insights or ideas I had not considered or realized, and connections to my own experiences and across participants. These threads were “reverberations” or “resonant echoes” (Clandinin et al., 2020, p. 278); they lingered in my mind and in the forefront and/or

background of my interactions with the participants. The threads felt inseparable from participants' experiences and knowledge of gender euphoria, and I did not want these resonances to be lost. I also felt it important to include these threads as I found they offered possibilities and alternatives. These threads offer avenues for exploration and understanding, whether it be exploring one's own cultural and family histories or delving into media that provides representation. My main intention was to articulate important experiences offered by participants, and I also hoped that it would encourage readers to explore and wonder (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Thread 1: Cultural (Inter)Connections**

As I was engaging with this narrative inquiry and writing this section, I was working with a client whose experiences echoed those of my participants. She identified as a Two-Spirit transwoman who, at the time we were working together, was in the midst of navigating what this meant for her. A large part of her identity and gender exploration journey was reconnecting with her Indigenous heritage. The current political climate in Alberta (i.e., looming transmissia) and the dominance of White, colonial ideals impacted her understanding of and connection to her gender. In exploring her Indigenous roots, she developed a greater awareness and knowledge of herself and her gender. Specifically, she gradually came to recognize that the distress she was experiencing was placed onto her by a colonial system that restricted her gender identity and expression. By (re)connecting with her Indigenous heritage, she challenged what gender can look like and mean, and felt supported in broadening her perspectives and sources of connection (e.g., ancestors) and knowledge. A significant part of her growing self-acceptance came from knowing "my ancestors would support me," specifically referencing her Indigenous ancestors and the openness to gender expression and experience in many Indigenous cultures. I was struck, first

and foremost, by the power of this statement. I was also struck by the parallels between her account and the participants in this study. I struggled to find the vocabulary to articulate this connection between my research world and work world – perhaps “coincidence,” “synchronism,” or “coexistence” of experience – but regardless, the significance of cultural connections in the exploration of gender and gender euphoria cannot be understated. This client was yet another person who influenced me and illuminated the importance of (re)connecting with cultural histories.

Throughout my conversations with Sam, Solar, and Steven, cultural factors and connections emerged as important resonances, both in terms of their lives in general and also in terms of gender euphoria. These cultural factors often included ethnicity, sexual orientation, political climates (of home and familial countries), colonization, and religion, and provided a context and space through which participants could understand and come to know their experiences. Cultural considerations emerged both in response to specific questions I asked during our conversations to explore their personal experience (see Appendix D) and naturally as they spoke of their stories. In the following paragraphs, I will delve into participants’ experiences of gender euphoria and various cultural (inter)connections, illuminating the multidimensionality of their experience and knowledge. In addition, I provide further exploration into various aspects participants mentioned and additional information and areas of interpretation as they pertain to participants’ experiences.

Steven and Sam identified sexuality as important in their experiences and understanding of gender and gender euphoria. Specifically, Steven talked about how he came to know he was gay before understanding he was non-binary, and how coming out as gay to others helped him come out as non-binary later. Having the knowledge and the experience of sharing a part of

himself, and witnessing the responses of others, supported his ability to share himself with others again. Similar to Sam, part of gender euphoria for Steven was being able to live openly and have those in his life be aware of his gender and sexual orientation. Sam often spoke of his gender identity and sexual orientation together. As we spoke of gender euphoria, sexuality emerged alongside and within it. I admit that I initially experienced a tension with this. I have often held the perspective that gender and sexuality are entirely separate identities. Perhaps this was born out of a frustration with the conflation of gender and sexuality that often exists as a way to lump everyone's experiences within the 2SLGBTQ+ community together. After my first conversation with Sam, I remember turning to my reflection journal and my proposal for this research. I was a little embarrassed that I had done exactly what I did not want to do; I made an assumption about what the experience of gender and gender euphoria would be, and almost dismissed a resonant experience for both Sam and Steven. I was thinking too black-and-white; gender does not equal sexual orientation, but the two may be related, connected, and woven together in various ways (Crenshaw, 1989). For Sam, his sexual orientation paved the way for gender exploration, and also provided avenues for connection through coming out. For Steven, his gender identity and sexual orientation were woven together and provided him with access to community and connection.

Throughout our conversations, Sam and I also discussed various identities and contextual factors that are important to him, including sexuality, politics, and culture. In these conversations, I was reminded of the impact of narrative commonplaces (temporality, sociality, place) that are present in our experiences. Sam brought up the recent context and anti-2SLGBTQ+ laws in Uganda, as well as transmisia that seems to be simmering in Alberta and elsewhere. Sam noted Uganda, and Africa more broadly, as his "ancestral home" and therefore

described feeling deeply affected by the anti-2SLGBTQ+ sentiments in politics (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Sam also spoke of (re)connecting with his Haitian and African culture, recognizing their histories and that the current anti-2SLGBTQ+ atmospheres are not always representative of the community's roots. I recognize that, in this, there is also a tension; a desire to connect with one's culture while knowing that the current beliefs in that community may tend towards a lack of support. Sam also acknowledged that his Haitian and African background was a part of his family's life, but not his own. His parents grew up in Haiti before immigrating to Canada, and so they experienced life and culture in Haiti firsthand. Sam spoke of wanting this connection to his roots as well, but felt it was often withheld from him. There was often a shadow of secrecy that followed his family for generations, which led to a distance between Sam and his culture. Sam stated that his family's history, as well as his parents' upbringing and own stories, were not openly discussed and he was therefore largely unaware of this part of their lives. It seemed that this was a common pattern throughout several generations. In our conversations, Sam mentioned aspects of his culture and family history that he was beginning to adopt and integrate into his life, such as Haitian Vodou and folklore. He also expressed appreciation for the Nigerian term, *soro soke*, which contributed to his experiences of gender euphoria and comfort of living freely.

Through my exploration and learning, I delved into some history. It would, of course, be impossible to do a full history of gender and sexual diversity in Africa, nor would it be ethical to attempt to do so. Additionally, each country, region, and culture will have its own unique history. However, there is extensive research and available articles that detail the history of diverse gender and sexual experiences and identities throughout Africa, especially pre-colonization. Mohammed Elnaiem, a Sociology student whose work focuses on decolonization efforts, stated

that same-sex marriages and relations were historically common throughout Africa, and many European colonizers described such relationships in disrespectful ways and thus sought to change them in accordance with European Christianity and traditions (2021). In addition, Elnaiem went on to state, "...it is not homosexuality and trans identities that are a colonial import into Africa, but homophobia and transphobia instead." (2021, p. 1). This statement was echoed by countless other articles and documents, which highlight the long-lasting, harmful impacts of colonial homophobia and transmisia, as well as the historical presence of gender and sexual diversity in Africa (Alozie, 2021; Buckle, 2020; Evaristo, 2014; Kimuhu, 2022; Minority Africa, 2020; Muiga, 2019; Westman, 2023). Having this knowledge and awareness offers avenues for exploration and validation. By hearing and seeing the presence of diverse gender and sexual identities and experiences historically in various cultures, people can (re)connect with their identities in various ways. These pre-colonial histories also offer affirmation and validation of the existence of 2SLGBTQ+ people throughout history, challenging discourses that gender and sexual diversity are "new" and "modern" identities.

Cultural factors were also resonant for Solar. Specifically, Solar mentioned ethnicity and cultural history as important in their experience of gender euphoria. The history of gender and sexual diversity in China has been significant in how she has connected to both her culture and her gender. In our conversations, Solar discussed a sense of euphoria in learning about queer stories in China's history, as knowledge of the histories and stories was affirming and validating of her identities. One example Solar mentioned is 兔兒神 (*Tu'er Shen*), the Rabbit God, who represents and looks after romantic and sexual relationships between men (Davidson & Lin, 2023; Ren & Zhu, 2023). The presence of such a figure validates the existence of 2SLGBTQ+ folks in Chinese history, and also demonstrates the awareness and attention to sexual diversity.

Another is the story of Uncle Olive, who was a lesbian and possible trans individual in Myanmar. Uncle Olive was born into royalty and resisted gender norms throughout their life by dressing in ways considered unconventional and resisting foot-binding, a common practice for women at the time. Uncle Olive also resisted marriage and parenthood and went on to become a very successful opium warlord (Paluch, 2017), which was one of the few paths that were available to Uncle Olive at the time, and which provided an avenue to escape constricting expectations of women. For Solar, Uncle Olive is a figure who represents resistance of gender norms and expectations, and was someone that held much power and influence. Given common discourses of sexual and gender minorities as having little power, the story of Uncle Olive offered promise and an alternative to less empowering narratives. In addition, there is the famous story of a loving, queer relationship in China's history that has been absorbed by many as validation of queer identities and relationships throughout the country's history:

In the last years BCE, Emperor Ai was enjoying a daytime nap. He was in his palace, in Chang'an (now Xi'an, China), hundreds of miles inland, wearing a traditional long-sleeved robe. Lying on one of his sleeves was a young man in his 20s, Dong Xian, also asleep. So tender was the emperor's love for this man that, when he had to get up, instead of waking his lover, he cut off the sleeve of his robe. (Prager, 2020, p. 1)

The presence of stories of 2SLGBTQ+ figures in history, and specifically Chinese history for Solar, validates and affirms the existence of 2SLGBTQ+ throughout time. It also offers promise and possibility in that these stories and figures were celebrated and positioned in positive lights and so, such a positioning is possible again.

Solar also spoke of experiencing traditional Chinese clothing as a component of gender euphoria, in that it has been a way for them to both connect with their gender and (re)connect

with their history and culture. Specifically, Solar expressed appreciation for Han Dynasty clothes (e.g., hanfu) as they feel androgynous, an aesthetic which often brings Solar a sense of gender euphoria. Typically, Han Dynasty clothes, for all genders, often consist of long robes or skirts, and various accessories including jewelry and fans. Clothing was also often adorned and embellished with symbols of significance (e.g., dragons, phoenixes). Therefore, traditional Han Dynasty clothing offered Solar with an opportunity to connect with her culture and androgynous clothing that evokes euphoria in her gender identity.

Solar stated she is bicultural and that she has combined aspects of Western culture, and modern and ancient Chinese culture. Doing so has allowed her to connect with her identity and bring about a sense of belonging,

...taking what I have from these various cultures in my life and kind of meshing what I like about them kind of helped me shape who I am... so culture has kind of become this mishmash of this like celebrating festivities. That brings me close to my culture. Bringing me closer to my identity makes me feel like I belong.

Solar also discussed the influence of colonization on China's conceptualization of gender, and how uncovering this history and connecting with China prior to Western influence and imperialism has contributed to experiences of gender euphoria. For instance, Solar mentioned the existence and prevalence of gender-neutral pronouns in China before Western influence on language (Batson, 2023). Solar said she experienced a sense of euphoria in imagining herself "finding my way through the world and not going by any gendered pronouns." For them, there was also an imaginal component to gender euphoria by imagining what it would be like to navigate the world without always being gendered. Imagining and connecting with this pre-

imperialism era China, and before the introduction of gendered pronouns, offered Solar an opportunity to experience this world.

Another key aspect of culture for Solar as it pertains to their experience of gender euphoria is the concept of *wuwei* (or *wu wei*; 无为) in Chinese philosophy. *Wuwei* was initially discussed in early Daoism and describes the practice of non-action/inaction and allowing natural flow as a way to experience harmony. The idea is that allowing things to happen as they need to will lead to greater congruence between the person's intentions and what ultimately occurs (Stefon, 2013). By not forcing something to occur, it is allowed to happen in the way the universe intended and thus leads to the ability to flourish and thrive. Solar described how this connected to her experience of gender euphoria,

I was doing this Chinese philosophy reading and then their description of something called *wuwei*, which is like doing without doing and spontaneous action. And when you do it, you have this charismatic power. And I feel like that's what gender euphoria feels like to me. It's like this charismatic power. But you're not trying to get the power, you're just spontaneously being you. And that's what it feels like to me. And then when you radiate this, uh, charismatic power, I feel like it does definitely allow me to be more myself. And it allows me to communicate with others better.

I was quite drawn to this concept as well because it felt like a “coming home,” which I referred to earlier, in that it allows things to happen and exist as they are, without forcing or changing anything. In my further exploration of *wuwei*, I came across a section of a translated excerpt from an early Daoist text that I felt articulated the concept and experience, particularly how Solar described it,

When your body is not aligned

The inner power will not come.

When you are not tranquil within

Your mind will not be well ordered.

Align your body, assist the inner power

Then it will gradually come on its own (Roth, 1999, p. 66)

I found this excerpt explained *wuwei* well, specifically the naturalness of the experience followed by power, congruence, and enlightenment that comes from allowing things to flow. Perhaps why I appreciated this concept as well is that it connects with my belief system and my general intentions in doing this research, where I wanted to highlight the strength of allowing people to exist as they are, without forcing them to change.

For Solar and Sam, much of their experience of gender euphoria involved a movement towards their culture, as Solar described, “Being able to connect to these more, I wouldn't say super ancient, but pre-colonial ideas of gender in ancient China does relate back to identity of feeling oneness of being the individual, but also oneness with culture.” She spoke of becoming distant from her culture due to experiences of discrimination and stereotyping but has since found a sense of gender euphoria from (re)engaging and (re)connecting to her ancestry. Sam, similarly, discussed a distance from his culture due to generational silence and secrecy, and his journey to growing in his understanding and knowledge of himself encompasses an exploration and reconnection with his culture.

Sam also mentioned his interest in Haitian music, drama, and the Vodou religion. Having little knowledge of Haitian culture and Vodou myself, I dug into some of the background, specifically as it related to Sam's experiences. I certainly do not position myself as an expert in Vodou, nor having any kind of in-depth knowledge of the religion, but there were aspects and

beliefs that stood out to me because of my conversations with Sam. An area I was particularly struck by was rebirth in Vodou and how it related to a common thread in Sam's experiences of "rising from the ashes" and living his life as himself. From my readings (and certainly, this may not be the beliefs of everyone who practices Vodou), I learned that, for many in the Haitian Vodou tradition, the belief is that the souls of the deceased descend into rivers and emerge a year and a day later – their "rebirth" (Bellegarde-Smith, 2004; Danticat, 2011; Rey, 2024). When they reemerge, the souls are reincarnated as people, trees or other natural beings, or in the air that we breathe. It is through this that a continuous thread to ancestors and previous generations is maintained. Reading this reminded me of Sam's experience of generational shadows and silence; there are certain aspects of existence that appear to be passed on from generation to generation, whether it be a way of relating to the world or a presence in the air. The idea of rebirth offers the possibility of renewal and new beginnings – whether in this life or the next – all the while the thread to one's ancestors is held close. The sense of continuity throughout time elicits a sense of strong connection to one's roots and a bond that cannot be broken. Though there may be a generational silence in Sam's family, there will always be a continuous thread passed down through generations.

In my research journal, I reflected on a few points brought up by Sam and Solar; specifically, the aspect of colonization. Initially, during our conversations, there was something gnawing at me that I could not quite pinpoint. As I reflected on the narrative commonplaces (temporality, sociality, place) in doing this research, hearing the stories of participants, and exploring histories, the relevance of colonization and decolonizing identity felt particularly poignant. I sought to further explore contexts and histories, including the current state of the world and the various 2SLGBTQ+ movements and communities. While anything that brings

about positive experiences and futures for 2SLGBTQ+ people is worth celebrating, I wondered about the role of histories and current discourses. It seems that many countries and cultures held more open-minded views regarding sexual and gender diversity before Western colonization and imperialism. The colonial influence persisted and led to institutionalized homophobia and transmisia in many of these places, and current Western attitudes and discourses posit that these countries and cultures are inherently problematic. We are now celebrating colonial cultures for being progressive regarding 2SLGBTQ+ rights, as though we are pioneers and starting a new movement that all other places should idolize and aspire to. Indeed, the cultures that comprise my own background (Scandinavian, French, British, Irish, Scottish, Italian, Swedish) are often considered quite progressive today. However, as I explored their history, it was much more difficult to find evidence of support for 2SLGBTQ+ than other countries. I was not entirely surprised to find that Europe has not historically been supportive of queer and trans folks; however, I admit to assuming that this would be the case for virtually all countries and cultures. I thought that was how the world had been, and that we are just now making some progress. It is certainly not to say that every place is perfect and should not be held accountable for discrimination and imprisoning people for being queer or trans; rather, it is to situate these circumstances within a context and history of colonization and Western imperialism. It is also not to say that modern day progress should be stopped, but that it is important for us to understand those who came before.

All participants also spoke of the role of religion. Sam and Solar spoke of growing up with religion (Christianity and Catholicism, respectively), but noted a current distance from religion in large part due to the anti-2SLGBTQ+ messages they encountered in their churches. This was something I also connected with them on. Like Solar, I was raised Catholic. Though I

do not recall specific instances in my elementary school years where anti-2SLGBTQ+ sentiments were expressed, I later became aware of the prevalence of this in Catholicism and subsequently became distant from it. Steven also spoke of his faith, specifically Christianity, and the continued closeness he feels towards his faith. He did acknowledge a tension with his faith since coming out; Steven said he often heard in church negative messages about 2SLGBTQ+ folks, which contributed to his fears of coming out, “Me and my mom would attend on Sunday service, and they’d say, ‘homosexuals, lesbian, you’ll be punished by God in the pit of hell.’” Steven noted he still regularly attends Sunday service; for Steven, his faith has morphed, and he holds a more liberating view,

I’d say that the most important thing is who you are on the inside. What you do, how clean your hands are. ... As long as you have a clean heart, as long as you’re doing the good thing the Lord says you should do, I think you are good to go.

For Steven, his faith is more centered on innate kindness and doing things solely out of the goodness of your heart. In addition, Steven has found a supportive network through his church and noted that the people are welcoming, even if the messages presented in church are not,

I’m a good person and everybody knows, you know. They are cool with me. .... I don’t think there’s anybody here having a problem with me, because we are good. You know, because after Sunday service, we head out, BBQ, and hang out for a little while.

I find this demonstrates that faith can bring many things to people: a belief system, guidance, a community of love and support. And although Sam and Solar have, understandably, distanced themselves from some of the harmful perspectives put forth by their church, Steven’s account also shows the possibility of a community of support where people are grounded by their intentions of being good.

In sum, various cultural factors contributed to experiences of gender euphoria for Sam, Solar, and Steven. Ethnicity, cultural histories, faith, and sexual orientation were all identified as resonant experiences and identities in relation to gender euphoria. In addition to the connection and euphoria found within these cultural experiences, participants also mentioned the connection to various role models represented in media and history.

### **Thread 2: Representation and Role Models**

In our conversation, we also discussed artists, idols, media, and key figures who participants admired for their image and messaging around self-acceptance, empowerment, and pushing boundaries and challenging stereotypes. Many of these artists are gender non-conforming and have individualized styles and expressions that participants connected with. In this section, I will delve into specific artists who have inspired and empowered participants, and the significance this held for them. I have also included photos throughout as I feel having visual depictions further connects to participants' accounts and experiences.

Sam noted several artists as being important role models for him. Specifically, he noted Sam Smith (they/them) and Lil Nas X (he/him). Sam stated that both Sam Smith and Lil Nas X are unashamed of their identities and express their gender in creative ways. He appreciated their style, music, and lyrics, and credited this as helping him connect with his identity and sense of gender euphoria. Sam specifically noted these *Industry Baby* lyrics by Lil Nas X (2021) as empowering,

I don't run from nothin', dog  
Get your soldiers, tell 'em I ain't layin' low  
You was never really rootin' for me anyway  
When I'm back up at the top, I wanna hear you say

He don't run from nothin', dog

Get your soldiers, tell 'em that the break is over

In listening to this song, Sam said he felt motivated to speak about himself and his identities, and it helped him feel that, no matter what, he would be able to persevere. The song gave him strength and courage, which he noted as fueling euphoria in his identities.



[Top Left image]: Syed (2022)

[Above image]: Allaire (2021)

[Left image]: Syed (2022)

Like Sam, Steven also specifically mentioned Sam Smith and Lil Nas X as artists that inspired and empowered him. In particular, Steven spoke of his love for Sam Smith, “I love the way they are right now; I love so much that they came out.” He expressed appreciation for Sam Smith’s coming out and that they did not listen to people who told them not to, or who told them to look and be a certain way. “They kept pushing. They kept doing what makes them happy.

That’s the most important thing,” Steven said. They went on to say that Sam Smith inspires him,

They’re fully out, and they dropped the song that just won a Grammy. I’m so happy for them, like that really motivates me because– I know that I’m no celebrity...many people don’t know me the way they know Sam Smith. But they still have the courage, you know, not to listen to millions of people telling them what to do. They went and followed their heart, that’s the most important thing. Then I was like, if Sam Smith can overlook millions of people telling them how to dress, what to do... I said to myself, “I can do this just like Sam Smith.”

For Steven, much of his experience with gender euphoria came from his ability to live as himself, despite messaging from his church and broader society. And so, he saw himself in Sam Smith who, despite what other people told them and in the face of much criticism, came out and lived as their true self. Sam Smith challenges gender norms and expectations through their style (Syed, 2022) and confidence, which gave Sam the confidence to live as himself as well.

Solar also identified several artists and artistic avenues that have impacted their exploration of gender. She noted that she was initially made aware of the diversity of gender when she discovered drag and realized, “oh, you can do that <laughs> you’re allowed to do that.” For Solar, drag represented the possibility and opportunity to “dress against what is considered the stereotypical idea” and found this to be exciting and empowering. Solar also

identified several artists that were integral in her gender exploration and sense of euphoria. Solar described experiencing “massive gender envy” with singer, King Princess (any pronouns). They noted that King Princess is genderqueer and “so confident in her body,” and, after discovering King Princess, described that she was “getting closer” to the gender experience that felt right for them. In addition, Solar noted androgynous cosplayer, Hakken Coser (they/them), who was quoted as saying, “I am not limited by conventions or gender norms. I just feel like I am me and I want to be myself” (Teo, 2022).



[Left image]: Teo (2022)

[Above image]: Leong (2023)

Similar to Hakken, Solar spoke of how artists within the K-pop industry are presenting in more androgynous ways, “... men who are presenting more traditionally perceived as feminine, and they're seen as attractive. They're seen as this new ideal. This new idea of this hot <laugh> man who takes care of himself, like wears makeup, and it's fine.” For Solar, an aesthetic that they admire and appreciate is often androgynous, and so they look to these artists for inspiration and a sense of euphoria. Regarding her own art, Solar stated she often draws androgynous characters as

well. Solar emphasized the feeling of naturalness with androgyny and fit with her experience and identity. Allowing their art to unfold in a natural way connects with their experience of *wuwei* in terms of gender euphoria and demonstrates how Solar's art morphed and grew alongside their gender exploration.

In addition to artists, my participants and I also talked about films and media. Sam specifically mentioned *Moonlight*; *Call Me by Your Name*; *Love, Simon*; *Blue is the Warmest Colour*; *Happy Together*; *Fire Island*; *Bros*; *But I'm a Cheerleader*; *The Color Purple*; *Long Time Companion*; and *Philadelphia*. In all these media, Sam found characters and stories to connect to, whether it was about gender and sexuality, or ethnicity. Sam saw himself represented in these stories, and this speaks to the power and importance of representation. By seeing himself and connecting with these stories, Sam was able to connect to himself and feel more comfortable living openly, which ultimately brought him gender euphoria.



Jenkins (2016)

Sam and Steven specifically discussed *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) as a powerful film because of its representation of Black masculinity and Black queerness. The film depicts Chiron as he progresses through youth into adulthood and navigates his sexuality and the pressures of a particular image of Black masculinity. *Moonlight* showcases the struggle of being vulnerable, particularly for Black men in Western society where the expectation and stereotype is that they

must be tough and unbreakable. The scenes where Chiron is in the moonlight are when he is most vulnerable and authentic; these scenes show the beauty and pain of that softness and vulnerability, which are so often shut away out of necessity. As I was exploring the themes and interpretations of *Moonlight*, I was struck by the overwhelming number of articles, videos, and social media posts that spoke of the impact of the film. There is also an entire book that details the importance of the film, particularly in the current political and cultural context of the West (Flood, 2021). Many articles spoke of the representation of Black men and queerness that has been missing from much of media to date, and that has provided Black people and queer Black people with a source of connection and understanding. The film offers an alternative way of being, including embracing tenderness and vulnerability, and criticizes the pressures and stereotypes of Black men (Alfred, 2019; Bradshaw, 2017; Coffigny, 2017; Hall, 2017; Street, 2016; Watts, 2017). What *Moonlight* has done for so many people, including Sam and Steven, cannot be understated.

I watched *Moonlight* shortly after our conversations, and it was an overwhelmingly beautiful film for many reasons. After watching it, I was also struck by the parallels between the film and my conversations with Sam and Steven. In particular, the threads of family, constricting narratives and stereotypes, the significance of mentors and relationships, and the use of water as a metaphor. For Sam, and Chiron in *Moonlight*, family was a complicated subject. Family was a source of great love and pain, and remained significant for Sam and Chiron. For Steven, family was also greatly important and, unlike for Sam and Chiron, was a strong source of support following his coming out. As previously mentioned, the discussion of black masculinity in *Moonlight* illustrated constricting narratives and the experiences of queer black men in navigating society. Sam connected with the alternatives and possibilities offered through the film

regarding what it means and what it can look like to be a gay black man. Furthermore, Sam noted the significance of having a mentor in his life, an experience which was mirrored by Chiron who also had stable mentors who accepted him and who he could rely on. Lastly, regarding the metaphor of water in the film to articulate vulnerability and fluidity, Sam often described gender and sexuality as fluid and identified this aspect as a piece of gender euphoria for him.

Steven spoke of another movie, in addition to *Moonlight*, that resonated with him and helped him connect with his identity. Steven could not recall the name, and despite my best efforts, I could not locate the film either, but it centres on a character named Steven (or Stephen) who is a gay man. The film shows the character, Steven, realizing his identity and coming out to those around him. Steven, in the movie, experiences some hardships after coming out, including criticism and abuse from others, but always perseveres. Steven, the participant, said,

Though he was criticized and sometimes people beat him up on the streets, he gets out, overcomes all those things. He was happy at the end. So, when I watched that movie, I saw how happy he was and I was like, "I can be happy like him." And I'm not even going through what the guy did went through. But I can be happy- even happier than him.

That's why I said to myself, that's all. My journey is started.

Steven also highlighted something which I think is often forgotten; happiness is possible and likely for folks within the 2SLGBTQ+ community. As previously mentioned, many of the dominant discourses of 2SLGBTQ+ folks are focused on pathology and negative narratives. Their joy is often forgotten. And so, for Steven, it was empowering and encouraging to witness a queer character be able to live a happy life. For Steven, this was also an important start to his journey. After seeing that happiness is not only possible but attainable, they felt able to start their own journey.

Solar also identified several media and characters that were significant in their exploration of gender and gender euphoria. Specifically, Solar described being drawn to characters who appear to be gender-fluid. For example, in the show, *She-Ra* (Stevenson, 2018), a character named Double Trouble (they/them) is a shapeshifter and largely understood by audiences as non-binary. Double Trouble tends to use gender-neutral pronouns and, in terms of appearance, does not present in a stereotypically gendered way (Lamari & Greenhill, 2020). Another character Solar mentioned was Shi QingXuan from the Chinese novel and manhua (comic), *Tiān Guān Cì Fú / Heaven Official's Blessing* by Mò Xiāng Tóng Xiù (2021). Shi QingXuan, or Lord/Lady Wind Master, is a character who can shapeshift and freely changes between stereotypical male and female forms and, therefore, is often seen as gender-fluid by audiences. Shi QingXuan, also a god, is worshipped by followers in both their male and female forms. Another character in the novel stated, “He doesn’t care what form he appears in as long as he looks good,” and Shi QingXuan himself mentioned feeling more powerful in his female form. This was also something Solar and I connected over, having read the novel and manhua myself. Though I, of course, cannot connect to the cultural components of the story as Solar did, we connected over the fluidity of Shi QingXuan and the storyline of the series, which centers on a love story between two men.

Solar: I discovered this comic called *Heaven Official's Blessing*. You’re gasping. I think you know what it is.

Me: Love it. I’ll let you continue <laughs>

Solar: <laughs> So, one of the characters, the Wind Master, this is cannon I think, I think they’re gender-fluid.

Me: Yeah.

Solar: And I was like, where's my credit card? Give me this gender <laughs>



[Left image]: X (n.d.)

[Above image]: He-Man Fandom (n.d.).

As I wrote this section, I have reflected on the power of representation. Steven, Sam, and Solar highlighted how representation validates their identities and is an acknowledgement of their existence. I am also taken back to a resonant experience for me; when I think of representation, I feel that it also gives me *permission* to be as I am. If I cannot see myself in the world, I have to wonder if I am too different or too “deviant” to be represented; something must be wrong with me. But when I do see myself represented, I am reminded that no, nothing is inherently wrong with me and I am allowed to be as I am.

### **Thread 3: Community and Support**

In this section, I will speak to all the participants' experiences together since there were a lot of similar experiences. Community and support ranged from family, friends, the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and mentors. Participants had differing experiences with regards to family, with Sam's family not showing support, Solar's family being unaware of their identity, and Steven's family expressing support for them. In particular, Steven's mom, has shown him great support. When he was being bullied, she stood up for him in what he described as, "one of the greatest moments of my life because I felt safe for the first time." Steven said he thought about this specific moment for days; "I was so proud of her." In that moment, Steven felt her unconditional love for him. He described this moment specifically in relation to gender euphoria; it was at this moment he really felt he could live freely. In addition, "she told me that she loves me so much, that I'm a part of the family so no one has the right to treat me like shit." It was then that he felt truly loved and welcomed by his family.

All participants also mentioned a broader sense of community, specifically the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Sam spoke of a specific mentor who he credited as helping him come out and access community. It was this mentor who supported Sam in experiencing the gender euphoria that came with living openly and freely. Sam also stated that community brought "immense love" to him, and that in this community, "everybody was now a family, you know, we are concerned about the welfare of one another... we made sure everybody was not lacking." He further described this community as empowering, "The love we show to each other, that created a path for us...we all have a lot of stories inside that we need to let out, you know. We've been hoping inside our mind for a very long time." For Sam, the community he found in college provided him with the space to live as himself without judgment. It also gave him hope, and he

experienced a sense of euphoria from envisioning a positive future for himself and the community. Solar shared a similar sentiment,

Being around a community of people who have similar stories to you, I feel like it's much easier to connect... it's like you skip a couple of steps when you meet someone whose also queer... that's part of the warmth that finding your community brings. And it validates that you're valid.

When I consider my own experiences of gender euphoria, I realized as I was doing this research that it is also a relational experience for me. The elation and sense of comfort I feel being in a space and with people I know are safe and that I can trust to not judge is huge to me. I can probably count on one hand the number of people who know of certain identities of mine, and I recall each of their reactions. Some were less than positive to put it mildly, and some were supportive. Being around those who are supportive brings me an untouchable sense of joy that cannot be understated. And so, along with Sam, Steven, and Solar, I echo their sentiments about the importance of community and relationships that provide unconditional love and non-judgment which allows us to be who we are. It provides us with confidence, safety, and the ability to thrive as we are. Individuality makes us stronger collectively, whereas forcing conformity fractures our connections to each other. Sameness does not equal connection.

#### **Thread 4: Metaphors**

In narrative inquiry, metaphors can be a valuable way of thinking about (and with) the research and the topic. Lakoff (1993) defined metaphors as “instances of novel poetic language in which words... are not used in their normal everyday sense” (p. 1) and as “the principle by which one concept is understood in terms of another” (Lakoff, 1986, p. 224). Metaphors can be a way to “establish common ground between ourselves and our readers” (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000, p. 26). We – researchers, participants, readers – may not share the same experiences, but metaphors can offer a way to connect to, reflect on, and explore the feelings and experiences being articulated. Metaphors are also a way for us to engage our imagination, both in a creative and interpretive sense, and in the way it allows us to step inside the experience of another (Caine et al., 2022). Metaphors allow us to view and reflect on experiences in different ways, and can extend, rather than limit, our understanding and way of thinking (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

A few metaphors emerged throughout my conversations with participants, specifically those of water, paper, and armies. When these metaphors came up, I felt what Lakoff and Johnson (2003) emphasized as a broadening of my understanding and ability to reflect on the experience of gender euphoria. I often think and articulate experiences through the use of metaphors as well, and so the emergence of these metaphors paved way for another way to illustrate gender euphoria. I was struck by the theme of water that emerged for all participants in one way or another. For Sam and Steven, it came up in relation to *Moonlight*, with Sam specifically discussing the fluidity of gender. In addition, throughout the film, water was a metaphor for cleansing and transformation. Many significant moments for Chiron, the lead character, occurred in the water, including when his mentor, Juan, supported him as he floated freely in the ocean. Water in *Moonlight* also symbolizes rebirth in a sense; the scene with Juan showed Chiron trusting and becoming closer to his mentor as he was able to experience trust and safety (Gilbert, 2016). In addition, as I mentioned earlier, rebirth in Vodou, which Sam noted, often involves water; people who pass away go into the water and emerge later as a new soul or entity to start anew (Danticat, 2011). Water also emerged for Solar. When Solar presented her idea of co-creating a video game that centred on a character getting lost in the ocean, I was struck by the coincidence. The storyline of the video game involves the main character, a cat,

feeling scared at the beginning as they are lost in the middle of the ocean, but finds characters amidst the tumultuous waves who offer support, love, and guidance. The lighthouse then guides the cat home. In addition, when I think of the term *wuwei* that Solar brought up and the intention of *flow*, I imagine water. Water flows as it needs to, which can be both terrifying and beautiful, and it sustains life.

A couple of additional metaphors I wanted to touch on are a paper metaphor brought up by Solar and the metaphor of an army that Steven discussed. Solar discussed the paper metaphor in relation to their own artwork. She spoke of the joy in encountering a blank sheet of paper, where she could create anything and everything she wanted. She compared this to her identity and gender, which elicited a sense of gender euphoria,

In a way, paper is kind of like me as a person when I start out child blank, brain empty <laugh> and then I can do whatever I want to the paper, no one can tell me what to do.

And art is just something that, to provoke thought, something to be appreciated. And yeah. It doesn't really matter what someone else thinks about what I make because I made it and I like it. <laugh>.

The sentiment expressed here is an appreciation for having a blank slate and to have free reign as to what they can create. Also, Solar noted here that her identity is also personal, and not informed by others. This contributed to a feeling of gender euphoria as it allowed her the space to live freely as herself, regardless of the opinions of others.

Regarding Steven's metaphor of an army, which was integrated into the poem above, an army symbolized community and togetherness. It represented the 2SLGBTQ+ community across the world, and our commitment to each other. With this metaphor, Steven spoke of the protectiveness within the community, as well as the ability to keep fighting in the face of

challenges. The euphoria in this was powerful for Steven; the confidence they experienced from knowing that people will fight for them, and that they will fight for others, was significant. This also offered him a sense of hope, “Soldiers fight because there is hope, so that people can live happily and peacefully.” In feeling joy and euphoria, we are collectively resisting and fighting against dominant narratives. We may not win every battle, but there is a sense of victory in knowing that we fought and will continue to fight.

### Chapter Summary

Sam, Steven, and Solar shared the ways in which they experience gender euphoria and we co-constructed said experiences as shown through their personal narrative accounts. Gender euphoria – the joy, comfort, and/or peace of living as and/or exploring one’s gender – was experienced in many ways and in a variety of situations. The participants showed us – the readers – what gender euphoria can look like, how it can feel, and when, where, and how it can be experienced. The avenues through which euphoria can be explored and experienced also offer the possibility of greater connection in many areas (e.g., to one’s culture and history, community), illustrating the intersectional nature of gender euphoria.

In returning to the term *gender euphoria* following the conclusion of this chapter, it is worthwhile to consider the meaning of the term in the context of this research. *Euphoria* is a term with Greek origins, coming from *euphoros* which, when broken down, means to “well” or “easily” (*eu*) “bear” or “carry” (*pherein*; Milnes & Arnold-Forster, 2019). *Euphoria* can also refer to “well-being” or a sense of “buoyancy” (Merriam-Webster, 2025). Milnes and Arnold-Forster (2019) provide an illustration of this experience of *euphoria*: “People who danced beautifully might be thought to carry the different parts of their bodies well.” To carry oneself

well, or to carry something well, whichever part it may be – one’s gender, body, identities, skills – allows for this experience of *euphoria*.

It is interesting to consider the findings from Sam, Steven, and Solar’s accounts of gender euphoria in the context of the meaning and origins of the term. The idea of being able to “carry well” provides an added layer to gender euphoria – to “carry well” one’s gender. Positioning the experience of gender euphoria in such a way provides and centres a narrative of dignity and strength, a narrative which is not often afforded to TGD people. Too often, the experiences and lives of TGD individuals are positioned only as painful, distressing, and bleak. However, as Sam, Steven, and Solar have illustrated, gender euphoria exists in many ways and places, and holds much more significance than experiences of suffering and distress.

Sam, Solar, and Steven described gender euphoria as an experience which holds internal, social, and collective/cultural components, woven into the various aspects that discussed. Each participant had their own unique experiences presented as a story, a poem, and a video game. Following their personal accounts, common threads of cultural (inter)connections, representation and role models, community and support, and the use of metaphors were elucidated. Taken together, the experiences laid out in this chapter illustrate the complexities of gender euphoria and the multiple ways it can emerge and be experienced. To “carry well” these findings forward, the next chapter will discuss the potential utilization and implementation of the findings explored here.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

In this research, I sought to explore the question: *How do transgender and gender diverse people understand and experience gender euphoria?* I used narrative inquiry to address this question with three participants, Sam, Solar, and Steven (pseudonyms). In the spirit of narrative inquiry and addressing multiple audiences, this chapter will focus on professional applications, including exploring participants' experiences in connection to the existing literature on gender euphoria, such as the influence of community and culture. I will also discuss the implications and recommendations for practice, research, and beyond, as it pertains to the findings of this study.

### **The Importance of Euphoria**

As the literature around gender euphoria grows, there is more and more evidence of the importance of this experience for TGD individuals. Indeed, participants in this study discussed why gender euphoria was important to them, as well as why broader understandings of the experiences of TGD should consider this experience. For example, both Sam and Steven spoke of how they experienced gender euphoria through living freely and openly, and how this euphoria, in turn, continued to allow them to live freely. In addition, Sam in particular spoke of his hope for research, the TGD community, and society more broadly to understand the significance of gender euphoria for TGD folks and begin to shift away from viewing their experiences and identity in a negative light. This mirrors findings from a research study by Jacobsen and Devor (2022) who also explored experiences of gender euphoria for TGD individuals. The researchers found that, for participants, gender euphoria was an integral part of their experience and advocated for a shift in perspective of trans folks at the societal level. Participants discussed gender euphoria (vs. dysphoria) as a guiding force and hoped that there would be a shift in understanding of gender euphoria as the rule, not the exception for TGD

individuals (p. 131). Participants further stated that gender euphoria is more significant to the experience of TGD people than dysphoria, despite dysphoria being more pervasive in dominant discourses.

### **The Relational Nature of Gender Euphoria**

All participants also spoke of the relational nature of gender euphoria and the importance of community and social support. These experiences ranged from familial support to connections within the 2SLGBTQ+ community. The relational experiences that allowed for and brought about euphoria included a sense of safety and trust within these relationships. Sam and Steven in particular shared how moments of support from others directly led to feelings of gender euphoria. For Steven, it was when his mother stood up for him when others were picking on him for his gender and expression. For Sam, it was when he was in college and found community that allowed him to live openly, which is what he desired. Solar also spoke of the importance of community; she noted that she had not disclosed her gender and sexuality to her family, citing more conservative beliefs within the family, but found connection and community through friendships and advocacy efforts. Indeed, there are countless studies that demonstrate how social support and community are associated with feelings of gender affirmation (Lewis et al., 2022), positive outcomes (Alanko & Lund, 2019; Puckett et al., 2019), buffer or protective against negative outcomes (Bockting et al., 2019; Budge et al., 2013; Kia et al., 2021; Pflum et al., 2015; Sevelius, 2013; Trujillo et al., 2018), and support resilience (Puckett et al., 2019).

It is also important to note the various complexities regarding social support and community. To access this support and community, often there is a component of disclosure, which not everyone may feel ready for, nor do folks ever need to disclose if they do not want to. In addition, there may be physical barriers to accessing community and support, such as living in

remote, rural areas (Kerry, 2018). There are also a wide range of reactions that can occur when a person discloses their identity to someone; anything from violence to supportive and encouraging, and anything in between. There is even a Family Reaction to Coming Out (FRCO) scale to measure these range of responses (Nebot-Garcia et al., 2024). The FRCO Likert scale provides statements regarding family responses to coming out (e.g., “Was proud of me,” “Prayed to God, asking him to turn me ‘normal.’”). The purpose of this scale is to help 2SLGBTQ+ people identify and process their experience of coming out, as well as to identify individuals who may need greater support. Negative responses to coming are often associated with greater distress, depression, and lower self-esteem, particularly if the parent or loved one attempts to change the individual’s identity (D’amico et al., 2015; Puckett et al., 2015). Conversely, there is evidence for the benefits of familial support after coming out, including decreased suicidal ideation (D’amico et al., 2015). Peers also play an important role, with evidence suggesting that peer support (e.g. friendships, online support) is beneficial to 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, as demonstrated by Kia et al.’s (2021) scoping review of 34 studies.

I admit that my assumption going into the research was that gender was solely an individual experience. I would now reframe this to describe it as a personalized experience. While I had considered the societal and cultural factors involved in gender, I had not considered the influence of culture on gender euphoria. Specifically, the ways in which the connectedness of gender and culture could foster feelings of euphoria. I did not see how this connection could be positive. Since I was raised in a Western culture and it is within this culture that we are questioning the conceptualization of gender, I had distanced myself from the possibility of positive cultural influences for others. As I have researched and learned from my participants, I

have grown in my view and understanding that the gender binary is a colonial construct, and gender euphoria is a way of decolonizing one's identity.

The research listed above just scratches the surface of the literature on social support and community for 2SLGBTQ+ people; overall, the research overwhelmingly indicates the importance of said relationships. However, there are many considerations and factors involved in accessing these supports, including but not limited to physical access, familial responses, peer support and relationships, existing communities of support, and so on. It is also important to consider a person's comfort and readiness to disclose their identities. And so, it is valuable for us to understand that each person can come out if, when, how, and to whom they want.

### **Intersectionality and Context**

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990) was also important in this study and to the participants. All participants mentioned that their experiences of gender euphoria were connected to various other held social identities, including sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and culture. Participants discussed the ways in which their other identities contributed to experiences of gender euphoria. For example, Solar spoke of how connecting to their Chinese roots, including the country's history of gender and sexual diversity, and traditional clothing, brought about feelings of gender euphoria. To my knowledge, there is no research that exists exploring intersectionality and gender euphoria specifically. There is research on the experiences of TGD people of colour, and a study by Sevelius (2013) that explored the experiences of transgender women of colour from a gender affirmation perspective. The study focused on stigma, oppression, distress, risk, and gender affirmation, and Sevelius proposed a gender affirmation framework to understand risk behaviours in the participants. They posited that there exists a very real need for gender affirmation (e.g., being correctly gendered by others, access to gender-

affirming supports) for transwomen of colour due to the multiple forms of oppression they experience, which can threaten their sense of identity.

Furthermore, the Intersectionality Research for Transgender Health Justice (IRTHJ) framework has been developed which integrates transgender theory, feminist theory, and intersectionality to address social and health inequities for TGD people (Wesp et al., 2019). This framework rests on three main points, “(i) name intersecting power relations, (ii) disrupt the status quo, and (iii) center embodied knowledge” (p. 287). In utilizing this framework, the intent is to develop better health practices and policies for TGD individuals, and challenge existing misconceptions or harmful beliefs about the community and their needs. Though it is still in its early stages, it has a solid foundation for promoting healthcare for TGD, with specific consideration of intersecting identities. The IRTHJ framework also aligns well with the findings and stories of participants in this study. Specifically, there is overlap in the emphasis on intersectionality, disrupting dominant narratives and discourses, and centering the voices of TGD people. In exploring gender euphoria in this study, participants noted the importance of other identities and, as with the IRTHJ framework, this should be considered and integrated into care and policies affecting TGD people. Gender affirming care (GAC), specifically, should be holistic and tailored to the individual, and include consideration of each person's unique identities.

Another significant component that emerged in this study was the framing of gender euphoria as a form of decolonization for participants. In particular, Sam and Solar mentioned the history of colonization in their ancestral countries. Solar further spoke of the long-lasting effects of this, including in terms of the conceptualizations of gender. For them, experiencing gender euphoria often occurred through (re)connecting with their culture. Interestingly, I located an article that spoke of a similar experience. Authors Zaharin and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2022) wrote of

Zaharin’s experience of decolonizing her transgender identity by connecting with cultural histories. Specifically, the authors wrote that this occurred by “...dismantling colonialism through rebuilding and rediscovering ancient and pre-colonial knowledge of Indigenous and colonized people to decentre heterocisnormativity, gender hierarchies, and racial privilege” (p. 98). In another personal account, Izenon (2023) recounted their experience of drawing upon *do’ikayt* (“hereness”) and connecting with their Jewish roots as they explored gender and gender euphoria. Based on the personal accounts in the existing literature, as well as the stories of participants in this study, it is apparent that decolonization of identity (e.g., expanding beyond the Western gender binary, engaging with cultural histories) can bring about experiences of gender euphoria. As we – as a country, in the field of psychology – hopefully continue to work towards reconciliation, gender euphoria may be one such way this can occur. By supporting the experience of gender euphoria for TGD folks, we can work towards dismantling colonial perspectives and step aside to give people space to (re)connect with their histories.

### **Shifting Narratives**

The importance of shifting narratives of TGD people’s lives is also worth highlighting. The intention of this study was to explore and make space for alternative narratives; ones that do not necessarily align with dominant discourses of TGD people, which typically involves pathology and negative experiences (Westbrook & Shuster, 2023). More and more in media, “trans joy is resistance” is gaining traction (e.g., Luterman & Rummler, 2024; Wright, 2022). It is stemming from a desire within the TGD community to not be viewed through a singular, negative lens. And experiencing joy in one’s trans identity is a way of challenging dominant discourses of TGD folks by a cis-heteronormativity society, and forming their own narratives of themselves. Crego (2023), for example, acknowledge that rage at systems that seek to oppress

and harm is normal and this can fuel a form of resistance; however, they noted how trans joy is also a form of resistance. These systems often position TGD folks as tragic, miserable, broken, or wrong, but joy resists this narrative (Westbrook & Shuster, 2023). Westbrook and Shuster went on to state that gender euphoria can fuel activism, and telling stories of gender euphoria can contribute to progressing movements for the rights and wellbeing of TGD folks. Interestingly, the authors also introduced the term *transnormativity* which they described as, “the belief that there is one correct way to be transgender – positioning misery and oppression as central to a ‘true’ experience of transness” (p. 17). Joy disrupts this harmful narrative by giving space to the diversity of voices and experiences.

I attended a conference a couple of years ago where there was a panel of trans youth. When asked what we, as the older generations can do to make their lives easier when they grow up, one of the panelists said, “Be happy and just live.” I was not expecting this answer; I thought they might say, “keep fighting” or “just don’t burn the world to the ground.” But I was surprised; it was exciting for them to see that TGD folks can and do live long, joyful lives, just as it was exciting for us to see the next generation. This was echoed in an article by Sinclair-Palm and Gilbert (2018), “The stories we tell about trans youth matters, and when educators and policy makers only see trans youth as at risk, we limit the stories available to trans youth about who they are and who they can become” (p. 325). As I reflected on this moment during the panel, I realized the pervasiveness of the transnormativity and current discourses of pathology and trauma for TGD people. It occurred to me that much of what these young TGD people on the panel were seeing about themselves was that they were going to suffer, their rights were going to be taken away, and the future was bleak. And so, seeing a whole conference dedicated to trans

folks and seeing the joy in the audience full of TGD people must have been a wonderful experience. It certainly shifted my own perspective.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study has several strengths. Throughout the research process, detailed accounts of participants' lives and experiences were gathered, which allowed for rich stories of their experiences with gender euphoria. The use of narrative inquiry, a qualitative approach, was also a strength of the study as it allowed for the rich, personal accounts to be given full respect and attention. In addition, intersecting identities were at the forefront, and the focus of the research was on a pleasant experience of being TGD, both of which allowed for the diversity of voices and narratives to emerge. This is particularly important as solely focusing on narratives of pathology or tragedy reinforces and perpetuates transnormativity (the idea that there is one particular way to be trans), and can be constricting for TGD people. Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of narrative inquiry research, including this study, is its ability to give voice to marginalized people and honor stories previously dismissed and unheard (e.g., Quarmby et al., 2020; Rahatzad et al., 2016; Wang, 2017). In line with narrative inquiry, I also paid careful attention to relational ethics and the research relationship throughout (Josselson, 2007), by generating follow-up questions based on each participants' specific experiences, attuning to my own emotional reactions to the conversations, and asking open-ended questions and reflecting back what was said to facilitate conversations and foster a sense of trust and safety. Furthermore, throughout the research, I engaged in member checking to ensure the stories were representative of participants' experiences and maintained a research journal to reflect on my own experiences, emotions, and potential biases as I conducted the study (Caine et al., 2019; Clandinin et al., 2018).

There are, of course, limitations to this study as well. Though subjectivity and the personal involvement of the researcher is considered a strength in narrative research and it supports in co-constructing meaning and relationships (e.g., Caine et al., 2022; Clandinin et al., 2018), there is to be some caution around “overwriting” participants’ narratives with the researcher’s own thoughts, experiences, biases, and assumptions. The research products were co-constructed and I engaged in reflection and member checking as a way to ensure their accounts were appropriately illustrated. In addition, steps were taken (e.g., research journal) to ensure my own experiences or interests did not “overwrite” those of the participants, but it is important to consider my involvement. This is particularly important given that participants were people of colour, and I am approaching the research as a White person. In order to avoid prioritizing my own thoughts, deviating from participants’ accounts, and pushing my own experiences and narratives over theirs, I worked to remain as close to their words as possible (e.g., integrating direct quotes from Steven into the poem). In addition, the co-construction and member checking allowed participants the space to have research products that represented their true experiences. Another limitation is that there are many stories that were not involved in this research project. Specifically, there were many identities not represented, including Indigenous peoples. This is particularly important given that respectful, relational research with Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer (an alternative term for Two-Spirit) peoples is lacking. Research and accounts do exist which demonstrate that being Two-Spirit involves elements of spirituality, cultural connection, and resistance against colonial binaries and structures (Carrier et al., 2020; Jacobs et al., 1997; Robinson, 2019), and so it is important and valuable to their stories and experiences.

### **Recommendations and Ways Forward**

In this section, I will discuss recommendations and potential ways forward for the TGD community, counsellors and mental health workers, research, education, social support, and policy.

#### **TGD Community**

This subsection is not intended to tell TGD folks what or how they should feel. Rather it is to support finding ways to explore gender euphoria. Articles have noted that trans joy can range from joy in one's trans identity to the joys of everyday life, all of which are valuable and important (Crego, 2024). Gender euphoria and/or trans joy can involve enjoying the day-to-day, art (viewing and creating), spending time in nature, playing video games, having time for oneself, and spending time with others (Luterman & Rummler, 2024). There is certainly no wrong way to experience joy, and these moments of joy, however "small", are worthy of being savoured and celebrated.

Greene (2024) wrote an article around cultivating trans joy. In their article, Greene highlights the many ways in which gender euphoria can be experienced. It speaks to self-love and acceptance (which is, of course, a journey in itself), recognizing love from others, and knowing one is not alone in their experience. Another component I appreciated was when Greene stated, "I get to have dreams about my future." As more and more representation of TGD folks emerge, people will begin to see themselves and their futures. A final point I want to highlight from Greene's article is giving love to one's inner child. Greene noted that many TGD may not feel as though they had the childhood they wanted if they were not supported and/or if they were not able to live as themselves. Doing things as adults to appease this inner child and address their needs is important.

There are also a couple of pivotal books that specifically talk about gender euphoria for TGD folks. One is *Gender Magic: Live Shamelessly, Reclaim Your Joy, & Step into Your Most Authentic Self* by Rae McDaniel (2023). This book puts forth the Gender Freedom Model which is intended to be a guide for TGD folks in experiencing trans joy, reconnecting with curiosity and pleasure, and working towards self-acceptance. *Gender Euphoria* (2021) by Laura Kate Dale is a collection of stories by nineteen TGD people about their experiences of gender euphoria. A final book is *The Body is Not an Apology* by Sonya Renee Taylor (2018). Though not specifically about the experiences of TGD people, Taylor writes of radical self-love amidst systemic oppression and indoctrinated shame. Within this book is the radical self-love toolkit, which includes important reminders, such as eliminating harsh body talk, expanding beyond binaries and living in the in-between space (e.g., not framing as “good” vs. “bad”), self-exploration, the joy of moving one’s body, and developing self-compassion, among others. The book has been cited by Trans Reads for the book’s focus on self love, which is a direct form of resistance to systemic oppression and dominant narratives.

### **Counselling**

There are articles and books that exist for practitioners wanting to provide gender affirming care. One such book is *A Clinician’s Guide to Gender-Affirming Care* by Chang et al. (2018). This book highlights several important considerations to facilitating gender affirming care, including therapist-client match (personality, style, professionalism), therapist knowledge and proficiency (e.g., being developmentally appropriate), accessible location of services (e.g., online options), and a welcoming office environment. It is a helpful guide that provides information on approaching first sessions, as well as specific questions to ask in sessions (e.g., “what about your experiences of gender are important for me to know?”, p. 188). This echoes

many of the findings in Krivos' (2022) dissertation on the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming people in counselling. In their paper, the author highlights the importance of safety within the therapeutic relationship, validation, and therapist knowledge. Similarly, The Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counselling (ALGBTIC) published guidelines and competencies when counselling transgender clients, including but not limited to therapist holding knowledge of the experiences and needs of TGD people, recognize multiple factors at play in the client's life, and express validation and affirmation of the client's identity (Burnes et al., 2009).

Another book by Yilmazer (2021) discusses how to approach gender affirming therapy. The author emphasizes the importance of knowledge (of identities, administrative and medical processes, context, etc.) and competence, as well as the ability to be flexible and adapt to each clients intersecting identities. Yilmazer discusses the importance of unconditional positive regard in line with person-centered approaches. In addition, Yilmazer notes, "The gender affirming therapist has a strong understanding of the impact of marginalization, privilege, intersectionality, and oppression on our clients" (2021, p. 35). This connects to the current study where participants' experiences of gender and gender euphoria connected to several other identities. Actively integrating intersecting identities into affirmative therapy gives space to holistic and respectful care. This bears resemblance to feminist therapy, which focuses on exploring power, oppression, influence of gender, and intersectionality, and typically takes a strength-based approach (Brown, 2018). Also in line with this study, a strength-based and empowering approach can involve exploring and supporting experiences of gender euphoria as a way to empower clients and challenge dominant discourses of TGD people. Furthermore, Estrellado and Balsam (2023) discuss the ways in which modern feminist therapy can be use with transgender, non-

binary, and gender expansive (TNBGE) people. Specifically, the authors note that feminist therapy can be particularly helpful for shifting to a focus on wellness (vs. pathology and deficits), intersectionality, and relationships. Furthermore, central to feminist therapy is that it is ever evolving, changing as the world changes and integrating relevant personal and cultural aspects to the client (Brown, 2018). Feminist therapy also focuses on empowerment and embodiment, with consideration of the societal and cultural forces at play in one's experience of their self and body (Threadcraft, 2015).

In terms of therapeutic approaches, there are several that may or have been proven to be beneficial for TGD clients. Chang et al. (2018) advocate for using relational approaches to therapy. In other words, prioritizing the therapeutic relationship and being attuned to interactions in therapy, as well as considering the impacts of past and current relationships on the client. As participants in this study discussed, the past and present (experiences and relationships) had an impact on their well-being, as well as their understanding and experiences of gender. For example, Sam noted that his relationships with his family are strained, and their perspectives on gender and sexuality were harmful to Sam. In addition, the family's distance from their culture and history lead Sam to seek out ways to reconnect with his culture and build a community with people he could trust and who would support him. Furthermore, Chang et al. (2018) also note that emotionally focused therapy (EFT) may be an effective approach as it focuses on connection and relationships. In addition, the authors express support for mindfulness techniques, such as those in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), as this supports client in developing coping skills.

Group therapy or support may also be beneficial for TGD clients (Chang et al., 2018). This also aligns well with the common thread of connection and social support in this research,

as well as with the existing literature on the benefits of social support (e.g., Lewis et al., 2022). Group therapy can provide guidance, support, connection, and foster a sense of belonging. As participants in this current study stated, having support and connection was critical. Chang et al. (2018) have additional considerations for group work with TGD clients, including group format, dynamics, and expectations. Interestingly, Chen et al. (2016) provided a gender euphoria therapy group to adolescents. This group was, “guided by a social cognitive model with topics germane to this age group, including gender identity exploration, expression, and disclosure, family relationships, adaptive coping, social and medication transition, and dating and relationships” (p. 121). In their article, the authors summarized a multidisciplinary approach to gender affirming care for youth, with the gender euphoria group being one component. They did not provide information on the outcomes of the group, but it is interesting that work is already being done in this area. Their research also indicates the potential benefits of a holistic approach to working with TGD youth.

Though important to all counselling work, it is particularly important for practitioners to engage in continual self-reflection when working with TGD clients. This is because TGD, and 2SLGBTQ+ people more broadly, often experience discrimination, stereotyping, and dismissiveness from others, and so it is important for their therapist to not create this same atmosphere in therapy. Chang et al. (2018) have helpful recommendations for engaging in self-reflection, including, “What approaches that I use may be less affirming or need to be adapted to my work with trans clients?” (p. 193). In addition, Mizock and Lundquist (2016) emphasize the importance of gender sensitivity, and encourage practitioners to reflect on what they are asking of clients (e.g., education burdening), if they are over- or under-emphasizing the role of gender in therapy, potential avoidance of topics related to gender, and gatekeeping of information. The

authors note that negative experiences in therapy can be harmful and deter TGD clients from seeking support. Therefore, it is important for therapists to approach therapy with open-mindedness and humility, with respect for the client's personal experience.

Taken together, therapy with TGD clients is not so much a "how to" or a checklist. It more a way of being with clients and involves a way of thinking and doing therapy that is conducive to fostering and encouraging experiences of gender euphoria. The above literature, as well as the accounts of participants in this study, highlight the importance of remaining close to the client's personal experience and engaging in self-reflection to ensure that therapy is meeting the client's needs, and that therapist biases or assumptions are not impeding therapeutic progress.

### **Research**

In line with the limitations mentioned above, it will be important for future research to explicitly explore the connection of gender and gender euphoria with other identities. While there is a growing body of research exploring the experiences of gender euphoria, to my knowledge, there have been no studies specifically looking at the connection of gender euphoria to other identities, including race, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, socioeconomic status, religion, and age. In addition, it will be beneficial for future research to explore how gender euphoria can best be fostered in the counselling space, drawing upon the approaches listed above. Given the personalized nature of gender euphoria, future studies may benefit from continuing to use qualitative methods. Future research that wants to consider potential cause and effect relationships (e.g., the direct benefits of gender euphoria, what can cause gender euphoria) would benefit from using quantitative approaches. In all, gender euphoria is a rapidly evolving area of exploration in research, and there is a wealth of information yet to be uncovered.

## Education

All participants spoke about the importance of education, both in youth and throughout one's life. For Steven, it was important for there to be education about gender and the 2SLGBTQ+ community more broadly in schools to help youth understand themselves and explore their experiences and identities. Solar spoke of this as well, in relation to her own experiences,

I was slowly growing, more aware of the fact that there were more than just two options. Because clearly there was something, there's a piece of the picture that was missing. Like sex ed class didn't teach me about this; sex ed class still is super weird to me because I feel like, I feel like it doesn't- elementary school, high school doesn't teach you anything about sexuality, doesn't teach you anything about gender. And it's just like, but what happened? What happens to us <laugh>? Like, we're left out of the picture and we're just kinda like going through college, having an identity crisis.

Sam and Solar both spoke of how understanding and opportunities for identity exploration did not occur until college and university where they were finally exposed to gender and sexual diversity. This speaks to the importance of earlier education to support self-understanding and acceptance, particularly in our cis-heteronormative society. For example, the U.S. Department of Education published a brief guide for support transgender students in schools (2021). In this guide, they suggest schools and educators use inclusive language, have policies that specifically prohibit bullying and harassment based on gender and sexuality, respecting students' privacy (e.g., not disclosing name and pronouns to others when different from legal name), supporting communication between students and their families when appropriate, developing "gender support plans" to address the student's needs, having gay-straight alliances (GSAs) that protect

students' privacy, and providing professional development to educators. In addition, Sinclair-Palm and Gilbert (2018) highlighted five important considerations when supporting trans youth: (a) schools are places of exploration and it is their responsibility to provide a safe space for students, (b) "gender is messy and difficult to narrate" and "young people are its most creative authors" (p. 325), (c) gender identity is not a linear exploration process, (d) family relationships are often complex with both affection and potential misunderstandings, and (e) "trans youth may be defined by their gender, but they describe and construct their gendered identities through their relationship to their race, culture, religion, class, abilities, sexuality and nationhood" (p. 326).

With this consideration of intersectionality, it is also important to explore and share with others the various histories and interpretations of pre-colonial cultures, religions, and countries. Many people, including Sam, Steven, and Solar in this study, have described experiencing discrimination within religion, specifically the discriminatory histories of Christianity and Catholicism. In line with what has been discussed in this dissertation, I felt it would be beneficial to also discuss the possibility of exploring alternative interpretations of religious texts. For example, passages from the Bible are often cited to justify homophobia and transphobia. However, it is important to keep in mind that the Bible was written, interpreted, and translated by many different people for hundreds of years, with each person having their own biases and agendas (Murphy, n.d.). There are also sites and experts who have found passages they define as 2SLGBT+ affirming within the Bible, including, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Psalm 139:13-14; St. Hugh of Lincoln Episcopal Church, n.d.). This quote was cited as it articulates a sentiment often used by Christian 2SLGBTQ+ folks in which it states that God created them as they are, and they are not

inherently wrong. The passage further illustrates that we are “wonderfully made” and 2SLGBTQ+ folks can draw upon this as a message of validation, affirmation, and self-acceptance. While this barely scratches the surface, and certainly I do not claim to be an expert in religion, it is clear that information exists in cultures and religions that demonstrate transphobia and homophobia in religion is an issue of interpretations and translations of texts, rather than an indisputable, embedded truth.

Regarding my own pursuits to disseminate the knowledge and reflections gained in this research, at the Shaping the Future (STF) 2024 conference, with a colleague, I presented various recommendations for creating gender affirming schools. This included using affirming language (e.g., gender neutral language, “caregivers” instead of “mothers and fathers”), having affirming “signs” in education settings (e.g., pride flags), representation in course work (e.g., books, scenarios), engaging TGD students without over-burdening, reconsider grouping of students, supporting agency and self-expression, and encouraging professional development for staff (Lefebvre et al., 2024). Ironically, this presentation occurred less than a week before the Alberta premier announced that the government would be re-evaluating gender affirming care for youth in schools (Johnson, 2024), and making some of our recommendations difficult, if not impossible, if the new regulations are put in place which, at the time of writing this, they are.

Continuing with this “humble brag” as Solar would say, I also drew upon the research, including this dissertation, to create a workshop on gender euphoria for students at the University of Alberta while I was completing my counselling internship. This workshop highlighted the intersectional nature of gender euphoria and recommendations for exploring gender euphoria, including holding compassion for oneself on this journey. The staff at the University of Alberta counselling center decided to make this workshop a more regular offering to students and staff,

and it will be provided again this year. It was also through this workshop that I built connections with the University of Alberta staff working in the area of gender and sexual diversity. It was through these connections that I learned of the *Gender Magic* (McDaniel, 2023) resource. It is exciting that, in providing education, I also received valuable resources and learning opportunities.

### **Community and Support**

Community and support are also important for TGD folks. This was mentioned by all participants, as well as the existing research, indicating the significance and need of connection and support. Mentorship programs, as mentioned by Sam and Steven, can be excellent ways of establishing connections and communities. These programs may be in schools (e.g., connecting youth with older peers in the community), and in youth and adulthood (e.g., mentorship programs within 2SLGBTQ+ organizations). Skipping Stone in Calgary has programs, such as this, including community group programs, community coaching, and more (Skipping Stone, 2024). Having organizations, programs, and communities in educational settings, including universities, is also important for building community. Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are also important. GSAs, which have expanded to include everyone in the 2SLGBTQ+ community, foster a sense of safety for students in schools and homophobic bullying becomes less common when GSAs are present (Ioverno et al., 2017). Similarly, according to a summary of the research by GLSEN (formerly standing for Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network), GSAs provide safety, improve accessibility for LGBT+ folks, foster a positive school environment, and help LGBT+ students identify safe staff members and peers at school (2007). The future of GSAs, specifically the safety within GSAs, is currently on shaky ground in Alberta as the government debates disclosing to parents their child's membership in a GSA (Wells, 2018). However, the

evidence in support of GSAs, as well the literature more broadly speaking to the benefits of community and connection for 2SLGBTQ+ folks, indicate the importance of safe, trusting relationships. As such, many schools, institutions, and workplaces have such groups.

### **Policy**

Narrative inquiries can also lead to important policy changes due to its consideration of multiple stories – not just dominant narratives – and by encouraging people to reflect on current policies and ways of effecting change from a policy standpoint (Lyons, 2012). In line with the intention and findings of this research, it would be beneficial to have greater consideration of gender euphoria in policies as a way to continue shifting narratives to something more hopeful. With regards to psychology, Bradford et al (2021) noted that despite the promising path of gender euphoria, the research and mental health field still tend towards a deficit-based, medicalized model. Drawing upon this research and participants' accounts, it would be beneficial to move in the direction of building more positive and hopeful discourses for TGD people by implementing specific guidelines for fostering gender euphoria in psychology, and beyond. In doing so, more people will feel comfortable living as themselves, which will in turn encourage others to live authentically. A way to change these narratives and discourses is by creating and implementing policies to create safer spaces. This includes specific policies and regulations banning discrimination and bullying based on gender and sexuality. In addition, having policies to protect the identities of students and employees is important. People should not feel forced to disclose and, if they do disclose their identity, this should not be shared with anyone without permission. This is complicated in Alberta right now; the very day I am finalizing this chapter, the Alberta government is discussing whether to change the Bill of Rights and policies concerning the rights of trans folks. Specifically, if these news bills and policies are put in place,

they would, "...restrict access to gender-affirming health care for transgender youth, ban transgender participation in female sports, and require parental consent or notification for sex education and changes to pronouns and names for students in schools" (Johnson, 2024, p. 1). Students' membership in GSAs would also be disclosed to parents (Wells, 2018), which would deter many from joining this needed community of support.

When I think about this possibility, I remind myself of the words of Sam, Solar, and Steven. I remember Sam's words, "we'll achieve it in time" and Steven's, "don't worry now, it won't be long." I also recall Solar's enthusiasm and hope for the future. In reminding myself of this, I do believe that the future is bright. There will be difficult moments, but if I have learned anything from my personal life, counselling work, and research, the 2SLGBTQ+ community across the globe is truly a force to be reckoned with.

### **Conclusion**

In this narrative inquiry, the experiences of gender euphoria for three participants – Sam, Solar, and Steven – were explored. Their stories touched on the euphoria of living openly and freely, (re)connecting with various identities, and recovering themselves amid challenges and outward resistance. Within their stories, the importance of relationships and connection was important, as well as being able to see themselves represented in literature and media. The richness of their personal experiences has opened up many possibilities and recommendations for ways forward, which will be of great benefit to many, most importantly, fellow TGD folks.

This narrative inquiry began with experience – my own – and focused on exploration of gender and gender euphoria, and the possibility of returning home, to a place of understanding and acceptance. Throughout this narrative inquiry, experience has been central and positioned as a site for understanding gender euphoria. This has been an inquiry into experience, centering

experiences of gender euphoria for Sam, Steven, and Solar, rather than confining or discussing their experiences within a particular theoretical or conceptual framework. The participants and I explored their experiences through conversations, and we discussed the various ways in which they felt and explored gender euphoria. Their histories – personal, familial, and cultural – played a part in these experiences of gender euphoria. In addition, gender euphoria was discussed as a relational experience in many ways, emphasizing the importance of community, trust, and safety. The ways in which we speak about our experiences also played a role in how gender euphoria was discussed. Specifically, metaphors were often used by participants to articulate their experiences. Metaphors are an avenue by which experiences can be explored in a way that supports understanding and recognition. Taken together, this narrative inquiry on gender euphoria illustrates the many ways in which gender euphoria can and is experienced, and how this experience can be shared and articulated.

Coming to the end of this dissertation, I have been reflecting on how it started. When I first began – before COVID – there were only a handful of articles on gender euphoria. It is wonderful and exciting to see so much content on gender euphoria now, from books to articles to media sources. This growing body of work shows a way forward that is already being paved, and the singular narrative of TGD folks are slowly making way for many other hopeful narratives and ways of being. In noticing this pattern, I am again reminded of the ever-changing nature of the world, and the importance of time and place in our progress.

It is hard to believe that I am getting closer and closer to the last sentence of this dissertation that has been years in the making. I have found that finishing and “saying goodbye” to this dissertation has been surprisingly difficult. I am a sentimental person, and almost always become tearful when I finish a book or movie or TV show. Whether it was good or not, a happy

ending or a sad ending or something in between, I feel nostalgic for the time spent together. I have the same feeling with this dissertation; it is like saying goodbye to a friend. It is hard. But I got to know them – my participants Sam, Steven, and Solar – and got to journey with them. It is not something I will easily forget. To witness the three of them experience a sense of joy in who they are, as cheesy as it may sound, truly fills me with awe and hope for the future.

When I think back to that little two-headed calf, I like to envision a full circle journey for them, one that is reminiscent of Sam, Solar, Steven, and my own journey, as well as many others. In our beginnings, we simply existed and navigated life with relative ease, as many children do. It was later on that disconnection – from others, ourselves, our histories – grew, as did the expectations to be a particular way in the world. We were led away from our innate gifts and our natural selves. Over time, through new connections and experiences, we realized that we are not “freaks,” there is nothing inherently wrong with us. We have had to dig for understanding of ourselves and return to respecting ourselves and our gifts. For us – and for many – this has been a process of returning and reconnecting, to ourselves, other people, history. This journey has been one of coming home.

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**Tables****Table 1***Participant Demographics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Sam	Late 20s	Genderqueer	He/him	Black-Haitian
Solar	Early 20s	Genderfluid	Any	Chinese
Steven	Mid 20s	Non-binary	He/they	Black

**Table 2***Addressing Narrative Inquiry Touchstones in the Current Research*

<b>Touchstone</b>	<b>How it was addressed</b>
Recognizing and fulfilling relational responsibilities	See section on Relational Ethics. This will be pertinent throughout the research process. This included respecting the stories shared, engaging in mutual and non-exploitative research <i>with</i> transgender people (e.g., by sharing my own experiences and identities when appropriate), and being responsive to the needs of participants (e.g., meeting at a time and place convenient for them).
Being in the midst	I continually maintained the understanding that the research, participants, and I are in the midst of our own lives and contexts. I did not search for people who have “achieved” gender euphoria, but rather considered that many are negotiating and learning about themselves within a social, historical, and institutional context that is ever-changing and continually shaping their lives.
Commitment to understanding continuity of lives and stories	By using life story interviews, I was better able to understand the context of people’s lives and situate their experiences of gender euphoria within their context. I also explored my own context in which I am doing this research, and the various components (e.g., political climate, personal experiences) associated with this. In doing so, I acknowledge the continuity of experience – participants’ and my own.
Negotiating relationships	Negotiating relationships occurred at every stage – as someone already a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, building respectful relationships with participants, negotiating the research relationship (e.g., boundaries, dynamics, hopes, mutuality), and the (co)constructed narratives/research texts.
Narrative beginnings or narrative self-stories	My field of study (Narrative Inquiry as a Trans Positive Research Method), proposal, and this dissertation began with narrative self-stories and personal accounts. In addition, my own stories, experiences, and reflections will be woven throughout this dissertation, particularly the results, to detail my own experiences in relation to the topic and conversations with participants.
Negotiating entry into the field	I worked with my existing community membership to further build and foster trusting relationships with participants. I have worked to maintain awareness and understanding that people may not want to participate, had particular hopes in participating, and are in different places with regards to comfort. Part of this touchstone also involved

accepting uncertainty at various stages as I negotiate my place within participants' lives, as well as in the field (research, psychology) and TGD community (Clandinin et al., 2018).

Moving from field to field texts	This stage allowed me to move back and forth between closeness with participants and distance (e.g., recording personal experiences, memories). It was important, at this stage, that I was fully involved with participants, and then step back to reflect on my own stories, the participants' stories, and the temporality of these experiences and stories. The interviews and research journal allowed me to be engaged with this touchstone.
Moving from field texts to research texts	In order to approach the construction of research texts, the participants and I reflected upon the questions posed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000): What should I consider when creating these research texts? Who is the audience? How will this benefit participants and the community? In what context were these stories shared? What consequences will these research texts have? Once a draft of the research texts was created, participants had the opportunity to review and edit them as they saw fit.
Acknowledging temporality, sociality, and place (narrative commonplaces)	Throughout, I revisited this consideration. In the research texts, I continually acknowledge and highlight the context in which stories were shared (e.g., the research relationship, social context), the time in which the stories occurred, and the context in which the research texts were written and, later, disseminated. The narrative commonplaces were woven throughout the stories, as will be seen in the Results sections.
Engaging with communities	This occurred throughout the research and before, which supported in building trusting relationships with participants.
Explaining justifications of the research	Throughout my proposal, field of study, and this dissertation, I discussed the justifications of using narrative inquiry and the importance of exploring gender euphoria further. The implications are many and wide-ranging, and include implications for practice, participants, the community, the audience, and myself, as a person, practitioner, and researcher.
Acknowledging multiple audiences	I considered the potential audiences throughout this research. The audiences include the participants themselves, the research community, the general population, and the transgender community. It is therefore important that I am respectful of these audiences, particularly the participants and transgender community, as they will be most directly involved and affected by this research.

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## Research Participants Needed!



Are you **over 18**? Do you identify as **transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, etc.**?

Have you experienced **gender euphoria** (the joy of living as your gender)?

Are you **comfortable** talking about your experiences?

If you answered “yes”, you are invited to volunteer in a collaborative study looking at the experiences of **gender euphoria** = the joy of personal gender expression and living as one’s gender.

### What does it involve?



- 3+ interviews (1-2+ hours – Zoom, phone, in-person) with a researcher at the to discuss your experiences with **gender** and **gender euphoria** over the course of your life.
- \$100 gift card(s) to a place(s) of your choice (e.g., Starbucks, Indigo, Amazon, local businesses) as compensation.



If you are **interested in participating** or for more information, please contact:

Danielle Lefebvre, MSc, PhD Candidate: [dclefebv@ucalgary.ca](mailto:dclefebv@ucalgary.ca)

Or anonymously at: <https://xoyondo.com/mb/C6x15HoxrqHaFO6>

QR code:



This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board:  
REB22-1382

Principal Investigator: Dr. Shelly Russell-Mayhew, [mkrussel@ucalgary.ca](mailto:mkrussel@ucalgary.ca)



**Appendix C: Consent Form****Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, & Email:**

Danielle C. Lefebvre, MSc, PhD Candidate  
Werklund School of Education, Faculty of Graduate Studies  
[dclefebv@ucalgary.ca](mailto:dclefebv@ucalgary.ca)

**Supervisor:**

Shelly Russell-Mayhew, PhD., R, Psych.

**Title of Project:**

Exploring Experiences of Gender Euphoria for Transgender Individuals

**Sponsor:**

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study (REB22-1382). Participation is completely voluntary and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, etc. individuals with gender euphoria (the joy of personal gender expression and living as one's true gender). Gender euphoria will be explored within the context of your life, and we will delve into moments in your life that you find particularly relevant and important (e.g., key events, relationships, identities, circumstances). This study also fulfils the requirements of completing a doctoral dissertation.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

In this study, you will be asked to participate in interviews about gender euphoria in connection to your life story. Questions such as, “Where would you like to begin the story of your life?”, “What did that [event, experience, person, art] mean to you?”, “How do you define gender euphoria?”, and more broadly, “What have been your experiences with gender euphoria?”. You may be asked to elaborate on your answers, but only talk as much or as little as you feel comfortable. These questions may feel personal and may be difficult to answer if they approach a sensitive topic for you. In addition, you are welcomed and encouraged to share any other forms of expression (e.g., art by yourself or others, poems, music, films, photos, etc.) that you feel articulate, describe, and/or enhance your experience of gender euphoria. You are free to decline to answer any question without penalty. You can decide to have fewer and longer interviews (2+, 2+-hour interviews), or more and shorter interviews (3+, 1–2-hour interviews). Interviews will take place however you are comfortable: over Zoom, phone, in-person, or email.

The interviews will be audio-taped. This is so that we are able to listen to the interviews afterwards and examine them for patterns.

During the interviews, we will also discuss a way(s) to express your story and experiences and collaborate on this. You have can your experiences shown through stories (e.g., a direct recounting of an experience), art, photographs, poems, etc. We will co-create these together to ensure that you are comfortable with and approve of the depiction of your experiences. If it is your preference, we will continue to meet throughout this stage. The research will be published and presented at conferences; given the collaborative nature of this research, you will be allowed to include your name as an author if you wish.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits (i.e., you will still receive compensation after the initial interview).

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Personal information will be collected for the purposes of contacting you and providing your gift card(s), and will not be used in any other part of the study. In addition, all information will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used, or you may choose to use your real name. Any other identifying personal information (e.g., locations, events) can be anonymized to ensure your privacy. You are also able to use a pseudonym and non-identifying email address if you choose to remain anonymous to the researcher as well throughout the study.

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your gender, age, ethnicity, and any other additional identities you wish to provide. Only the researcher and principal investigator will have access to the audiotapes. The recordings will not be available to the public.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:”

I grant permission to be audio-taped: Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

The pseudonym I choose for myself is:

OR, you may choose a pseudonym for me:

You may quote me and use my pseudonym: Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

**Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

While participating in this study, there is a possibility that you may feel distressed, upset, or uncomfortable if sensitive topics emerge in our conversations. If this is the case, you can decline to answer certain questions and you are free to withdraw at any time. A list of resources will be provided to you after the first interview, along with your copy of the consent form. If you state intent to harm yourself or others, it is the responsibility of the researchers to ensure that everyone is safe and may involve contacting emergency services. Information disclosed during the interviews will not be included in the analysis or final products of the research without your consent. In addition, if you choose to use your real name, there may be some risk. The research will be published and presented at conferences and, if you use your real name, it may appear in articles and presentations. You can consent to remove your data with your name from conference presentations as presentations often do not require extensive participant information. Once the research is published and presented, you will not be able to retract your data or your name from the data. However, we will regularly discuss this to ensure that you feel protected.

Additionally, this study may take up your time, effort, and finances (e.g., travel costs if interviews are in-person). To compensate you for the time and effort this study requires of you, you will be given a \$100 gift card (broken down into various amounts to different places if you choose).

**What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

The researcher and principal investigator will have access to your information, but this will not be released or seen by anyone else. The researcher and principal investigator will have access to the interview recordings, transcripts, notes, and any other information collected, but all identifying information will be removed before reviewing it.

Pseudonyms will be used in this study, if you choose, to maintain privacy and confidentiality. All electronic files will be kept in password protected files, and hard copies/physical items will be kept in a locked cabinet, both of which only the researcher and the principal investigator will have access to. If you choose to withdraw from the study and/or remove your data from the study, your data will be destroyed, including all information, recordings, interview transcripts, and other materials. You will have until 4 weeks after your approval of the research product(s) to request to have your data removed.

No one except the researcher and principal investigator will be allowed to see or hear any of the data as it will be stored on the University of Calgary's Secure Computing Data Storage (SCDS) system, which only the researcher and principal investigator will have access to. There are no names associated with the interviews and a pseudonym will always be used in the collection, analysis, and presentation of the data. Quotes from the interviews may be included in publications and presentations, but no personal identifiers will be included. Hard copies of data and physical materials are kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researchers and the study supervisor. The anonymous data will be stored for five years on SCDS and/or in a locked cabinet, at which time, it will be permanently erased. You will have copies of your data,

including interview transcripts and the research texts (e.g., stories) we collaborate on; you are free to keep these for as long as you choose.

Would you like to receive a summary of the study's results? Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_

If yes, please provide your contact information (e-mail address or phone number)

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### Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Dr. Shelly Russell-Mayhew, PhD, R. Psych.  
Werklund School of Education, Faculty of Graduate Studies  
mkrussel@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; email [cfreb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cfreb@ucalgary.ca). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

**List of Resources**

## Skipping Stone Calgary

407 2 St SW #1250, T2P 2Y3

One-on-one support, group programs, various resources

<https://www.skippingstone.ca/>[info@skippingstone.ca](mailto:info@skippingstone.ca)

(587) 333-4342

## End of the Rainbow

223 12 Ave SW, T2R 0G9

Various support services

<https://endoftherainbow.ca/support/>

(403) 262-4086

## Centre for Sexuality

#700 1509 Centre Street SW, T2G 2E6

Counselling and programs, various supports

<https://www.centreforsexuality.ca/>[intake@centreforsexuality.ca](mailto:intake@centreforsexuality.ca)

(403) 283-5580

## Distress Centre Calgary

Suite 300, 1010 – 8th Avenue SW, T2P 1J2

Online chat, 24-hour support, counselling

<http://www.distresscentre.com/>[help@distresscentre.com](mailto:help@distresscentre.com)

(403) 266-4357

## Calgary Outlink

Unit 103 – 223 12 Ave SW

Supports and resources for LGBT2Q+ folks

<https://www.calgaryoutlink.ca/>[info@calgaryoutlink.ca](mailto:info@calgaryoutlink.ca)

(403) 234-8973

## Women's Centre of Calgary

39-4<sup>th</sup> Street NE

Resources for women

<http://www.womenscentrecalgary.org/>[info@womenscentrecalgary.org](mailto:info@womenscentrecalgary.org)

(403) 264-1155

## Calgary TransHub

Resources for the transgender community in Calgary

<http://www.calgarytranshub.com/>

### Appendix D: Interview Script

*\*Note: The method and type of interviews do not involve structured interviews with pre-determined questions. Rather, broad, general questions are asked and the meanings of events and experiences are elaborated on in the moment.*

The purpose of this research is to explore your experiences with gender euphoria throughout your life. Gender euphoria has been defined as the sense of joy and freedom from living, or the thought of living, as one's true gender, which can involve personal gender expression. Together, we'll explore your experiences of gender euphoria. We will discuss your life story and you are welcome to share events, relationships, people, places, etc. that you feel are significant. Within those conversations, we'll discuss your experiences of gender euphoria. Since this research is more mutual and collaborative, I will share personal stories as well and you are always free to ask me any questions. We will then collaborate and co-create a "product" from our conversations, which can be in the form of a story, artwork, poem, or anything that you feel best voices your experience. It is possible that aspects of our conversations may be distressing or upsetting, so please feel welcome to decline to answer any questions, end the interview at any time, or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty for doing so. A list of local resources will also be provided to you with your consent form. Feel free to mention anything that you think is relevant; any questions I ask are more of a guideline. Is there anything you want to ask me before we get started?

\*\*\*\*\*RECORD\*\*\*\*\*

Before we start on the main interview, I just wanted to gather some basic information:  
How old are you?

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Any other personal information you'd like me to know?  
Do you have any questions about me, whether regarding the research or personally?

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**(Overarching question: What are your experiences with gender euphoria?)**

I want to start by getting to know you a little. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

- Who inspires you?
- Do you have any favourite authors or artists who have been influential to you?
- When do you feel happiest/most comfortable/most relaxed?

Where would you like to begin the story of your life?

- *Prompts:*
  - What did that [event, person, etc.] mean to you?
  - What messages did you learn from that?

- How did that change you/influence your understanding of...?

How do you define gender euphoria? / How do you understand gender euphoria?

What have been your experiences with gender euphoria?

- *Prompts:*
  - Tell me more about that experience.
  - What point in your life did this occur?
  - What meaning did you take from this experience? / How has the experience impacted you?

Is there anything else you would like to add?