

**Telling Stories to Live:
Hawaiian Trans Narratives on Gender and Sex Work**

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This paper is dedicated to my sister Bejana. Drop your shoulders Baby Sister. Keep looking to the ocean for quiet truths. Let the water embrace you and fill you up. Breathe deep, cry recklessly, and try to never let your grief feel more real than love. A dream, a chant — for tomorrows of laughing and living.

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We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

–Joan Didion, “The White Album,” 1970

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This research in many ways chose me. Growing up, sex workers and trans persons were a constant presence in my everyday life. They were a norm. As such, as an adult, when my baby brother — my youngest sibling — informed us that he wanted to become a woman and soon thereafter began sex work no one in my family made much of a fuss. Traditionally Hawaiians recognized a non-normative category of gender called *māhū* (Nanda, 2000; Ikeda, 2014). *Māhū* held a respected and integral role in pre-colonial Hawaiian culture (Xian & Anbe, 2001; Ikeda, 2014; Kame‘eleihiwa, 1999). And today, the *māhū* or trans¹ population in Hawai‘i comprise a visible presence of the resident population. However, for the most part trans persons now exist as a marginalized and stigmatized group in a two-gender framework (see Ellingson & Odo, 2008). Due to the difficulties related to conforming to the compulsory gender norms of mainstream employment, sex work has become one of the most common professions amongst trans (Odo & Hawelu, 2001). In this paper, I explore this particular juncture of sex work and trans identity in Hawai‘i.

1.1 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

1.1.1 *Historical and Geopolitical Context*

The Hawaiian Islands are the most geographically isolated population center in the entire world. Polynesian astronomers, navigating by canoe, settled the Hawaiian Islands around 300 A.D. Hawai‘i was “discovered” by the British in 1778 (see McGregor, 1996). Christian missionaries and sugar plantations followed shortly thereafter, developing Hawai‘i in the name of religion, moral responsibility, and economics (see Banner, 2005). In 1893 the sugar industry conspired with American military interests to depose of and imprison the increasingly independent and outspoken Hawaiian monarch, Queen Lili‘uokalani (see "Apology Resolution," 1993). This coup d'état was the first step towards statehood that would guarantee a lasting American foothold in the Pacific (see Van Van-Dyke, 2008).

¹ See §1.2 for a clarification of the term.

Today the result of America's illegal overthrow and de facto colonization of Hawai'i have manifested itself in the living conditions — disease, poverty, and homelessness levels of the native population mirror third world conditions (*see generally* OHA, 2011). With the addition of plantation history, a super military presence, and the tourism industry, Hawai'i is a noxious concoction and incomparable site of investigation. Consequently, today's Hawai'i is a place of contradictions. It is both America and it is not. It is both a tourist paradise and a site of contestation. It is both heteronormative and gender diverse.

1.1.2 *The Historical Transformation of Māhū in Hawai'i*

Possibly because the Hawaiian language was only an oral language, there is an extreme dearth of the historical record of transgenderism in the Pacific (Besnier, 2000). In any case, the historical presence of *māhū* has been noted since the first contact with Westerners (Ellingson & Odo, 2008) and “is considered to be an integral part of tradition” (Besnier, 2000: 417). It has also been mentioned in various written transcriptions of *mo'olelo*² (legends and stories) in the last century and *kupuna*³ (elders) have continued to pass down the history orally.

However, today after “generations of cultural misappropriations” many aspects of Hawaiian culture, tradition, and language have been affected, and “words like *māhū* have been stigmatized and carry negative sexual connotations over decades of misuse” (Snow, 2014). Although there has been no research tracking the transmogrification of the status of *māhū* from the center to the margins, a few scholars have hypothesized as to the primary causes. They have argued that the missionary import of the heteronormative framework in conjunction with Hawai'i's unique historical and geopolitical record helped drive this shift forward (*see generally* Snow, 2014; Kame'eleihiwa, 1992; Kanuha, 2000).

Understandably, like many colonized indigenous populations, many Hawaiians today have little connection to their native culture. Instead of finding identity in a culture and history that recognized them, I saw that popular culture and the online world were the main sources of influence for the project's participants. I also came to realize that there was a strong correlation between urbanization (in other words the degree of colonization) and the performance of/adherence to heteronormativity. Or in other words, that the trans identities

² The legend of Ka-uholā-nui-a- māhū (*See* Pukui, Haertig & Lee, 1972; Malo, D. *Hawaiian Antiquities*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Special Publication, 1951. pp. 68-69) and the legend of Kapae-māhū or the Wizard Stones at Waikīkī (*See* Matzner, 2001; Pukui et. al. *Place Names of Hawaii*. Honolulu: UH Press, 1974, p. 173) are the two most cited legends.

³ See the discussion of māhū by Pukui (1972) and the interview with Ku'umealoha Gomes in Xian & Anbe (2001). This was further confirmed in my personal interview, dated 3 June 2014 with Gomes.

that I encountered were particular to the project's specific location on urban O'ahu,⁴ which is littered with military bases, facilities, airfields, and training areas,⁵ not to mention hundreds of hotels, inns, and vacation rentals. The combination of the tourist and military industries, along with the marginalized status of trans persons may have aided in facilitating the proliferation of the trans sex market that is seen today.

1.1.3 *Trans Persons in General*

Trans people comprise an especially vulnerable population (Rachlin, 2009; Martin & Meezan, 2009). The National Center for Transgender Equality in the United States conducted a study involving 6,450 trans participants. The results showed that trans persons are facing discrimination at a disproportionate rate. Trans persons are four times more likely to live in extreme poverty (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011). They are twice as likely to be unemployed, and four times as likely to be unemployed if a trans person of color (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011). And 90% of those that are working report experiencing mistreatment, harassment or discrimination on the job (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011). 22% of respondents also experienced harassment by police, and almost half of the respondents reported feeling uncomfortable seeking help from the police (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011). These compounded injustices likely are the reason why 41% of participants reported attempting suicide at least once, compared to only 1.6% of the general population (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011). With trans women⁶ of color experiencing overall exponentially heightened rates of murder, homelessness, and incarceration (GLAAD, 2014). This level of risk and vulnerability is exacerbated further when the trans of color identity intersects with the illegal commercial sex trade (*see* Grant, Mottett & Tanis, 2011).

1.1.4 *Trans Sex Work in Hawai'i*

Both the act of prostituting and soliciting in Hawai'i is illegal. Convictions are punishable by a \$500-\$1000 USD fine and up to 30 days in prison ("Prostitution," 2014). Trans persons are incarcerated in a prison that corresponds to the gender registered on their

⁴ So although I refer to Hawai'i and Hawaiians, it is important to remember that I do *not* intend to generalize my conclusions to trans persons living on the outer islands Hawai'i. Instead I use the terms as a matter of convenience because there appeared to be enormous differences between the urban and rural populations.

⁵ 20.6% of all land in Hawaii is military land (<http://www.nohohewa.com/occupied-areas/>).

⁶ Meaning transgender persons who identify with the female gender identity. I use this term throughout the paper.

certificates of birth, in the case of this study—the men’s prison.⁷ Although trans street sex workers constitute a visible presence on the streets of Waikīkī and Hono‘lulu, a quick search of classified advertisements on “Craiglist” and “Backpage” reveal there are also a large number of trans women soliciting from online databases. Because there is no comprehensive registered data on trans sex workers in Hawai‘i accurate numbers are difficult to estimate, though two smaller health and welfare studies estimated between 69% and 72% of their informants to participate in sex work.⁸

1.2 USE AND DEFINITION OF THE TERM “TRANS”

In this study I shall primarily use the term trans. I originally planned to use the Hawaiian language term *māhū*, then thereafter I switched to transgender,⁹ but finally I carefully decided on trans as the best choice for this project. In Hawai‘i, the label *māhū* refers primarily to male-to-female¹⁰ trans persons (Odo & Hawelu, 2001) though some research has opted for the newly constructed term, *māhūwahine*, meaning female *māhū* (Odo & Hawelu, 2001). Female-to-male individuals are not commonly referred to as *māhū* in contemporary times, though historical documents suggests that this was not always the case, as the category was liminal and meant generally that a person was both male and female at once (Odo & Hawelu, 2001). Although Hawaiian activists have attempted to reclaim the term *māhū*, I came to understand very quickly that most of the project’s participants continued to dislike the word, since they had experienced it being used by the general public (as opposed to academics and activists) in a pejorative way.

I then began to use the term “transgender,” which is the current trend in research throughout the world.¹¹ However, I also soon realized that this term felt awkward and

⁷ Although this is not officially stated anywhere, this is the practice according to informal statements I received from Hawai‘i state attorneys, Honolulu Police Department employees, and the project’s participants.

⁸ See § 3.1.1 (with 69% in Ellingson & Odo, 2008; and 72% in Tomas, 2013). These were studies that were looking at the Hawaiian trans population—though factors like urban or rural residence, or age, of the sample populations, could influence these numbers greatly.

⁹ Generally speaking, a transgender individual may have characteristics normally associated with a particular gender, or identify elsewhere on the traditional gender continuum, along several places on the continuum or even exist outside of it (*See* Rachlin, 2009). This could include many overlapping categories, including but not limited to transvestites, androgynes, genderqueers or pangender, transsexuals, and intersexed individuals.

¹⁰ Transgender persons that identify with a gender identity outside of the binary may feel constrained by the male-to-female or female-to-male categories (since they are based on a heteronormative framework) and therefore I chose not to use the designations in my study, though the participants themselves generally had no problem with this designation and in fact actively used them.

¹¹ I carefully came to this decision after weighing the convenience of transgender as a term with the fact that utilization of the term may be a repressive, colonizing, and reifying act in itself (*See* § 3.2.3 of this paper for further explanation). I also decided on using term trans women instead of trans feminine (which is also common in current research) due to the fact that the participants perceived and referred to themselves, and preferred to be considered real women.

scientific in my everyday colloquial discussions with the participants, and in fact highlighted my role as “Researcher” because they almost always referred to themselves as just “trans” or “TS,”¹² meaning transsexual. Consequently, in this study, I chose to primarily utilize one of the term’s the project participants’ themselves used — “trans” — as opposed to *māhū* or transgender, to refer to them and their corresponding population in Hawai‘i.

Before moving on, I would like to highlight three essential points regarding trans identity in this research. First, that being trans is not dependent on sexual reassignment surgery [hereinafter “SRS”]. Most chose to utilize medical procedures and hormone therapy in order to align their physical body with the perceived female gender. However not all had a desire to have a SRS. The term could also refer to persons who had had zero surgery because what was most important was the fact that the person was living full-time as feminine bodied and intended to live life as a woman. Second, it is of utmost importance to note that being trans does not imply a homosexual orientation. This was a common misconception and source of frustration for the project’s participants. Trans persons, like any other people, can be straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Though, I should note that most of the participants considered themselves emphatically straight and were seriously offended by any other designation (particularly gay/homosexual). Third, on a related note, the project’s participants also clearly distinguished themselves from other identities in the transgender umbrella label, most specifically—part-time cross-dressers (transvestites)—whom they negatively referred to as “butch-queens.”

1.3 AIMS OF THE THESIS

This thesis originally started out as an examination into how colonialism affected Hawaiian gender and sexuality. Although colonial history and indigenous cultural legacy are not a primary focus any more, they still remain an important backdrop into understanding trans identity in this project. The project then transformed into a social criticism piece that condemned how society constructed the trans sex worker. It was easy to become caught up in the negatives and how sex work often unintentionally turned into subsistence prostitution in order to support not only basic living and the quest for a SRS but a plethora of life-threatening addictions, ranging from drug abuse as a method of survival, to plastic surgery obsession in a search for a hyper-feminine ideal (Schepel, 2011). I was in effect creating a

¹² I decided against using the term TS because of its implication of transsexual, and the fact that many associate transsexual to mean post-operative or a desire for sexual reassignment surgery (which was not the case for all of the project’s participants).

Native victim that perhaps my Western audience might want to rescue and hopefully as a result would help generate change. I recognized that I had been reproducing a tragic narrative of mental disorders, loneliness, and drug abuse. This was the story told in the statistics and conveyed in many of the interviews. However, there were also other stories within those stories — overarching tales of survival. I had been so focused on the typical attention grabbing “exciting” parts, that although I had chosen to do qualitative research to focus on the subjective voice of the participants, I had in effect closed my ears to other parts of their stories. Sometimes the “major story may not become clear until all the minor themes and concepts have been developed (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002: 219). As such, as this thesis stands today, its overall objective is to provide new data about trans identity formation and trans sex work in Hawai‘i, while simultaneously critically discussing everyday performances of heteronormative gender identity through exploring their subjective experiences. Thus, the thesis intends to contribute both empirically and analytically to the research field of gender and sexuality, trans and sex work research in particular.

To meet this objective I considered the following research questions:

- How do trans stories and story telling work to reproduce and problematize heteronormativity, and influence subject formation? In which ways do they invoke a temporality of a present and a future? What do the stories tell us about which bodies matter?
- In which ways do Hawaiian trans sex work reproduce and problematize stereotypes of sex work and sex workers? How does the sex worker identity interact with the trans identity, and how do other types of work come into play? How are non-normative bodies — like the trans sex worker body — sanctioned by society and state institutions?
- How do Hawaiian trans sex workers navigate the complications inherent in passing? How does the discourse of heteronormativity affect self-perception and produce particular notions of gender amongst trans sex workers? In which ways do gender norms regulate the trans body into the role of the freak? In which ways is passing, i.e., the quest for womanhood, both a threat to the well being of trans sex workers, and concomitantly an indispensable necessity for their survival?

1.4 ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS

This thesis has been organized into eight chapters. In the second chapter I will present the theoretical framework that I used to guide my analysis of the empirical data. The

third chapter will include a review of the literature that I found relevant to my study. In the fourth chapter, I will describe my research methodology. The following three chapters (five to seven) will comprise the empirical findings and analysis of this research. With chapter five exploring trans stories and storytelling; chapter six examining the many contours of sex work and other types of work; and chapter seven delving into the complexities of passing.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.0 INTRODUCTION

In the following chapter I will present the theoretical framework that I utilized in this study. Beginning first with the primary theory, Plummer's "sociology of stories"—that assists in exploring the social role of stories and storytelling. Next, I consider Butler's theory on gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix to investigate my research questions on heteronormativity and gender. And last in the chapter is the sex work theory section that I will use to aid me in analyzing and problematizing the various dimensions of sex work.

2.1 SOCIOLOGY OF STORIES

In this research, I use Plummer's sociology of stories as the primary foundation of the theoretical framework. Plummer (1995) in his book, *Telling Sexual Stories*, outlines this theory. According to Plummer, a sociology of stories generally "seeks to understand the role of stories in social life" (1995: 31). More specifically, it delves into the "social and political conditions that generate some stories and not others, enabling some to be heard and not others" (Plummer, 1995: 31). A researcher analyzing narratives, needs to see "stories as social actions embedded in social worlds" (Plummer, 1995: 17). From there, the researcher can investigate the social role of the story, or in other words, the many ways they are produced and read, their function and performance in the wider social order, the manners in which they change, and lastly, their roles in the political process (Plummer, 1995: 19).

Plummer (1995) begins his elaboration of storytelling theory by dividing the primary actors into two groups. First, are the "producers" of sexual stories. These are further subdivided, and consist of both storytellers or performers *and* those that coax, coerce, or coach the stories to come forth. The second major group is the consumers, readers, and audiences. Whether you are the type to indulge in a television talk-show where prostitutes confess all, or more of the film-festival attendee who contemplates on an artsy independent documentary about the tribulations of a trans teenager, or even the professor who avidly devours an anthology of narratives about the post-sex change recovery period—you are still a consumer.

Everyone in modern western society is always either producing or consuming — constantly telling stories about our pasts, presents and futures. We ceaseless narrate and storytell, writing the story of our lives and the world around us — places, people, purposes,

plots (Plummer, 1995). Plummer describes even society itself as a “web of stories” that holds people together, pulls them apart, and makes societies work (1995: 5). Plummer explains:

We invent identities for others and ourselves and locate ourselves in these imagined maps We experience our bodies and our feelings, as well as our behaviors and talk. And everywhere we go, we are charged with telling stories and making meaning - giving sense to ourselves and the world around us. And the meanings we invoke and the worlds we craft mesh and flow, but remain emergent: never fixed, always indeterminate, ceaselessly contested (1995: 20).

Moreover, these stories are dependent on interaction, a “constant flow of joint actions” circulating between producers and consumers and the shifting contexts in which the stories are told, collected, heard, and interpreted (Plummer, 1995: 24). These processes compound each other until “the link between reality and the story become very fragile,” which Plummer insists does not devalue the story being told (1995: 24).

Next in the sociology of stories, the researcher must asks four questions, beginning with the basic nature of stories, which looks at form, organization (plot or time?), the presence of metaphors, and underlying structure. For example, according to Plummer, there are three basic elements of stories today: suffering, epiphany, and transformation. Suffering “gives tension to the plot,” epiphany refers to a “crisis or turning point,” and transformation is in reference to “a surviving and maybe a surpassing” (Plummer, 1995: 54). In addition, five generic plots are outlined: taking a journey, engaging in a contest, enduring suffering, pursuing consummation, and establishing a home.

The second question is regarding “the social processes of producing and consuming stories” (Plummer, 1995: 24). How does a narrator construct the particular story they are telling and how does one come to own that story? Or “why do they tell this particular kind of story rather than another” and “where does the story they tell come from?” (Plummer, 1995: 25). But also included in the social processes, is the consuming of stories. Because “tellings cannot be in isolation from hearings, readings, consumings” (Plummer, 1995: 25). When can, and how, are stories heard? Furthermore, Plummer emphasizes that there can be no story without someone who is listening. In this interactive relationship between production and consumption, both groups are mutually dependent on each other.

The third question concerns the social role of stories. What functions do the stories serve in society and in people’s lives? For example, are they being used conservatively (to maintain dominant order) or in a transformative way (to resist)? Lastly, in connection with

the third question, the researcher should take into account issues of change, history, and culture, examining “the links between stories and the wider social world” (Plummer, 1995: 25). Plummer describes this as “the contextual conditions for stories to be told and for stories to be received” (1995: 25). Or how certain stories are vocalized at particular historical moments, and how meanings change, and/or new types of stories become tellable?

An overall theme to be conscious of, flowing within and throughout the sociology of stories, is the aspect of power. Plummer explains that “[s]tories are not just practical and symbolic actions: they are also part of the political process” (1995: 26). And being part of the political process means that stories and the telling of stories flow through the stream of power. Plummer argues that “[p]ower is not so much an all or nothing phenomenon, which people either have or don’t have, and which resides either here or there.” (1995: 26). Instead, he describes it as “a flow of negotiations and shifting outcomes” (Plummer, 1995: 26). He goes on further to call it omnipresent and multi-formed, both positive and negative, flowing into lives, situations, networks of social activity, and the whole social order. Plummer asserts, “[s]exual stories live in this flow of power. The power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the conditions of one’s own choosing, is part of the political process” (1995: 26). Plummer claims that variations of power are everywhere, from the emotional power of pride that presses a story to be told, to the empowerment that overflows after the telling of a story that was once silent.

Because this presence of power is so entangled within sexual stories, Plummer recommends that researchers also keep in mind a second series of analytical questions when examining stories in this political flow. This series of questions is concerning the nature, making, and consuming of stories, the strategies of story telling, and stories in the wider world. The researcher must ask about how “stories sit with the wider frameworks of power?” (Plummer, 1995: 30). Plummer clarifies this by indicating that the “story telling process flows through social acts of domination, hierarchy, marginalization and inequality” (1995: 30). For example, he explains that some voices “are not only heard much more readily than others, but also are capable of framing the questions, setting the agendas, [and] establishing the rhetorics” (Plummer 1995: 30). Then there are the others, those whose voices tend to be silenced, whether from gender, race, age, class, or sexuality, or combination of many, like the voices present in my project. These are the most marginalized stories, because they fall outside of and challenge what Plummer calls the gendered heterosexism of stories (which he says signifies stories “which facilitate standard gender divisions”) (1995: 31). It is these types of stories, he contends, that “will be most readily said and heard” (Plummer, 1995: 31).

2.1.1 *Talking Story About Sex in Hawai‘i*

Because I am utilizing this theory in the context of Hawai‘i, I must state a couple of caveats. One is explanatory and the other is modifying. First, the expression “talk-story” is a well known concept used in Hawai‘i to describe small-talk or chatting that is done in Hawaiian Creole English¹³ (Booth, 2009). It is argued that it is not just a form of language but a form of relating, “there is a much higher degree of emotion revelation, in word, tone, gesture, facial expression, even posture” (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee 1972: 64) and “it denotes warmth, cordiality, friendliness” (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee 1972: 309). As such, in this project, the importance of storytelling or “talking story” takes on a deeper meaning because of the centrality of storytelling and the history of oral tradition in Hawai‘i. The Hawaiian word generally used to signify legends and myths today, *mo‘olelo*, actually directly translated means “succession of stories” or “talk-story” which demonstrates how the oral tradition persists today (Pukui & Elbert, 1986). It is a way to share, to remember, to document and pass on history, but also often a way to teach a moral or to entertain.

In addition, Hawai‘i’s history and relationship to sexuality must be mentioned. Traditionally, sexuality was not seen as taboo or even private for that matter. It was accepted as a natural part of daily life that was a matter of profound pleasure in addition to being an instrument for procreation (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee, 1972: 75). In old Hawai‘i, sexual privacy was so nonexistent that entire villages sang songs of tribute written about high-ranking children’s genitalia (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee 1972: 76). Moreover, because Hawaiian language had two meanings—one that was ostensible and another that was allegorical—there were often hidden, sexual meanings behind the seemingly straightforward language (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee 1972: 85). In comparison, the modern Western version of sexuality depicted by Plummer (1995) is one where sexuality was and in many ways is still considered personal and private. His book focuses on the instances where these private matters become public, sometimes in a most sensationalized way (because of the fact they are still considered private). These stories transform from bedroom secrets and unspeakable fetishes, to primetime TV shows and New York Times bestsellers.

As such, it is imperative to keep in mind that the narratives that were shared with me, and that I present, although were examined with Plummer’s theory, were simultaneously

¹³ Normally the language is called simply Pidgin by locals. But is also referred to as Hawaiian Creole English or Hawaiian Pidgin. This year, after a contentious history — including the de facto ban of the language in schools and workplaces for generations — it has finally been recognized as an official language in Hawai‘i this year.

analyzed with Hawai‘i’s history in mind. For the participants, telling sexual stories was an ordinary part of everyday life and came more naturally. At the same time, while they are Hawaiians, they are also byproducts of Western culture. Plummer explains that the way a story is told and how it is heard, will differ depending on the context because narratives “do not float around abstractly but are grounded in historically evolving communities of memory, structured through age, class, race, gender and sexual preference” (1995: 22).

2.2 PROVINCIALIZING SEX WORK

The next two theorists I use in my theoretical framework are very much interconnected. As such, I will discuss them as one. Because the project’s participants are Hawaiian sex workers, it is impossible to responsibly analyze the narratives without taking into account race and class, and the seemingly consequential profession and lifestyle that is sex work. Aiding me in this analysis is Kamala Kempadoo’s, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (2004) [hereinafter “Sexing the Caribbean”] and Svati P. Shah’s *Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work, and Migration in the City of Mumbai* (2014) [hereinafter “Street Corner Secrets”].

The benefits of sex work, for the project’s participants, go further than economic. Sex work operates as a gender confirmation, assisting further with identity formation. But at the same time, sex work brings a lot of trouble. The boundaries between what constitute the pros and cons of sex work are not always so clear. Even the definition of what comprises sex work itself is not a straightforward answer. Many of the project’s participants described sex work as their only option due to their identities as trans, poor, and Hawaiian. However, this recipe is also not so clear-cut.

Kempadoo on the first page of her book paraphrases Frantz Fanon, arguing that “colonial discourses are deeply embedded in the psyche and behavior of the colonized . . . sedimented in the hearts and minds” (2004: 1). This is an important theoretical starting point in this last section of my theoretical framework. Kempadoo points out the importance of examining “the ways in which sexuality and gender are socially, legally, and politically organized” (2004: 9), claiming that heteropatriarchy “marginalizes and criminalizes gendered subjects who transgress established sexual boundaries” (Kempadoo, 2004: 9). But most significantly for this paper, she argues that the brown sex-worker body (in her study the Caribbean body) is “self-actualizing and transformative” (Kempadoo, 2004: 3). Further, that “[t]hese sexual subjects are neither inert nor passive” (Kempadoo, 2004: 4). Instead, these bodies that “inhabit marginal sexual spaces resist, and sometimes rebel, against gendered and

sexual regimes . . . and actively work against dominant ideologies and practices that seek to deny their existence” (Kempadoo, 2004: 4). Kempadoo acknowledges the exploitative and oppressive nature of sex work, but also takes into account “the potentially transformational dimensions” of sex work — an aspect that is almost always left out (2004: 4). Kempadoo’s study is of particular interest to me because of the fact that it is based out of the Caribbean, and has many similarities with Hawai‘i, including island culture, a plethora of racial mixes, a colonial history, and a modern-day tourism based economy, to name a few.

Shah’s work follows the same vein as Kempadoo, challenging the sex worker as the powerless, exploited victim trajectory. Shah questions whether the exploitative and abusive conditions in sex work are produced due to its criminalization. Shah’s study emphasizes that sex work must be properly understood as “one of many livelihood strategies” that the poor utilize, where all of the strategies are comprised of many inherent “risks that are part of a daily negotiation for survival” (Shah, 2014: 8). She shows that sex work is not a totalizing concept, but for many it is just “one of numerous livelihood strategies that people engage concurrently, or over the course of their working lives” (Shah, 2014: 8). In other words, sex work is not a totalizing identity but instead is an income-generating activity. She makes sure to point out that prostitution and poverty should not be conflated, arguing instead that the poverty is not a universal experience amongst all sex workers (Shah, 2014: 10). She also challenges the larger, general ontology of prostitution, arguing that the term “flatten[s] many disparate forms of traditional sex into one conceptual frame” (Shah, 2014: 17).

2.3 GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND THE HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX

In addition to employing Plummer’s “sociology of stories” and Shah and Kempadoo’s approach to thinking about sex work as the foundations of my theoretical framework, I will be using Judith Butler’s theory on gender performativity. In particular, her interrogation of ideas on the sex/gender distinction, as an analytical tool to assist me in examining the complex gender issues raised throughout the narratives. Butler’s theory on gender is partly rooted in Adrienne Rich’s ideas on “compulsory heterosexuality” (*see* Rich, 1980). In turn, Butler’s theory is related to the concept of “heteronormativity,” first coined by Andrew Warner in an article published in 1991 (*see* Warner, 1991). Warner coined this term as a critique against compulsory heterosexuality, or the systematic and institutional reification of a two gender binary where heterosexuality is the norm.

Heteronormativity manifests itself everywhere, in unconscious ways that have no direct relation to gender, sex, or sexuality (*see* Berlant & Warner, 1998). In this project, this

becomes visible throughout the participants' narratives, in ways that are sometimes very obvious, and sometimes not. For the participants, gender formation both takes place, and is constructed, through story telling. This is no different than any other human in Western society, but in my research, by reason of the non-normative nature of the project participants' gendered expressions, it becomes particularly interesting. This is due to a key component of Butler's theory on gender performativity — her radical departure from the long accepted assumption that there is a distinction between sex and gender, i.e., that sex is biological and gender is social. Butler claims that the sex/gender dichotomy in itself is a construct and that *both* sex and gender are constructed. This revelation was of extreme importance in this project because my interpretation of it helped to reveal that identity formation for the project's participants was based on a hegemonic distinction between sex and gender — which will become clear in the following chapters.

Butler then adds sexuality to the sex and gender mix, claiming that all three are culturally constructed in a “heterosexual matrix.” This matrix is constituted over time, via repetitive performative acts, and via the institutionalization of heteronormativity. This is the basis of Butler's theory that gender is performative. This idea further disrupts the participants' sense of gendered self, because this identity of being a woman, and of matching one's outside self with one's inner self, is based on the belief that the gendered self is an inherent and inalienable part. This implies that their ontology pertains to particular identity narratives that serve to naturalize sex and establish a unity between sex, gender, and heterosexual desire.

Interestingly, many have oversimplified this theory into the drag analogy that Butler first mentions in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006) [hereinafter “Gender Trouble”] (*see* Prosser, 2006: 259 for a discussion of this misinterpretation of Butler's theory). The analogy though is quite useful in understanding gender performance. Within a single drag performance is the “presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” (Butler, 2006: 187). There is rarely a correlation between all three of these aspects in a drag performance. Therefore,

the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ . . . , it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory

fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag simplicity reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency (Butler, 2006: 187).

The drag performance then becomes the physical manifestation of the theory itself. Where drag showcases that there exists no original, authentic gender, instead “the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (Butler, 2006: 188). Instead it is a production, an always already failed copy, that “no one *can* embody” (Butler, 2006: 189).

In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* [hereinafter “Bodies That Matter”] Butler further clarifies this analogy: “drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but the hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations” (2011: 85). Additionally, Butler qualifies this analogy, claiming that drag, or in my research, transgenderism, *can* subvert dominant gender norms but it *can also* reify these norms. For example, the participants’ gendered expressions might perpetuate misogyny and hegemonic heteronorms. Despite this reification, Butler points out that *any* gender performance that imitates or transgresses norms can pose a challenge to the stability of dominant norms, because it opens up a distance between the “hegemonic call to normativizing gender and its critical appropriation” (2011: 95).

2.4 CONNECTING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO THE ANALYTICAL CHAPTERS

I utilize all of the theories — Plummer’s sociology of stories, Shah and Kempadoo’s ideas on sex work, and Butler’s theory on gender performativity — throughout this paper to assist me in analyzing the narratives. But in particular, I employ Plummer’s theory as the primary theoretical framework of chapter five on storytelling and stories; Shah and Kempadoo’s ideas on sex work as the main analytical approach to chapter six; and Butler’s theory on gender performativity is utilized to analyze chapter seven.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

3.0 INTRODUCTION

Before I begin, I would like to say a few words about the content of this chapter. Early on, I realized that this section could not adequately express the variety of sources I utilized during the course of this project, because most of them could not be categorized, or constrained into a single suitable category — much like the participants of this project — due to the multifaceted nature of this research. I could see the benefits of a presentation of the literature, but at the same time felt that it was limiting me to certain criteria. Despite these tensions, I managed to put together a concise but competent chapter, divided primarily into studies conducted from Hawai‘i, and studies that took place outside of Hawai‘i, highlighting only the material that I found particularly relevant to this study.

The study of trans sex workers is novel in the region of Polynesia. In fact it is relatively novel no matter the location. In the recent years the body of research on trans populations has exponentially grown and studies on sex work have remained popular. However, it is at the intersection of these two areas of research that my project is located, and although there have been some quantitative based studies or health and welfare related research that have been conducted at this intersection, the voice offered in qualitative research has been lacking.

3.1 STUDIES WITHIN HAWAI‘I

3.1.1 *Health and Welfare Related Studies on Trans Persons in Hawai‘i*

The majority of the research that has been conducted on trans persons is primarily studies related to health. This was likely due to the medicalization of transgenderism as a mental illness (*see generally* Cauldwell, 2006) and the heightened health needs associated with the trans lifestyle (*see* Silverschanz, 2009). These studies normally are quantitative in nature. A review of the literature found a few such studies on trans persons in Hawai‘i. All of the studies reviewed observed significant participation in sex work (with up to 69% in Ellingson & Odo, 2008; and 72% in Tomas, 2013). While at the same time noting the limited availability of analogous data on Polynesian trans sex workers when compared to trans sex workers living in the continental United States (*see* Ellingson & Odo, 2008). Odo and Hawelu conducted one such study on male-to-female trans persons using case management based data from an HIV prevention program. Their statistical findings compared selected

risk factors of the Hawaiian trans population with the general Hawaiian population. During a three-year search only four male-to-female trans persons over the age of fifty were found (Odo & Hawelu, 2001), implying a very high mortality rate. The participants were 300 times more likely to have HIV, 12 times more likely to use illegal drugs,¹⁴ 23 times more likely to be an ex-inmate, and 24 times more likely to be homeless when compared to a non-trans person (Odo & Hawelu, 2001). The authors presumed even higher rates for sex workers (Odo & Hawelu, 2001). Moreover, of the 100 participants, only 2 had a bachelor's degree (Odo & Hawelu, 2001). These statistics are consistent with the general statistics found on trans persons of color living in the US (*see generally* Grant, Mottett & Tanis, 2011). Outside of Hawai'i, there exists an enormous amount of quantitative studies on the health needs and risk behaviors of trans persons. These tend to highlight HIV prevention, surgical history, and other sort of statistical data related to mental and physical health and welfare, in a similar manner as the Hawai'i studies described above.

3.1.2 *Qualitative Studies on Trans Persons in Hawai'i*

Lastly, Besnier along with Alexeyeff (2014) edited a compilation on trans identities in the Pacific Region entitled *Gender on the Edge: Transgender, Gay, and Other Pacific Islanders*. One of the chapters in the compilation, written by Ikeda, was on trans persons in Hawai'i. It did not address the sex work dimension and instead mostly seemed to ignore that history altogether (except for one reference) — even when including a quotation that had what I interpreted as an indirect reference to sex work (*see* Ikeda, 2014: 150, second block quotation). Ikeda instead emphasized that she intended to “challenge the sensational” (2014: 136). Although a noble intent, the fact that sex work is a large part of the everyday lives of many trans persons in Hawai'i problematizes this omission.¹⁵ Furthermore, my project arguably demonstrates that sex work is not just about the sensational, but in fact becomes part of the “ordinary and ‘everyday’” following the same aim that Ikeda identifies in her study (2014: 136). In addition, Ikeda mentions that many outsiders perceive the Hawaiian trans population “as deviant, sick, or criminal” and a desire to challenge this portrayal of *māhū* as “drug-abusing street prostitutes and HIV carriers” was a motivation for her project (2014: 139). A byproduct of avoiding this subject, is the reproduction of these stereotypes, as well as the “prostitute as victim” discourse (*see* Agustin, 2007). My paper also questions this

¹⁴ Illegal here does not refer to marijuana, which culturally is more accepted in Hawai'i.

¹⁵ Many of the project's participants insisted that the majority of all trans persons of color in Hawai'i had done some degree of sex work in their lives.

biased depiction, but does so while addressing the reality and complexity of sex work and the trans sex worker identity.

Moreover, Ikeda's research described trans persons that had a clear connection to their Hawaiian identities and were rooted in the cultural knowledge of the traditional role of *māhū*.¹⁶ Because my research began looking for that connection, but failed to find its presence in the trans sex worker community, could reveal the diversity *within* the trans communities in Hawai'i.¹⁷ Ikeda's participants (sixteen in all) were primarily drag performers who had a notably higher average age (thirty-three), higher degrees of education (one Bachelor's degree, three Associate's degrees), and an overall higher employment rate (80%) than the participants of this project (2014: 137).¹⁸ As such, whatever the reasoning for these differences, as a reader, it is important to keep in mind that my paper is describing a specific trans community in Hawai'i. Nonetheless, despite the divergence from my project, Ikeda's focus on kinship (biological, fostered, and drag families) and belonging is an important and useful addition to Hawai'i's collection on trans literature.

3.1.3 *Other Material on Trans Persons in Hawai'i*

Despite the visible presence of trans persons in Hawai'i, there has not been a corresponding amount of published material on the population. One of the most well known works was the controversial documentary, *Downtown Girls: The Hookers of Honolulu*. Owens (2005) utilized interviews and hidden-camera footage to capture what he depicted as the sexually exciting escapades of trans prostitutes. Even though the documentary is generally related to this project's particular intersection of research, it was irrelevant for my research due to its spectacularized partiality.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Ikeda uses the term *māhūwahine* (a newly constructed term meaning feminine bodied transgender persons) throughout her research and in her title. This is the practice of most of the researchers in Hawai'i. However, as I stated earlier, I found that my participants were offended by the use of the term *māhū* and uncomfortable with the term *māhūwahine*.

¹⁷ Another interesting difference was Ikeda noted in her research that "most participants did not view transitioning as a change from male to female or vice versa so much as a shift to a desired place 'in between' or even beyond gender binaries" (2014:137). As stated earlier, this conclusion is what I had hoped to find when I set out for fieldwork, but did not. Although, it seems almost romanticized or too good to be true when compared to my data, it could also have to do with the specific population she studied, and point to the fact that there are distinct communities within the communities.

¹⁸ In comparison to this project, the average age of an interview participant was 22 years old (I did not have all the ages of the informal conversation participants, so cannot provide an average age). Only one participant had completed multiple university level courses but was not near the completion of a degree, and a second had completed some junior college classes. Moreover, amongst the interviewees, only two of the participants had full time work and three more had part time jobs. Although I was unable to ask the employment status of all the informal conversation participants, the trend seemed to be that the majority of them did not have a form of formal, legal work (part time or full time).

Although Hawai‘i is probably the most widely recognized area in Polynesia, Nanda’s chapter on “Liminal Gender Roles in Polynesia” in her book, *Gender Diversity: Crosscultural Variations* (2000), is based primarily on data attained from Tahiti and Samoa. One could conjecture that this is probably due to the fact that Hawai‘i’s early colonization and widespread settlement lessened Hawai‘i’s attractiveness as a location of ethnographic study. Her chapter briefly discusses sex and gender diversity in Polynesia in an anthropological fashion, making generalizations about gender liminality, social roles and status, as a larger crosscultural Polynesian category.

Another notable work was Matzner’s self-published book entitled, *‘O Au No Keia: Voices from Hawai‘i’s Mahu and Transgender Communities* (2001). It is a collection of 15 oral histories with prominent *māhū* in Hawai‘i. Although a few of these oral histories discuss life as a *māhū* sex worker, the book mainly prioritizes the non-sex work histories in order to challenge the “stereotypical conceptions of transgendered people as anonymous prostitutes” (Matzner, 2001: 14). Matzner does point out however, in his introduction, how many *māhū* end up turning to prostitution as a natural consequence of stigmatization (2001: 14). On another note, because the book is an oral history collection, there is no analysis of the personal histories from Matzner. Instead, in typical oral history form, the contributors themselves act as historians, with “the power to construct [their] own past, as well as present and future” (Matzner, 2001: 13). In any case, the book is an irreplaceable and pioneering addition to trans literature in Hawai‘i and greatly aided me during my project planning process.

One more early addition to the Hawai‘i library was the documentary, *Ke Kulana He Mahu: Remembering a Sense of Place* (2001). The documentary puts forth the argument that colonialism profoundly transmogrified indigenous Hawaiian culture, from a society that embraced gender and sexual diversity to one that marginalizes trans people today, by highlighting traditional roles of *māhū* and practices of ancient Hawai‘i, as compared to the present day “tyranny of the binary frame” (Xian & Anbe, 2001). The documentary does not however address the overwhelming practice of sex work amongst *māhū* today, and problematically classifies gay men as *māhū* and vice versa. In a similar vein, the documentary film, *Kumu Hina* also traces the historical transformation of gender in Hawai‘i, while leaving out altogether the sex worker (Hamer & Wilson, 2014). Both these films ignore the commonplace sex worker dimension of trans life in Hawai‘i and instead showcase the indictment of colonialism’s role in Hawai‘i. While both films have significantly contributed to the dearth of literature on the history of gender in Hawai‘i and of Hawaiian

trans persons in general, they have done so in a way that highlights the Native Hawaiian rights movement, while rendering invisible the subjective experience of life as an average trans person in Hawai‘i today.¹⁹ On the other hand, a recent addition that focused enormously on the sex worker experience, was Mock’s memoir, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (2014) [hereinafter “Redefining Realness”]. Although not a study, this book was helpful as a point of comparison to my empirical data, in that it provided in-depth (though one-sided) detail into the everyday life of a Hawaiian trans sex worker.

3.2 STUDIES OUTSIDE OF HAWAI‘I

3.2.1 *Studies on Sex Workers of Color*

What turned out to be most relevant in analyzing the data of this project were the studies on sex workers of color. Studies on sex work have always been popular, but those that were of most use were those that challenged the traditional discourse on sex work. These included, Shah’s book, *Street Corner Secrets* (2014), Kempadoo’s book, *Sexing the Caribbean* (2004), and lastly Agustin’s, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* (2007). These studies were primarily based on female sex workers. Though all three mentioned trans workers, there was not so much discussion about them. Despite not being about trans sex workers, these studies were of great help because each of them challenged the widespread stereotypes on sex work as being exploitative, and sex workers as being victims in need of rescuing. These studies aided me in discovering and presenting the complexities and intricacies of life as a sex worker, which was of utmost importance since the sex worker identity was so interwoven with the trans identity.

3.2.2 *Relevant Ethnographies on Trans Persons*

Only a handful of comprehensive qualitative studies that focused on trans sex workers that were not investigating health or welfare issues have been carried out. One early and the most well known study is Kulick’s (1998) case study of Brazilian trans sex workers called *travesti*. Relying primarily on interviewing and extensive participant observation, he documents body modification practices, and both the social and commercial sides of being a *travesti*. One of Kulick’s (1998) primary conclusions is that prostitution is a positive and

¹⁹ During my study, one of the study’s most compelling observations was that almost all the participants were not involved in the Native Hawaiian movement (and none of the current sex workers were actively involved in any way), nor did they show interest in Hawaiian gender history. Instead the commonality that I witnessed was sex work.

affirmative experience for *travesti*, in that it is both pleasurable and income generating. Kulick's research is also applauded for being one of the few studies that discusses at length trans or in this case *travesti* subjectivity.

Relatedly, Besnier has noted an "ethnographic silence" regarding trans subjectivity despite the fact that in the last decade or so, ethnographic analyses on trans categories around the world, including Polynesia, have begun to flourish (Besnier, 2004: 304). Besnier finds this omission especially problematic because "it erases questions of grave concern to marginal persons themselves" (2004: 304). Schmidt (2010), in her book *Migrating Genders: Westernisation, Migration, and Samoan Fa'afafine*, attempted to remedy the lack of subjectivity when she interviewed Samoan trans persons (*fa'afafine*) that migrated to New Zealand, beginning each session asking each of them what they thought she should know about them. In her research she notes an interesting transformation in bodily appearance, most notably the increase of feminizing mechanisms like make-up, female gendered clothing, and surgery and hormone usage, that was unheard of amongst *fa'afafine* in Samoa a few decades ago (Schmidt, 2010). Moreover, in her analysis she explores how *fa'afafine* construct and negotiate their identities at the juncture of tradition and Westernization, suggesting that the ambiguity of the *fa'afafine* gender identity is incomprehensible within Western gender discourse and this is one reason why some *fa'afafine* resort to sex work (Schmidt, 2010). Although she was only able to interview one sex-worker due to community accessibility difficulties, she felt such a need to address their situation that she utilized literature and "second-hand data" in order to compensate for the lack of voices of *fa'afafine* sex workers themselves. Which once again brings us back to the missing voice.

3.2.3 Other Relevant Material on Trans Persons Worth Mentioning

While conducting my review of the literature, I noticed a seemingly contentious relationship between anthropology and studies on trans persons of color. Although many researchers today are aware of this history and attempt to present a conscious and informed account, the history necessitates mentioning. The majority of qualitative research on trans persons of color has been ethnographical type studies. This is perhaps the location of the birthplace of the exoticized and homogenized "transgender native" (see Towle & Morgan, 2002). Valentine (2007) has conducted extensive research on the category of transgender itself. He cautions that the "increasing use of 'transgender' as a term to order knowledge produces the possibilities whereby certain subjects become appropriated into a reading of transgender that obscures the complexities of their identification and experience," effectively

erasing diversity and replacing it with one Western version of what it means to be transgender (Valentine, 2007: 169). Towle and Morgan (2002) take this one step further by focusing on the indiscriminate use of the generic transgender native in particular. They contend that “invoking” the transgender native comes hand in hand with “ethnocentric assumptions and colonial privilege” (Towle & Morgan, 2002: 472). These considerations were of great importance in my project and as such remained in the background throughout, and aided in my decision to not use the word “transgender” in this study (unless specifically relevant) as I originally planned.²⁰

Another related and controversial area has been the popular depiction of the “spectacular” side of trans identity that ignores the everyday lives of trans persons (*see* Namaste, 2000). These accounts tend to be sensationalized and sexualized, and are not regarding just trans persons of color, or trans sex workers, but about all trans persons in general as a sort of other amongst others. Although these sorts of portrayals are rarely scientific studies they do regardless influence both popular perceptions and scientific trajectories. As such, these considerations were also of value to me as I prepared my representations of the participants and analysis of the data.

3.3 THIS PROJECT AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE

Although there are many more works that I could have described in this chapter, I purposely selected the studies and material most relevant to this project’s specific scope. As I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, this project is unique in that it offers perspectives from the intersection of transgenderism and sex work, and consequently pertinent studies are not plentiful. In addition to addressing the void of subjectivities and voices of trans sex workers in Polynesia, this project will help to rectify “the overwhelming (and generally unmarked) whiteness of practitioners in the academic field of transgender studies” (Stryker, 2006: 15; *see also* Roen, 2001). Stryker further noted that studies on trans persons are “impoverished by the relative lack of contributions from people of color, and is therefore ultimately inadequate for representing the complex interplay between race,

²⁰ See § 1.2, “Use and Definition of the term ‘Trans,’” for further discussion on this. See also Stryker (2006: 14) where she discusses how the term transgender “recapitulates the power structures of colonialism” and “is, without a doubt, a category of First World origin that is currently being exported for Third World consumption.”

ethnicity, and transgender phenomena” (2006: 15). As a Hawaiian woman, studying trans persons in Hawai‘i, I hope this study will contribute in a meaningful way.²¹

²¹ Moreover, almost all studies on sex workers have been conducted by persons with no first hand knowledge of sex work (Shah, 2014). This study on the other hand was conducted by a person who was raised 300 meters from a prostitution stroll, who had multiple family members who engaged in various types of sex work, and who herself had at a period of her life done sex work. Although, I have never done street sex work or could never know the firsthand experiences of “full-time” long-term sex work as a trans person, I do believe that this knowledge has aided me in providing reliable data from a different perspective.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

4.0 INTRODUCTION

The following chapter is an overview of the research methodology that I utilized in this project. In addition, this chapter will include my reflections on the decisions that steered the planning and execution of this project and the ethical considerations and challenges I encountered along the way. Before beginning I would like to address the differences between the methods outlined in the proposal and those utilized during fieldwork. In my proposal I had planned for primarily interview-based data using an extensive interview guide. However in the field, challenges to interviewing mounted and the utilization of a semi-structured interview technique proved impossible. Instead, I kept with Hawai'i's oral tradition, disposing of my interview guide while internalizing the contents and themes, and embracing the life narrative interviewing technique in an effort to mimic as closely as possible the local talk-story²² mode of communicating that relies on intuition and natural fluidity to guide the conversation. Adapting to fully life narrative interviewing proved uncomplicated because I had created the original interview guide as a fusion between life narrative and semi-structured interview techniques and had left plenty of “room for the interviewee’s perspective and topics in addition to the questions” (Flick, 2014: 197), so that they could “identify their salient issues and the topics they want to address” (Sterk, 2003: 41).

Additionally, the inability for the majority of my participants to keep an interview appointment was the main reason for switching from an interview based data focus to a combination interview and participatory observation based data focus. Participatory observation afforded me the ability to daily utilize informal dialogue and observation instead of revolving my fieldwork around rescheduling broken interview appointments.²³

4.1 RATIONALE AND STRUCTURE OF RESEARCH

This project grew out of my longstanding interest in trans rights. As mentioned in the foreword, one of my siblings is a trans woman who came out and began transitioning almost ten years ago. After witnessing the struggle she endured at the beginning of her transition, I decided early on that I would try my best to champion for her recognition and legal rights.

²² See Chapter, §2.1.1 for further explanation of the “talk-story” method.

²³ These missed appointments should not be taken as an indicator of unwillingness to participate, but instead was just a consequence of trans sex work. As the willingness to participate was attained via oral consent and demonstrated in the many informal conversations I had throughout the fieldwork. The fact that street sex work most often happens in the middle of the night, daytime hours and appointments can be hard to keep.

Shortly after I moved to Norway, she began prostituting full-time. When it was time to choose a thesis topic, I decided to write about trans sex work. However, as the work went along, my interests and view changed from being predominantly focused on rights and recognition, to becoming more constructivist and critical, as indicated in the theory chapter. As explained earlier, although the structure of this research was systematically planned out well in advance, it was necessary to change certain elements. In accordance with my analytical framework, my methodological framework focuses on storytelling. Hence, I employ a combination of complementary qualitative methods (Flick, 2014). Life narrative interviewing provided the intimacy and space for long discussions, while participant observation provided insight into the everyday life (Flick, 2014). Utilizing the two together allowed me to be able to compare the dependability of the data (Flick, 2014).

4.2 SELECTION OF SITE AND STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Research data from this project was primarily collected during three months of fieldwork in the summer of 2014.²⁴ The fieldwork was conducted primarily on the island of O‘ahu — the main island housing the state capitol — of the Hawaiian Islands, which are primarily composed of eight main islands.²⁵ This island was selected due to the fact that the principal street prostitution centers (strolls) for trans women in Hawai‘i are located on O‘ahu, and the majority of the state’s tourist, military, and resident population reside on O‘ahu. The first street stroll is in Waikīkī (the intersecting corner of Seaside and Kūhiō Avenues) and the second is downtown Hono‘lulu (along Merchant Street). I chose my specific research base (studio rental) a short five-minute walk from the Waikīkī center because most workers would go between the two main prostitution centers throughout the night and often would end up partying at the bars located near the Waikīkī center. My previous contacts from my career, education, and volunteer experiences primarily lived on this island too, as well as my initial contact in the field—my youngest sister who had been working as a full-time trans sex worker for three years at the time of the fieldwork. Through her I had the opportunity to gain access to this very closed and often misunderstood population. She introduced me to the sample population from where I was able to recruit all of my interviewees and freely

²⁴ As noted later in the body of this paper, some of the data was collected after fieldwork.

²⁵ I did travel to an outer island (the island of Hawai‘i) during fieldwork for interviews when my project was still focusing on the Hawaiian culture aspect of the trans identity. Though the data collected from the women who resided there was not used in this paper.

participate in their community.²⁶ A list of the participants that were quoted in this paper can be found at the end of this chapter.

4.3 METHODS

Flick suggests that methodological and data triangulation “should produce knowledge on different levels” increasing “scope, depth, and consistency,” while simultaneously putting “findings on a more solid foundation” and “promoting quality in research” (2014: 184). Accordingly, I decided against a single method and instead employed a variety of techniques to collect data, including participatory observation, life narrative interviews, informal dialogue, and documentary analysis.

4.3.1 *Participatory Observation*

Participant observation is a method “often used for studying subcultures” and provides for “the here and now of everyday life situations and settings” (Flick, 2014: 312). Moreover, because the Researcher is observing from an internal perspective, it is a method that allows for greater understanding of the group’s subjectivities and existence (Flick, 2014: 312). Originally, participatory observation was included as a secondary method in which I would openly walk the various strolls and visit venues the trans population were known to frequent, participating through observation of behavior, and engagement in the everyday lives of trans sex workers in their occupational and recreational environments. However, as participatory observation metamorphosed into a primary data collection method, the plan changed to include the experiences of trans sex workers not only while outside and performing, but also in their personal and daily life at home, amongst other trans persons, and even amongst their own friends and families. This allowed me to see not only the attitudes and interactional behavior of community members, tourists, and customers observed while performing in the public, but also to see the intimate and private. The participatory observation primarily took place in my studio apartment, the two strolls aforementioned, three “gay bars,” and on O’ahu generally. I carried an audio recorder everywhere because “any observation can ultimately become sociologically relevant” (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002: 208) and as soon as I came home I went straight to the journal and wrote about the night’s occurrences. In total I worked thirty-four nights on the streets in a participatory-observatory manner, attended eight drag shows, and eleven parties or events. I selected to alternate

²⁶ See “Negotiation of Roles,” § 4.4 for further discussion about my reflections on using her as my initial contact in the field.

between activities in order to experience as many situations as possible to increase the variation and variety of what I observed (Flick, 2014). In addition, I lived in a studio with two trans women for two of the three months, partaking in most meals and daily activities together like shopping, going to the movies, hikes, beauty salon visits, and beach going.²⁷

Sanchez-Jankowski argues that both “the researcher’s personal and field-research background is very important” because this will help in accurately deciphering “what is important data to record and what is not” (2002: 146). The personal background he discusses is associated with class, gender, and race (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002: 146). He suggests that the experiential knowledge of having experienced the same environment as the one studied increases the probability that the data collected is reliable and valid because the Researcher is able to recognize and interpret behaviors and cues that are important to record (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002: 146). As such, this method was well adapted to the research objectives and most appropriate to the design of my study because my background was similar to my target population. I was born and raised in Hawai‘i, my first language is Hawaiian Creole English, and I am also Native Hawaiian.²⁸ Additionally, just like me, the majority of my participants will have come from a working-class background with all its accompanying experiences.²⁹ Drug and alcohol addiction, police arrests, homelessness, prison visits, sex work, and violence, were everyday instances in my life in Hawai‘i — very similar to the picture painted from quantitative data traits of trans sex workers of color (*see generally* Odo & Hawelu, 2001; Ellingson & Odo, 2008; Grant, Mottett & Tanis, 2011). Without suggesting that “you have to be one to know one,” I think my background facilitated not only access to the field but also an (epistemological) framework of understanding which enabled me to conduct a sound field study and a careful analysis of the collected data in term of representations.

4.3.2 Interviews

As previously mentioned the semi-structured interview originally planned was adapted to a life narrative interview using the local talk-story method of communicating. This was an important adaption because the interview guide proved unnatural and even noticeably altered relationship and power dynamics. I felt that I could smoothly combine life

²⁷ This was not part of my original fieldwork plan. See “Negotiation of Roles,” § 4.4 for further discussion.

²⁸ Due to Hawai‘i’s plantation history and the consequent importation of labor, the majority of all Native Hawaiians today are of mixed ancestry, or *hapa kanaka* (mixed blood Native Hawaiian), but are simply referred to as Native Hawaiian or Hawaiian.

²⁹ Studies have shown that most transgender sex workers come from the working or lower classes and this economic marginalization is one major reason for entering sex work (*see* Schepel, 2011; Odo & Hawelu, 2001; Ellingson & Odo, 2008).

narratives interviewing techniques with the local talk-story method to obtain the information I had originally hoped to gain through interview questions.

All of the ten trans women I interviewed resided on the island of O‘ahu and either currently worked in the sex industry or had in the past,³⁰ and all were Polynesian — of Native Hawaiian or Samoan ethnic background and born and raised in Hawai‘i.³¹ Although trans sex workers of Native Hawaiian background were originally my target population, my proposal accounted for the fact that I might also need to interview trans women from other areas in the Pacific.³² The interviewees ranged from age fifteen to thirty years. The interviews took place in the location most convenient to study participants, including my rental studio, my family’s home, a restaurant, and a coffee shop. All participants gave informed oral consent. A few of the participants wanted to be anonymized, but many wanted to use their names but agreed to choose a pseudonym of their choice instead. The interviews were conducted in either Standard English or Hawaiian Creole English. I began the conversation with a generative narrative question, asking the participants to tell me their life story or anything they thought was important for me to know about being trans. As the conversation progressed, if a subject area that I was interesting in was not naturally covered, I would ask a question. I was also able to have follow up interviews with a few of the participants. Twice I was unable to fully complete the interview, due to intoxication once and interruption another time. I utilized mainly an audio recording device during the interview, but also handwrote notes if I found it necessary in the moment. Normally after the conversation was complete I wrote down any additional observations or notes that I deemed necessary, to ensure greater trustworthiness of the verbal data. It is also important to note that some of the interviewees also participated in informal conversations with me on multiple occasions (so our relationship was not restricted to just interviewee/interviewer), as I interacted with many of them during participatory observation.

³⁰ I tried to include a variety of experiences. Of those I interviewed, 6 engaged in sex work as their primary money generating means; 3 used sex work as a supplementary income; and 1 had completely stopped exchanging money for sex.

³¹ Eight interviewees were of Native Hawaiian descent and two were of Samoan descent.

³² Hawai‘i’s plantation history and its subsequent labor importation practices altered the demographic of the islands. Today Hawai‘i is quite multicultural, with Asian and Pacific Islander (Or API is a lump-category term used in the US to describe the ethnic background of anyone from Asia or a Pacific Island. Hawaiians are often included in this category.) persons having the highest population. Correspondingly, the majority of the *māhū* population is of API ethnic background. I wanted to focus on Native Hawaiian and API transgender persons born and/or raised in Hawai‘i because I was most interested in researching transgender persons in the context of their relationship to indigenous notions of gender in Hawai‘i. I believed the prevalence of similar indigenous gender frameworks from API areas to be consistent with the aims of this study. In Samoa, transgender women are quite commonplace and are called *fa’afafine*.

4.3.3 *Other Methods*

Informal dialogue became an important aspect of my participatory observation. As indicated above regarding my background, it resulted in a major source of data for this project. It allowed me to gain a new perspective on the trans women interviewed, but also afforded me the opportunity to access members of the target population that were unable to conform to an interview schedule. In all, I was able to have informal conversations with twenty-six different trans women. I estimated that three-quarters of my informal dialogue informants were either Native Hawaiian or Samoan; all but one were ethnically from the Pacific region; and all had lived in Hawai‘i for over ten years.³³ In addition, the method was used with non-trans community members, while in public settings (i.e., standing in line at the coffee shop, browsing the market, sitting at the bus stop) to acquire opinions and perceptions of the public at large. I spoke with twelve random non-trans community members in total. Informed oral consent was obtained from each participant at least once. Participants that I spoke to on multiple occasions either gave informed consent repeatedly or consent was implied. The reader should also note that some of the quotations used in this paper are from conversations that occurred after fieldwork. Oral consent was also obtained on these occasions as well.

In order to gain a better understanding of the gender norm shift that has occurred in Hawai‘i, I also utilized documentary analysis. With the help of specialized reference librarians, I was able to search historical records, archives and literature, along with *mo‘olelo*, in the Hawaiian and Pacific collections of museums and the public and university libraries on O‘ahu for the presence of *māhū* in pre-colonial Hawai‘i. I was able to make photocopies of rare and out-of-print books and purchased book copies when available and necessary. I also assessed current media representations (films, television shows, newspapers, and magazines) and government publications of modern-day Hawai‘i and the United States as a comparison. Lastly, a few of the participants that I befriended recommended a multitude of literature ranging from books, to videos and websites about trans persons that they felt would be helpful to me. The combination of all this material helped to gain a fuller understanding of the trans worldview and more specifically trans history in Hawai‘i. However, it should be noted that I did not conceive of the additional material merely as sources of “facts and

³³ 20 of the 26 participants were either Native Hawaiian and/or Samoan (with 16 being part Hawaiian and 4 being Samoan without Hawaiian blood); 5 of the 26 participants were from other areas of the Pacific with no Hawaiian blood; 1 of the 26 participants was of Caucasian descent.

figures,” but treated them in accordance with my analytical framework — as forms of storytelling.

4.4 NEGOTIATION OF ROLES

Conducting research in a place you call home can result in all sorts of interesting complications — both anticipated and unanticipated. I was prepared for the fact that I would have a lot of family pressure and obligations, because that was my role prior to moving abroad. What I was not prepared for was that my role as Researcher would be so overwhelmingly psychological and emotive. The reflection on my various roles began months prior to embarking for my fieldwork. However, no time allotted would have been enough to prepare for the negotiation process. This was because I would be conducting research on a target population with compounded marginalities, but also due to the fact that I was personally connected to the field. These personal connections proved to be both a powerful source of motivation as well as grief. It at times made it difficult to navigate between the role of Researcher and the role of Hawaiian; and the role of Researcher and the role of Elder Sister.

Similar to many “Native” researchers before me, I was investigating “oppression” in my home culture through methodology and theory designed for and by our colonizers. Although this fact hovered over me throughout the fieldwork, my role as Elder Sister foremost and Researcher second,³⁴ proved to be the most bothersome for me. The fact was that if I did not have my sister as an initial contact, I would not have been able to complete this project. Initially I was most uncomfortable with the fact that I was being introduced to the target population as family, as someone who could be trusted.³⁵ Because every night, I knew I would be going home to my safe place, and at the end of the summer I would fly away across two oceans. Shaking the idea that my role may not be one worth trusting because of the “hello-use-goodbye” nature of the fieldwork was difficult indeed. Kvale’s (depiction of the warm and caring interviewer who charms the interviewee by “faking friendship” in order to create trust and gain access to the most private and sensational secrets (2006: 482) was something I wanted to avoid in my research. I recognized that even more so

³⁴ In traditional Hawaiian culture, my kinship role will automatically be placed before other roles.

³⁵ Although my sister will only be making my initial introduction and I will be using snowball sampling thereafter, because the community is so small, my identity as Elder Sister will quickly be known to all. At the same time I didn't think it would work to be introduced as just an acquaintance, nor would it be honest. Moreover, in Hawaiian society, family membership does not require shared blood or marriage. Family could be anyone that was treated like family, so because of my age as well, I took a role as Elder Sister to some of the girls I befriended.

because of my use of participatory observation, that I as Researcher, by immersing one's self in the everyday lives of the researched, would create an illusion of lasting companionship. I could not just overlook these complex power dynamics. Because my target population is extremely closed due to a long history of discrimination and abuse³⁶ (*see generally* Martin & Meezan, 2009; Rachlin, 2009) developing trust is an element that is indispensable in my research. Without it, I would have nothing. But as mentioned earlier, by entering their community, developing relationships, and leaving in the end, could not the attainment of trust then be considered “faking friendship?” In addition, the local talk story nature of collecting life narratives required that I provide personal stories in exchange for their stories. What resulted was such a sharing of intimate knowledge, a blurring of boundaries and roles that at times it felt hard to separate my personal experienced history from that of the participant. This proved especially difficult when it was a shared trauma or experience. No doubt the fact that Hawaiian culture emphasizes a deeply rooted collective memory did not make it easier.

Moreover, I was constantly bombarded with the feeling that my project, as most research and data collection, had an exploitative element (*see generally* Martin & Meezan, 2009; Rachlin, 2009; Kvale, 2006; Sterk, 2003). My conscious was with me every day, asking me whether research itself was exploitative in nature, and in which case, I also was exploiting these young women who were already subject to a multitude of systemic forms of violence. I was drowning in guilt for what my newly acquired Norwegian standard in living and privileges afforded, and the role of Researcher quickly took a *far* second. My studio accommodations became the home of two trans sex workers as well. Although this ended up providing me with massive quantities of data, it also was intense, to say the least, to live in a 37 square meter studio with two other adults. At the same time, it was the way that many of the participants lived themselves.

With the absence of personal and professional boundaries I was able to acquire this data. But at what costs? Was I in fact so good at “faking friendship” that even I believed I was a friend? It has now been almost two years since fieldwork, and although I returned to the opposite end of the world (which at the time felt like abandonment), I can happily say that I have kept in touch with some of the participants.³⁷ Perhaps this blurring has affected the “scientific” quality of the data? No doubt it has also provided me with the opportunity to access a closed community and collect data that I would never have had otherwise. In any

³⁶ Besnier himself cautioned me in an email (dated 3 March 2014) to “exert as much care as possible in approaching them” due to the fact that he suspected that they were very suspicious of researchers at this point.

³⁷ To further ensure reciprocity I even offered free legal services and referrals to some of the participants and helped with an array of errands and tasks while I was there.

case, I at least know that this self-scrutiny kept me conscious of the power dynamics at play and the constructive effects of power. In the end, I realized that it was important for me to accept these feelings so that I could process and understand them, not only in ethical terms, but also epistemologically. I now am able to see these “disturbances” as “an additional source of or as cornerstones for knowledge” (Flick, 2014: 317).

4.5 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

An interesting challenge that I encountered was regarding my personal dress, which in retrospect I see that it was related to my position as a Researcher. Despite all the identifying characteristics that could have in the eyes of some made me an “authentic insider” (Narayan, 1993) going home for fieldwork, I was simultaneously an outsider on many levels (Lal, 1996). Although I have a trans sister who prostitutes, I could not possibly understand what it feels like *to be* trans and to labor daily as a sex worker. To complicate my position as outsider even further, I am someone who not only educated myself, but also left the islands. This in itself is a major point of ostracism. Although I didn’t ask for it, in Hawai‘i I have been given the identity as an Abandoner. As someone who abandoned not only her people, but also her homeland.³⁸ As someone who “thinks she is too good to stay,” but shall now return as a researcher to “do science” on them. These outsider issues were first manifested in my choice of clothing. My clothing was perceived as “conservative” and “old-lady librarian like” among the participants. In the beginning I had without thinking, dressed how I would for an academic appointment instead of dressing like I was going out clubbing. Though later, the latter clothing choice also became a point of issue as sometimes, it made it too evident that I was a “genetic female.” In any case, the clothing issues just illustrate one of the ways my outsider identity manifested itself.

In addition to this challenge and the other ethical type challenges addressed in other sections of this chapter, there are also some limitation issues that I would like to acknowledge and account for. Kvale (2006) has argued that it is the positive characteristics of the interview that is both a source of its strength *and* weakness. He contends that the interview method “entails a hierarchical relationship with an asymmetrical power distribution of interviewer and interviewee” (Kvale, 2006: 484). During my interviews I tried my best, with the help of talk-story dialogue techniques to avoid “one-directional questioning” where the

³⁸ In the Hawaiian tradition, the connection to the 'āina (simply translated as land) is difficult to explain but it is paramount to the existence of life and is profoundly connected to humanity in a reciprocal relationship. So, the significance of leaving my homeland can only be understood through this knowledge of what 'āina symbolizes on a much deeper level.

“interviewer rules the interview” and “initiates the interview, decides the topic, poses the questions, . . . and also closes the conversation” (Kvale, 2006: 484). However, despite my noble intentions, I cannot change the fact that the interviews were “a means serving the researcher’s ends” supplying me as Researcher with narratives and texts “which the researcher then interprets and reports according to his or her research interests” (Kvale, 2006: 484). To help ease these unbalanced power dynamics, Plummer (1995) recommended that researchers also keep in mind a series of analytical questions when examining stories. As such, in my analysis, I addressed this challenge by analyzing the stories through the lens of power. I asked myself the following types of questions: Do some of the stories pathologize trans voices, presenting them as victims? Do some tell stories of survival and hope? As a co-maker of stories, or a coaxer, do I enable new stories to be told, or do I entrap stories into my own? Am I portraying the voices of trans women, or is my voice too much speaking through theirs? Why do I silence some stories, finding some stories more worthy of being told than others? Is the end story theirs or mine?

Second, because my project was participatory observation based, and the subculture being studied was based on illegal activity³⁹ and many of the participants utilized illegal drugs — things grew even more complicated. Although I do believe that with the help of my personal “honesty” — in the form of exchanging stories — that my project participants were truthful, one must also acknowledge the possibility of data limitations because of lies and/or misrepresentations due to embarrassment or concerns regarding legal culpability in relation to criminal activity. Though the fact that my sister also had the same lifestyle as the participants surely eased their worries. In any case, Plummer asserts that the “truthfulness” of *all* empirical data (even statistical representations) is narratively constructed, so despite the presence of a fictive element “[n]one of this means that people are lying, deceiving, cheating” (1995: 168). Instead, “mistruths” are just as important as “truths,” and the dividing line between the two are not as clear as one might assume, especially in Hawai‘i where the Hawaiian tradition emphasizes a collective memory that promotes “multiple truths” (*see generally* Pukui, Haertig, & Lee, 1972). Further obscuring this matter, Sanchez-Jankowski discusses the issue of representation and reliability in participatory observations studies, which points out the fact that data could be biased because all the data that I collected went through my personal “filtering system” that determined what was seen, what was not seen,

³⁹ Prostitution in Hawai‘i is illegal for both customers and the sex workers themselves.

and how it was seen (2002: 145). At any rate, being aware of and acknowledging these factors is important in order to give a reasonable account of the data.

4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As indicated above, “unique ethical dilemmas” arise while doing research involving trans populations (Martin & Meezan, 2009: 19). As such, special ethical standards were utilized in order to address these unique challenges beginning with receiving guidance and final approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services. Because the topic was highly sensitive and the primary population being researched was marginalized, the importance of confidentiality and identity protection was foremost (Martin & Meezan, 2009: 19). Every interview took place in a private studio apartment in a secured and guarded building, or a venue of their choice. No other persons besides the interviewee and myself were present for the interviews except for two occasions where there were requests for a friend to be present. Although informal conversations primarily occurred in public places, it was always with the full consent of the participant, who had the ability to abort the conversation at will.

All personal data was treated and processed confidentially. I kept the audio recordings of the interviews and informal dialogue, and field notes in a locked safe and any digital data in a password-protected computer with data encryption. From the very beginning of the data collection, pseudonyms of participants’ choice were utilized, so that no legal names were ever recorded, and participants were fully anonymized, protecting their privacy and confidentiality. After I had transcribed all of the audio recordings, they were deleted, and the field notes were destroyed.

Lastly, it has been important for me to ensure the dignity and rights of the population is preserved and not sensationalized.⁴⁰ To assist in safeguarding this I have provided every participant with my contact information so that they can 1) continue to recommend material for me to look at; 2) maintain a conversation and contact with me if they desire it or find it necessary, and 3) have the option of attaining a copy of the final report.

The consent and information form that was prepared, described and provided 1) the scope and purpose of the research; 2) the expected duration of the project; 3) a description of reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts; and 4) a statement that participation was completely voluntary and may be discontinued at any time. Because none of the participants

⁴⁰ In addition to the high numbers of grossly unethical research exploiting LGBT populations have been conducted in the past (See Martin & Meezan, 2009).

chose to read the form, I began to orally explain the details.⁴¹ Written informed consent was *not* obtained due to the sensitive nature of this project.⁴² However, every participant — whether they were participating with an interview or informal dialogue — voluntarily provided me with oral informed consent at least once. My identity as Researcher was well known amongst all the trans persons that participated in informal dialogue with me, and if oral consent was not given, each and every time we had a conversation, I considered that it was implied as each person knew they could stop the conversation, as I had specifically emphasized the option to withdraw at anytime. Because no repeat conversations took place with non-trans participants, i.e., external community members, this was not an issue.

4.7 DATA ANALYSIS

All of the interviews were audio recorded. About half of the informal dialogue was also recorded. All recordings were in Standard English or Hawaiian Creole English. As Hawaiian Creole English is my native tongue, there was no issue regarding translations. Extensive journal entries and observation notes were handwritten or typed out daily, and were regularly reviewed during fieldwork. Upon returning from the field, audio recordings were reviewed and transcribed. Thereafter, emerging themes were noted in a rough analysis, followed by closer thematic coding. The textual data was then interpreted using narrative and discourse analysis.

4.7.1 *A Note on Translations*

I utilize the original language of the participants when quoting the participants throughout the body of this text. When possible I tried to explain the meaning of the slang, Hawaiian, or Hawaiian Creole English words within the body of the text. I included footnotes when this was not possible. These footnotes sometimes just translated a couple words or expressions, but when necessary I translated the entire quotation.⁴³ Most of the quotations that I chose to employ in this thesis happened to not be in “thick” or pure Hawaiian Creole English, so full translation was not required. Moreover, I chose to use the

⁴¹ After repeated instances of notices that the form was barely glanced at and then left at the interview location. Although I continued to give them the form, I found it ethically responsible to orally explain the contents of the form as well.

⁴² As recommended by Norwegian Social Science Data Services during my proposal and project planning period.

⁴³ As I am writing this thesis in Norway, I translated many expressions that may not have been necessary because I cannot know which slangs, idioms, and expressions are known by readers. So please excuse any redundancy or instances of *over*-defining.

original text in the body, and the translation in the footnote so that I could preserve the individuality and cadence of the participants' voices.

4.8 LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

In an effort to aid readers I am inserting a short presentation of the participants (in alphabetical order) that were quoted in this paper. This will consist of a brief description of each participant, including age (at the time of the fieldwork), their relationship to sex work (in alphabetical order), and living situation (if known). Moreover, I will include additional relevant information on those that were quoted in greater degrees. In addition, throughout the paper, I will denote in the citation whether the quotation came from a personal interview or a personal communication during informal dialogue.

- *Ava Mahrie* was thirty years old and began transitioning in her early twenties. She was a manager of a coffee shop and although she had done sex work in the past, did not participate in any degree of sex work activities. She lived in a house with her father.
- *Brianna* was eighteen years old and had been doing street sex work since she was fourteen. She lived with her older sister.
- *Chasity* was twenty years old and began sex work at fifteen. She worked the streets more than any other participant, sometimes six or seven nights out of the week and used the income primarily to pay for her own studio apartment after being kicked out by her family. In addition, at the time of the fieldwork she was saving for her first surgery.
- *Celeste* was twenty-six years old and began transitioning in her teenage years. She was a full-time employee of an airlines company, but in addition continue part-time work in sex commerce.
- *Hunnie* began sex work at age thirteen and at twenty-five continued to work the streets but in addition posted online escort advertisements. She was the “mother” of Khloe (who I discuss in detail in chapter five) and had begun transitioning in her mid-teens. She had no permanent place of residence but did not consider herself homeless.
- *Jessica* was the “daughter” of Katie. She was nineteen years old and had been doing street sex work for three years. She abstained from all “hard” drugs⁴⁴ and alcohol, and lived with her family.

⁴⁴ Meaning she used marijuana which in Hawai‘i was not considered taboo, but not other types of drugs.

- *Katie* was one of two participants who lived with me during fieldwork. She was twenty-one years old and began transitioning at sixteen. She also began street sex work at that time. She was the only one of the participants who had completed university level classes. Katie devoted all her income from sex work to surgeries. At the time of my fieldwork, she was taking a break from street sex work but continued to see her regular clients. She worked part time in a clothing store, and (apart of that summer) normally lived with her mother and younger brother. Katie had spent more money (by far) on plastic surgery than any other participant. She abstained from all drugs and alcohol.
- *Kim* was twenty-three years old and began sex work at fifteen. She was the only participant who had a “sugar daddy” who paid for her housing, and did online escorting from her home a couple times a week.
- *Lana* was fifteen years old and had been doing street sex work for one year. She lived with her grandmother.
- *Lei* was twenty-four years old and had been doing sex work since she was fifteen. She had a part-time job but still depended on sex work as her primary income source. She lived with friends.
- *Riley* was one of the two participants who lived in a studio apartment with me during fieldwork. She was twenty-six years old and began transitioning at age twenty. She had been working in sex work for close to three years and primarily solicited online. Although Riley used a lot of money for surgery and shopping, the majority of her income was devoted to traveling the world. Most of the year she lived with her family. She was unique from the majority of the other participants in that she did not use hormones and was one of the rare participants that I spoke to that was ambivalent about SRS.
- *Tiana* was twenty years old and had been doing sex work since she was eighteen and began transitioning. She lived with her mother.

CHAPTER FIVE: TRANS STORIES AND STORYTELLING

5.0 INTRODUCTION

In the almost two years since I first began fieldwork on this project, being trans has become very “in.” Trans persons (particularly women) are all over the television and in print. Even in Norway, trans people are showing up on prime time television and are being covered in national newspapers. The media stories are normally a frenzy surrounding the trans body (genitalia and surgery), in effect making spectacles out of the transgendered, achieving them visibility, but simultaneously silencing their subjective experiences and lives beyond their before and after photos and stories.

As I mentioned earlier in this paper, sexual storytelling is a natural part of Hawaiian tradition. I came to see that even to a higher degree, this was also the case in the participant community in this study. The participants constantly told each other stories for a myriad of reasons: to socialize, to brag, to give warning, to teach a lesson, to grow in knowledge together, to share experiences, and also as a form of therapy. My goal in this chapter is to show a wider spectrum — a multiplicity — of trans stories that exist, not just the ones told in popular media.

5.1 THE STORIES WE HEAR: TRANS STORIES WITH AN AUDIENCE

Walking into the Hawai‘i premiere of the *Kumu Hina* (Hamer & Wilson, 2014) documentary film, I expected to see many from the local trans community because the film was starring and about a well-known Hawaiian *māhū* named Hina. I had invited Katie with me because she was very interested in seeing the film, but also because she knew almost everyone in the trans community, sex worker or not. We stood in line for half an hour waiting to go in, and during that time Katie recognized not one person from the trans community. Instead, the primary audience members were upper class, gay couples, of which a majority were men. But as we stood and waited, and I thought about the comments I received after considering to go to the Honolulu Pride Parade the week before, I understood that on O‘ahu there was a valley dividing the two communities.

Many in the outside world would assume that the trans person is automatically including in the LGBT community. That after all is what the “T” stands for in the initialism, LGBT. However, the interaction within and alliances amongst these subgroups turned out to

be a bit more complicated. Trans people are a minority in the LGBT community, and the trans person who is also a sex worker, is even further marginalized within this world. The week prior I was invited to go to the parade by the wife of a friend. My friend had told his wife about my project, and his wife thought the parade might be of interest. After hearing about it, I had thought the same, but when I asked Riley and Katie if they were interested in attending, they looked at me as if I were crazy. Katie politely declined, and Riley refused with a very sarcastic, “ummm, let me think, NO!” This of course sparked my interest. Riley responded,

[w]hy in the world would I go and participate in something like that and pretend to be buddy-buddy when the next day it will be back to the same old story? Half of those gay men are butch queens and crossdressers at night. They hate us because they wish they could be us but never had the guts to do it. You know what kind of shit they say to us? They call us whores and tell us to go get a job. As if I don’t work my fucking ass off. You know how much it sucks to have to do what I do? And to have them talk shit of all the people. Everyone knows that the only thing that matters in LGBT is the “L” and the “G.” The rest is just PC-decoration (personal communication, Waikīkī, 7 June 2014).

Like the “web of stories” that Plummer describes, Riley is constantly “writing” the story of the world around her—its characters, plots, events, places, purposes and agenda (1995: 20). In telling this story about herself and the gay men or “butch queens”⁴⁵ she is referring to, she places herself in this web of stories. By locating herself on this imagined map she is able to make meaning and give sense to the world around her, to reinforce her identity. The act of framing the web of stories that surround her in this manner, allows Riley to be the survivor she sees herself as, instead of just another helpless victim. Plummer explains that we “tell stories about ourselves in order to constitute our selves,” or in other words, “to assemble a sense of self and identity” (1995: 172).

Riley’s response was perhaps an exaggerated, one-sided, and simplified version of the story, but after going to the premiere, her thoughts highlighted some very complex dynamics, mainly that many in the gay community in Hawai‘i did not accept the local trans sex worker community and some even openly ridiculed the group — something I came to witness on quite a few occasions. But even more so, Riley’s reaction made me think about how if such a

⁴⁵ As mentioned earlier, “butch queen” is a derogatory term used by the participants to describe gay men who part time crossdress.

valley separated these two groups, then why was Hina's story being heard with such enthusiastic response by the gay population⁴⁶ and why were so few from the trans community present?⁴⁷ Moreover, utilizing Plummer's sociology of stories, how and why was Hina's story being showcased to the general public at all, and what function did her story serve in the larger social order?

Kumu Hina is a documentary film that tells multiple stories. The two main narratives are centered on Hina and Ho'onani, both whom of which are *māhū*. Hina is a hula teacher at a Hawaiian charter school, where Ho'onani is her 11-year old student. The film revolves around Hina's struggles in love and her relationship as teacher and mentor to Ho'onani, in Ho'onani's quest to lead the annual all-male senior class hula performance. The film also simultaneously tells the larger story of how Hawai'i's colonial history shaped traditional notions of Hawaiian gender and sexuality, specifically in regards to *māhū*.

Since the premiere, *Kumu Hina* toured at film festivals throughout the world, accumulating film award nominations and wins along the way. In fact, the film had such an effect that it premiered on the American Public Broadcasting Channel (PBS), and PBS sponsored a short version of the film to be used as a free educational tool throughout the nation. Hina's story has now been heard by not just the gay community in Hawai'i, but by people of all ages throughout the US and even the world. Initially, one might say that this success has been revolutionary, and in many ways it has.⁴⁸ But in other ways I see that it, like one other Hawaiian trans story I will discuss next, has been serving more conservative functions for society as well.

About half a year after I began my research project, Janet Mock, a part Hawaiian trans woman, published her New York Times bestselling memoir. The success of the book was no doubt tied to the enormously popular comedic drama series, *Orange is the New Black*⁴⁹ (2013), in which a main character is a post-operative trans woman played by actual trans actress, Laverne Cox. Cox became a media sensation, and openly promoted her friend's new book. All of a sudden, being trans was a hot topic. Trans people (children, teenagers, and adults) were guests on every American talk show and were being showcased in a plethora of magazines and newspapers.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Given it was the Honolulu Rainbow Film Festival, a festival aimed at the LGBT community, and showcasing LGBT films, and the directors/producers were a well-known gay couple in the community.

⁴⁷ Right before the opening ceremony began, Katie did finally notice a small group of between four and five Hawaiian trans elders who entered the theater, but in an audience of around three hundred.

⁴⁸ And I in no way wish to detract from its positive effects.

⁴⁹ A Netflix series created by Jenji Kohan.

⁵⁰ A few months later I got to witness a smaller version of this trans media frenzy in Norway.

Although Mock's book, *Redefining Realness*, has many similarities to the stories I collected (in that Mock is a Hawaiian trans woman who grew up on O'ahu and did sex work), it has one very important difference. It is different in that it has attracted a wide, mainstream audience, while the stories I will share, will be read by very few, not only because this is a Master's thesis, but because of the nature of the representations. Plummer asserts that "[m]ost stories that 'take-off' in a culture do so because they slot easily into the most accepted narrative of that society: the dominant ideological code. Others that are still not heard may fit less easily" (1995: 115). Plummer's assertion is critical here because it highlights the fact that although Mock's story is a trans narrative, it still manages to fit into the dominant ideology, that of heteronormativity. If one has not seen Mock or the cover of her book, one may wonder how this seeming contradiction is even possible. Mock is not just post-operative but she looks, sounds, and acts not just like a woman, but an extremely attractive genetic female. She then represents the perfect example of how a trans person should transition. She fits flawlessly into the heteronormative framework and provides a recipe for the good trans woman. In comparison, none of the project's participants have had a sex change; their bodies and genitals, in society's eyes remain in the ambiguous stage of part man, part woman. Furthermore, not only are their bodies unacceptable, but also who they are. Mock also came from poverty, and was a prostitute, but the difference is that she stopped sex work years ago, and today is an educated and successful, working professional. She is an embodiment of the American Dream.

And now to return to *Kumu Hina*. Although Hina, like Mock, is also a contributing citizen that has utilized some body modification techniques, it is not for that reason, that her voice is heard. Plummer argues that "[s]tories whose time have come will be those that have entered this culture of public problems, the political spectacle" (1995: 129). Hina's story was heeded because it arrived at the perfect time, when the public had "been fattened up, rendered ripe and willing to hear such stories" (Plummer, 1995: 121). Without the media frenzy focusing on the trans issue, the film could not have gained the same momentum. Furthermore, her story was selected for public attention because of its novelty, and its carrying capacity in the media (Plummer, 1995: 129). Plummer clarifies that at "this stage the kind of stories being told will matter enormously, for the story has to attract allies and fend off opponents" (Plummer, 1995: 129). Generically put, it is the story of a teacher in

search of heterosexual love, while concurrently giving inspiration to a young girl student (who just happens to wish she is a boy).⁵¹

Although Hina and Mock's stories signify a positive public focus on trans rights, Plummer asserts that "[e]ven seemingly radical stories...take on conservative functions once they assume traditional narrative forms" (1995: 177). They "perform conservative and preservative tasks" when "they fit into broad patterns" that have been told over and over again, over centuries (Plummer, 1995: 176). *Kumu Hina* and *Redefining Realness* fit with the major narrative tales of "going on a journey," "enduring suffering," and "finding a home" (Plummer, 1995). Plummer points out that these popular narratives find a congruence with the world, socially and personally, and "[t]heir ultimate pragmatic function is to make to world safe for us, to keep the threat and terror of life at bay" (1995: 177). If the gay community had to embrace a story that showcased the diversity of their LGBT spectrum, then it was easiest to embrace this type of story that the general public would also accept. In a way, these stories serve as distraction functions. They provide the public with illusions of positive change and stories of hope while simultaneously maintaining dominant culture.

Both Hina and Mock are examples of good Hawaiian trans persons—contributing citizens with legally paying jobs, striving to fit into the norms (in one way or another), as such their voices are heard. Plummer explains that some voices "are not only heard much more readily than others, but also are capable of framing the questions, setting the agendas, [and] establishing the rhetorics" (1995: 30). If the rhetorics being preached are acceptance over discrimination, then the perfect mechanism for delivering this tolerance discourse is to circulate it in popular media like *Kumu Hina* and *Redefining Realness*. Gressgård contends that

even if trans people push the limits of prevailing categories, it could be argued that the crisis of gender and sexual identity to which they call attention—and the language of tolerance to which they are subjected—contribute to the elasticity of gender taxonomies, thereby expanding the meaning and normative limits of "man" and "woman," rather than corrupting them (2010: 555).

In other words, their managed and appropriated stories serve to reproduce heteronormativity. Although their bodies are non-normative, their voices are compliant, and therefore they "are cast as flexible and adaptable bodies" (Gressgård, 2010: 553). The problem here is that

⁵¹ In addition, it is a narrative about an exotic culture—a Hawaiian teacher mentoring a Hawaiian youth in a Hawaiian cultural art form, at a Hawaiian charter school. In that way, there is room to be an Other when you are already an Other. It is easier accepted. It is an exotic Hawaiian story.

although they are “visually and narratively subordinate,” they “no longer mark an absolute deviance from the norm within a rigid cultural system” (Gressgård, 2010: 553).

Then there are the others — whether due to gender, race, age, class, or sexuality, or a combination of many, like the voices present in my project — that are still considered deviant and “will have a much harder time being said and heard” (Plummer, 1995: 31). These are the most marginalized stories because they fall outside of and challenge what Plummer calls the gendered heterosexism of stories — which he says signifies stories “which facilitate standard gender divisions” (1995: 31). It is these types of norm preserving stories, he contends, that “will be most readily said and heard” (Plummer, 1995: 31).

While almost all of the participants of my project would most likely not be included in this “good trans person” category like Hina and Mock, I chose to highlight their tales first because turning “a private, personal tale to one that can be told publicly and loudly is a task of immense political proportions” (Plummer, 1995: 122). It is perhaps because of their stories that my participants gave voice to their stories at this particular historical moment — that their stories grew in tellability, and perhaps why now their stories will become intelligible to outsiders (Butler, 2009). So although they will be read by very few, they are nevertheless partly a result of — and a contribution to — a growing public awareness and legitimacy of trans narratives. This opens up a space of recognition, while at the same time marginalizing further experience that cannot be made intelligible (and are hence not potentially legitimate) within the dominant codes (Butler, 2006; Butler, 2011).

5.2 THE STORIES THEY TELL EACH OTHER: HAWAIIAN TRANS FOLKLORE

5.2.1 *The Trans Version of the American Dream*

Whether or not sex work served as the primary source of income or not, all of the participants that engaged in sex work identified the money earned as the most important aspect of the work. Most of the project’s participants had grown up in poverty. To be able to earn money, and relatively a lot of money in a short period — without education — was more than a dream, it was freedom. It allowed for the possibility to pay for a roof over their head, food on the table, clothes that were not hand me downs, and even sometimes enough left over to help their families. Moreover it offered the prospect of funding the hormones and surgeries necessary to transition. Without the education and money that a higher-class status would have provided, sex work was seen as the only means to self-fund surgery. As such, stories of other girl’s successes in the trade were very popular amongst the younger sex workers:

[Katie] made like fifty grand in six months! She's had dates fly her all over — to Maui, to Alaska, and even give her three, four, or even five thousand! Shopping sprees too! And not just for her but [her friend] too! No way could she have earned that working minimum wage at Walgreens. After paying taxes you got nothing left. Can't save for anything that way. Two/three bills a pop is the way to do it (Lana, personal communication, Waikīkī, 20 June 2014).⁵²

Interestingly here, instead of telling her own story, Lana told the story of Katie. The fact that she tells another's story is especially telling because it demonstrates how a cultural myth becomes a collective story. Lana comes to own that story, in the same way that I witnessed each project participant who told me a version of it imagine herself as the protagonist.

This storyline was a favorite to pass around amongst the participants because it kept their hope for the future alive. These American Dream type narratives served a very specific purpose, the same purpose that they serve amongst all poor and working class, they ignite enough longing to hold their fantasies afloat, to keep them chasing the dream and preserve the life of the machine. In the wider framework of power, this sort of story has a conservative function of maintaining the dominant order, in so far as it has disciplinary effects on the subjects.

In the actual lives of the trans sex workers I interviewed, the story also served a simpler role: it created community. Despite the fact that in reality the numbers reportedly earned varied greatly, in this story the numbers stayed pretty much the same. Generally, similar to what Shah experienced in her fieldwork, “there was little agreement about how much a woman could earn doing street-based sex work. Earning reported by women doing sex-work ranged widely, the difference being tenfold, at least” (2014: 127). But this story was the exception, where consistency was standard. All the women shared this mythology, connecting them together in construction of a social memory. Plummer describes this memory as one that is attached to social groups where “the common stories talked about and heard within particular groups . . . often come to have a life of their own” and “get transmitted in part from generation to generation” (1995: 41). Although this myth created unrealistic expectations, it also served to reinforce solidarity. Plummer explains that

stories need communities to be heard, but communities themselves are also built through story tellings. Stories gather people around them: they have to attract

⁵² “Two/three bills a pop” means two to three hundred dollars per sexual service.

audiences, and these audiences may then start to build a common perception, a common language, a commonality (1995: 174).

This shared story, despite being folklore, brought them together as a community, where the women could feel proud in their common profession, that they were self-employed, independent, and if they earned enough, a self-made woman (via self-sponsored surgery), literally.

5.2.2 *The Pretty Woman Myth and Other “Love Stories”*

Another narrative that was commonly shared amongst the participants was what I came to refer to as the Pretty Woman⁵³ myth. Sex work provided the means for meeting many men, and although many swore that they were strictly professional, they also used the job to search for a husband. These women held the Pretty Woman myth close to heart. Some directly referred to the famous film about the prostitute (played by Julia Roberts) who is rescued from her life of sex work in typical fairy tale fashion by a wealthy and handsome “Prince Charming”⁵⁴ (played by Richard Gere in the film):

He’s gonna come one day. I know it. Then I will finally get my ‘Pretty Woman’ ending. Get my surgery. Then we can move to somewhere in the middle of nowhere like but not like so bad, like maybe North Carolina or something. And then maybe we can adopt a couple babies. And I will have that boring housewife life and be just like a genetic female (Celeste, personal interview, Pearl City, 19 July 2014).

None of the women talked about falling madly in love, instead the story they described, like Celeste’s “happy ending” here, always seemed to be almost an anti-romance. What they wanted was a combination of three ingredients: a house (in a far away place), a husband, and what they perceived to be a normal life as a normal girl (in no particular order). For some, getting this client/husband to pay for their surgery or surgeries was part of this recipe, for others it was not important.

The three elements on the other hand were indispensable. The house element was usually presented in a great deal of specificity while the husband served a generic role. He did not need to be good looking, super rich, or even particularly nice. He was primarily a

⁵³ *Pretty Woman* (1990) is a cult film amongst trans sex workers.

⁵⁴ By calling this generic male symbol as “Prince Charming,” I am referring to the fairy tales where a princess is always rescued by a charming prince. In *Pretty Woman*, Richard Gere is the Prince Charming or knight in shining armor who saves the day.

token that completed the dream. The idea of having a house that was far from Hawai‘i was tied to at least two things. First, it was because in this clear idea of the house they would live in, they envisioned the houses seen on TV and in the movies, and second they wanted a life where no one recognized their old self. Every part of their dream seemed to revolve around the idea of normality. It was my impression that for many, they believed that to be seen as an anatomical female meant that their lives had to be completely conventional, but their idea of conventionality was associated with the popular media representations of the 1950s, with the *Leave It to Beaver*⁵⁵ housewife as their role model.

Another related love or romance complication amongst participants was that some of them not only tolerated physical abuse but welcomed it. I observed how malicious aspects of stereotypical gendered behavior were given high value. On one evening, I heard a couple fighting in a parked car. You could see that there was a struggle inside the car. Finally, the door opens and Lei walks out with a bloody face yelling and the car speeds off. A couple of girls run over to comfort her while Chasity explains to me what happened: “Her ‘husband’ is heavy on the hands [long pause]. I have to admit it I like it when a guy is rough with me. It makes me feel like a girl. Like helpless [imitating the damsel in distress with hands raised in the air] you know” (personal communication, Waikīkī, 12 June 2014).⁵⁶ For Chasity, her idea of what constituted feminine and masculine behavior was epitomized in physical abuse. She associated helplessness and fragility with being a woman.

For many of the participants, their idea of being a woman was dependent on a man being part of the picture. Though interestingly, the majority of the participants did not have actual boyfriends (as opposed to a sugar daddy), or “husbands” as some liked to call them, but of those that did or had in the past, almost all had experienced high degrees of emotional and/or physical abuse. Participants that worked in sex commerce while in a relationship cited jealousy due to their profession as a primary cause of the abuse. But even those that abstained from sex work while in a relationship, complained about repeated infidelities, and dishonesty about their relationship in general. The trans factor definitely complicated their relationships:

I was in a relationship with this guy for two years and he tormented me. Cheated. Lied. While I took care of him and did everything for him and his son. I would buy his son so many nice things. You know things that I would buy him if he were

⁵⁵ *Leave it to Beaver* (1957) was an iconic American television show that was based in the 1950s. It represented the perfect American family, with the working and wise father, the homemaker mother, and their children. The wife was constantly cooking and cleaning in a dress and high heels.

⁵⁶ A man that is “heavy on the hands” is “heavy handed” or abusive towards his partner.

my own son. I loved him. Unconditionally. To this day. You know from a little boy I had wanted to be that pretty local girl with her local boyfriend and so I had that. It was like perfect. I didn't have to worry about not being able to give him kids because he already had one. But he would always cheat on me anyway. So it didn't matter. I would take care of his son, paying for his son's school lunches because he couldn't pay for it because he was too busy paying strippers or whatever. Taking strippers to dinner, cheating with my car when he dropped me off at work. You know how fucked up is that? I gotta put GPS on his phone. I went crazy I remember . . . [omission by author] And so he would always tell me every time I would try to leave him, 'Just remember no one is ever gonna love you because of what you have between your legs. Only I will love you.' And back then I was so stupid and blind to this tactic that I would put up with this guy no matter what. And he wasn't even the best looking (Celeste, personal interview, Pearl City, 19 July 2014).

Celeste's relationship story seemed to be a common one among trans women. I heard story after story of infidelity — of these “tranny chaser” men who went from one trans girl to the next, apparently chasing a fetish that was readily available and free. Celeste confided that she believed at that time that he was all she could get and that she should be happy to have him despite the fact that he had attempted to cheat or actually did cheat with four or five of her acquaintances.

On a related topic were reports about how these so-called tranny chasers liked to be with trans women sexually, but were ashamed of being with them in public. More than once I heard a girl complain and say she was single because she could not handle to be with a tranny chaser whom she knew would be in lust with the fetish, instead of in love with the girl. So some decided to abstain from relationships altogether to avoid being hurt:

I don't know how it is to be in love. My love life is nonexistent. I've dreamed of it so many times. I've been putting it on hold until I'm done with the sex change. Holding off meeting men until after I have the sex change because you know I have um, well I have a penis down there basically. I don't wanna date now because this is not me, because I wanna feel comfortable. I wanna have my girl and guy moment. Not like I wanna hide my past, of course I will tell him the truth. It isn't about that like my therapist asked. I just wanna be comfortable in my own

body and be like this is me; I'm finally me (Ava-Mahrie, personal interview, Wahiawā, 27 July 2014).

At age thirty, Ava-Mahrie told me that she had never been in a relationship primarily because she was waiting to feel whole. And in her mind, romantic heterosexual love would help her complete that picture. Despite having the outward appearance of a Barbie doll, she believes her sex organs determine her gender. But she went on to explain further, “I couldn’t handle it. If I fell in love and he started calling my friends. It would destroy me. So it’s easier to just wait until there is nothing there and I know he is with me for me” (Ava-Mahrie, personal interview, Wahiawā, 27 July 2014). The tranny chaser, by wanting the fetish (the thing that makes them different: *the penis* on a feminine body) in effect might deny the presence of womanhood from these women, and consequently denies their desire and identity.

What all these stories of love — the tranny chaser stories, the Pretty Woman myth, and the account on abusive men — have in common is that they illustrate how “trans people’s improperly or inadequately gendered bodies — pertaining to the contradiction between outward appearance and notions of inner truth which they embody — maintain the norm while challenging the naturalness of relations between inside and outside at the same time” (Gressgård, 2010: 551). Butler argues that the trans person “will out-woman women, and in the process confuse and seduce an audience . . . who . . . will be drawn into the abjection it wants both to resist and to overcome” (2011: 91). Trans women are constituted as a fetish, “as marketable goods within an erotic economy of exchange” (Butler, 2011: 91). Because women are the image being imitated and idealized, and consequently the figures of abjection, this in effect reproduces misogyny and heteronormativity. Moreover, the “citing of the dominant norm does not, in this instance, displace that norm; rather, it becomes the means by which that dominant norm is most painfully reiterated as the very desire and the performance of those it subjects” (Butler, 2011: 91).

The Pretty Woman myth in particular is an example of how transgenderism can sometimes reify gender norms. The infamous interview of Venus Extravaganza in *Paris Is Burning*⁵⁷ (1990) depicts this same trans version of a fairy tale ending as being a housewife in the suburbs. Butler breaks down Venus’ narrative into a desire to have “a transubstantiation of gender in order to find an imaginary man who will designate a class and race privilege that promises a permanent shelter from racism, homophobia, and poverty” (2011: 89). The participants’ version of this myth can also be seen in a similar light. Their dream of escaping

⁵⁷ *Paris Is Burning* is a documentary film that chronicles New York’s drag scene in the 1980s.

Hawai‘i and having a life of normality can easily be interpreted as a call to be rescued from the tough world of trans discrimination, poverty, and prostitution, and like Butler argues, it is equally as phantasmatic. Moreover, this fantasy involves becoming normal women, in this case, Hawaiian women, constituting an illusion of these women of color being a site of privilege. In this fantasy “they can catch a man and be protected by him, an impossible idealization which of course works to deny the situation of the great numbers of poor [brown]⁵⁸ women who are single mothers without the support of men” (Butler, 2011: 90). Butler questions “whether the denaturalization of gender and sexuality that [Venus] performs, and performs well” in fact “culminates in a reworking of the normative framework of heterosexuality” (2011: 91). She argues that “the denaturalization of sex . . . does not imply a liberation from hegemonic constraint” (Butler, 2011: 91). Instead, when Venus declares her desire to find a man and have a house in the suburbs not only does the Pretty Woman myth work to maintain heteronormativity but it also precipitates the nightmare ending (instead of the fairytale ending promised) murder of Venus.

5.2.3 *A New Story*

Similar to the American Dream, the Pretty Woman myth helped many to keep going — believing in, and hoping for something. It is easy to be distracted from reality when one is busy chasing these illusions. On the other hand, if it is true that “we invent ourselves from the contradictory stories around us” (Plummer, 1995: 135), then it is easy to understand how this folklore came to life. But regardless of the reasons behind it, in the bigger picture, the Pretty Woman myth both created unrealistic expectations and contributed to reinforcing boundaries and degrees of otherness in the dominant order. However, there were other stories that were whispered as well, and although they were rare, just their presence meant that a new chapter in the collective memory had begun to be written — one that challenged the conventionality of the phantasmatic storyline of the Pretty Woman myth, and even arguably debunked it altogether.

Plummer maintains that “[n]ot only do stories work pragmatically for the people who tell them, so too they feed into and perform major tasks for societies and groups within them” (1995: 176). So when a new story comes forth that challenges social folklore, not only does it have practical effects for the teller of the story, but it has the possibility to affect the entire community.

⁵⁸ The author replaced “black” with “brown,” for the purposes of the discussion here.

Yeah well you know I didn't do it because I'm nice cause everyone knows I'm a self-centered bee-yatch.⁵⁹ I can't be the only one looking good all the time or else I will be the only one hated . . . [long pause]. Anyway, she is practically my family since her sister is with my cousin. [With my] [s]econd cousin to be exact. But you know how it is here. And her boyfriend! What a total dick! I had to do it. Didn't really have a choice at that point. Plus she will probably pay me back anyway (Riley, personal communication via FaceTime, 2 September 2015).

Riley was talking about Chasity here. At twenty years old, Chasity had been escorting for five years when I was there. When we spoke at the end of my fieldwork she had just bought her ticket to Thailand where she planned to get her first surgery—breast implants. It took her all these years to save for this surgery because she lived completely on her own. Her “husband” as she called him, was an American dog-breeder living there. Later that winter, I heard from her and learned that she returned from Thailand, but that she had to use her savings for living expenses while living with her boyfriend instead of getting her surgery as planned. A couple of months after returning to Hawai‘i I heard through the grapevine that Riley had paid for Chasity’s surgery. The story I relayed above was the response I received from Riley on FaceTime upon asking her about her recent act of generosity.

Not only does Riley’s narrative challenge this fairy tale of being rescued or “sponsored” by a man, it completely rewrites it. Plummer asserts that the classical story has to be challenged, undone, so the new story can be written” (1995: 67). Chasity traveled far away to live with a man who promised to support and take care of her. Instead, he borrowed her hard-earned surgery savings and never paid her back. Moreover, he told her she needed to work (prostitute), help pay his rent, and buy her own food. Her savings was quickly depleted, and she had to return to Hawai‘i. The knight in shining armor, who ended up sponsoring Chasity, was not a man, but a fellow sex worker and friend, Riley. Returning then to Riley’s quote, if we read between the lines, although uncomfortable with the positive attention, Riley is proud and empowered by her decision to help Chasity, to rescue her from this man. But much more important than Riley’s pragmatic effects is how her story rejected the *Pretty Woman* myth altogether — just like Plummer writes — so that this new story can be written into history; one that possibly could alter the social memory of their community. And this new story is being conveyed in a language that suggests that it has the potential to

⁵⁹ “Bee-yatch” is an emphasized pronunciation and slang for bitch.

destabilize the dominant code, even as it testifies to a failure within a heteronormative scheme.

5.3 THE STORIES THAT ARE SILENCED: THE UNGRIEVABLE HAWAIIAN TRANS SEX WORKER BODY

There was a third group of stories that flowed through the community, stories that although never truly forgotten, were not told. Here I will discuss in detail the case of Khloe. Although the facts of her death are not one hundred percent clear, it still provides us with a vivid picture into how violence and an early death are everyday realities for trans sex workers of color — but even more so, how certain bodies matter more than others, and certain stories are effectively silenced.

Katie often asked to come along with me while I was doing research at the state library. An avid reader, she had referred me to many different sources on trans women and had a deep personal interest in Hawaiian history and culture. I enjoyed her company and she was a helpful research assistant. While walking from the public parking garage to the library one morning late in June, Katie told me that a girl that she knew had just moved back from Las Vegas and had agreed to doing an interview. Her name was Khloe. After the library, Katie asked me if I could drop her off at the mall because she was going to meet Khloe. I went home and had a late lunch with Riley. A couple hours later, while browsing Instagram, Riley began to yell curse words. I asked her what was wrong and she said, “another TS died.” Apparently people were posting remembrance posts and video compilations of a girl who was found dead that day in her Waikīkī hotel room. When she showed me a video, I immediately recognized the name and told Riley that Katie was supposed to be meeting her. Riley started panicking, calling and texting, concerned for her friend’s life. After an hour of panic, she was finally able to get in touch with Katie who never met up with Khloe after all, because Khloe was a no-show (because she was dead).

In the hours after learning of Khloe’s death, I found myself surrounded by many of those who knew her. Some hypothesized that it was a drug overdose. Everyone knew partying was part of the everyday life of most girls in the profession; just half a year earlier another girl in their community had died from an overdose. Later in the night I drove into downtown Honolulu with Riley and drove by Merchants. Standing alone on the corner was Hunnie. She asked for a ride back to Waikīkī. Hunnie was Khloe’s “mother.” The other girl who died earlier in the year had also been her “daughter.” She was obviously very high on

cocaine, and told me that she hadn't slept in two days. She was the first person to mention murder as a possible cause of death:

Fuuuck, girl! I just when date one *kāne* who was going on and on bout Khloe. And was only after I left him that I saw her Insta. Fucking irraz dat pepo trying for act like she when OD. Who da fuck ODs on dabs? I just got off da phone with her sistas and girl she had been strangled. Had marks all over her neck. Could have been the same *kāne* (Hunnie, personal communication, Honolulu, 27 June 2014).⁶⁰

Hunnie described first how she had just been with a *kāne* or man who had said he had dated Khloe earlier and who seemed to be obsessed with her, because he would not stop talking about her. Then she talked about how she was irritated by people gossiping about the death being an overdose because apparently Khloe's last post on Instagram was a picture of "dabs." Dabs were a highly concentrated extract of THC,⁶¹ and Hunnie pointed out the fact that an overdose of THC was extremely unlikely. Instead she proposed, that after talking to Khloe's family, she believed that this man could have been responsible for her death. Hunnie discussed this repeatedly throughout the night.

Although there was much talk about Khloe, there was no crying that night — at least none that I noticed. Business and partying went on as usual. Her passing seemed to be a normal event; and in many ways it was. Though the atmosphere was thick with feelings, they were not openly discussed. More than once, however, in an intoxicated outbreak, emotions broke through. From what I could understand, there did not seem to be so much grieving over her death, but more the processing of personal sentiments about the possibility of an ending similar to Khloe's.

The days after Khloe's death, I searched the newspapers for any news about her death. The only news article I found regarding her death was her obituary. The original obituary posted referred to her by her legal (male) birth name, and the picture included was a photo prior to her transitioning where she was clearly living as a man (shirtless, muscular chest and a crew cut). Although a couple days later the obituary was altered to include the name she went by, it was listed at the end of her male name and in quotation marks. Moreover, a picture of her after transitioning was included at this time but only on the side of the original

⁶⁰ Full translation of quotation: "Fuck, girl! I was just with a man [a sex work service] who would not stop talking about Khloe. Only after I left him I saw her Instagram account. It is super irritating that people are trying to say that she overdosed on drugs. Who overdoses on hemp oil? I just got off the phone with her sisters and they say that she was strangled. She had marks all over her neck. It could have been the same man I just went out with."

⁶¹ THC is short for tetrahydrocannabinol, which is the active ingredient in marijuana.

picture of her — shirtless, very male, and tough. Other than that obituary, her death passed by without any attention from the newspapers or police. Dozens of other unattended deaths and possible crimes were reported in the week after her death, but no mention of her.

I saw clearly how the life of a trans sex worker was given less worth by the news reporters, and was ungrievable even within the trans community — as there seemed to be an unofficial iron curtain surrounding her death. As such, the aftermath of Khloe’s death was confusing for me as an outsider. Even when attempting to discuss her death with the girls I knew best, the discussion never turned out to be fruitful. In the weeks that followed I brought up Khloe’s name here and there. Each time, I was met with irritation or silence on the subject. Before I left and returned to Norway, the main rumor that seemed to be going around corresponded with what Hunnie had originally said about Khloe being strangled to death. I tried once more to bring up Khloe and asked Riley if there was a police investigation into the matter. She responded bitterly, informing me,

[w]hy would there be? You think anyone actually cares? You know how many of us die every year? They will never waste their time looking for her killer. It will be like she never existed. Everyone has gotta die sometime. We just happen to go much earlier (Riley, personal communication, Wahiawā, 5 August 2014).

Riley’s use of the personal pronouns “we” and “us” when discussing Khloe’s death, shows both how the public view⁶² she described is internalized, but also how easily Khloe’s death could become her own. Maybe then, what I perceived as them ignoring the event was actually a method of psychological self-protection for Khloe’s fellow sex workers, because it is difficult to keep working when one is at such a high risk for death. And when death is so common amongst a group, it becomes normalized. However, it was not merely due to personal stress that Khloe’s life was not grievable. Riley’s narrative also demonstrates how she had incorporated the public opinion of trans bodies into her outlook of both herself and other trans sex workers. By emphasizing that no one cares, that it would be a waste of time, and that it will be like Khloe never existed — Riley highlights how Khloe’s death was effectively erased, and how the public values certain bodies over others.

After a year there was still ambiguity surrounding her death. The next summer, I sent a message to a couple of the participants asking about an update regarding Khloe’s death and if there was ever any resolution. The two replies I received said two different things. One

⁶² Evident also in the lack of news coverage when compared to other unattended deaths. But especially when considering that news reporters seemed more than eager to report on any instance of even a possibility of a violent death, as there were many other “alleged crime” articles reported in the local newspaper.

talked again about a possible overdose, classified as an accidental death because of a variety of drugs in Khloe's system, so there were multiple intervening causes, but definite evidence of a struggle and bruising were present. The other said simply that Khloe's killer was never found. In any case, although it is unclear as to what her actual cause of death was, it was agreed that Khloe suffered physical violence shortly before her death.

Khloe's death raises one very critical question — namely what qualifies as a body that matters, a body worth grieving? The manner in which Khloe's story was consumed by the various groups can help give us insight into this question of which bodies are grievable. Amongst the trans community, her story was quickly heard, processed, and filed; amongst the media and law enforcement, her story was not heard at all, and instead ignored; and amongst her family, her story was first published not just as an edited version, but a completely unrecognizable version. Plummer explains that the “consuming of a tale centers upon the different *social worlds* and *interpretive communities* who can hear the story in certain ways and hence not others” (1995: 22). This is why each of these three groups had a completely different experience of consumption. As I quoted earlier in this paper, Plummer states that stories “are grounded in historically evolving communities of memory, structured through age, class, race, gender, and sexual preference” (1995: 22). Each of these groups therefore, for their various reasons, did not *or* could not acknowledge Khloe's life as one worthy of memorialization (in the case of her fellow trans sex workers), investigation (in the case of media and law enforcement), recognition (in the case of her family), or grief (in a general societal sense).

Butler addresses this question of grievability further asking: “whose life, if extinguished, would be publicly grievable and whose life would leave either no public trace to grieve, or only a partial, mangled, and enigmatic trace” (2009: 75). Khloe's life, because she was both trans and a sex worker, fell in the latter group. First, like Venus in *Paris Is Burning*,⁶³ Khloe's unnatural body is erased in her death, it is reverted, renaturalized (*see* Butler, 2011), when her family published a photo of her long before her transition to the female gender. Second, as a matter of psychological necessity, her trans community is left with only an “enigmatic trace” of her. And third, Khloe's all too common death is not even remembered as a statistic,⁶⁴ instead it disappears with “no public trace to grieve.” Butler writes that because “certain lives do not qualify as lives or are . . . not conceivable as lives . . . then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense” (2009: 1). Hence, to paraphrase

⁶³ Earlier in this chapter I discussed Venus' death further.

⁶⁴ Since her death was not classified as a murder.

Riley's words — if Khloe never really existed, then she was never really lost. And as Butler further argues, “[w]ithout grievability, there is no life, or rather, there is something living that is other than life” (2009: 15). In other words, some lives are ungrievable because they are non-recognizable within the dominant frames of intelligibility and thus not normatively legitimate (Butler, 2009). Thus, because Khloe was a trans sex worker, and existed outside this intelligibility, her body did not qualify as a life, and therefore was ungrievable.

Stryker explains that “the supposed epistemological sin of perpetrating falsehoods that ensnare innocent and unsuspecting others, the atypically gendered must sometimes pay with their lives” (2006: 9). The year of my fieldwork, 2014, broke the record for trans deaths. 2015 broke the record again. Despite the recent trans rights milestones, violence against trans people is increasing. The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) in the US, noted that the trans population is the most at-risk for becoming a victim of violence, with the risk increasing exponentially when it is a trans women of color (NCAVP, 2015: 55-56), like Khloe and the other Hawaiian trans women in Hawai‘i. According to the Transgender Law Center, in 32 states, there exist no laws protecting against discrimination against trans individuals (Uffalussy, 2015). And lack of legal protection puts many trans people at risk because when legal employment is hard to attain due to discrimination, sex work becomes an appealing option (Uffalussy, 2015). NCAVP has hypothesized that the “disproportionate impact of homicides of trans women of color” is most likely due to severe marginalization through discrimination and poverty. These statistics only cover legally documented trans killings (unlike Khloe’s), so the real numbers are probably significantly higher. Many trans and prostitute killings are never reported as such due to the fact that the trans quality of the victim is often not considered relevant in death and the sex worker identity is overwhelmingly relevant. In Khloe’s case, a death that at first glance was assumed to be accidental is not further investigated, because her non-normative body did not seem to matter.

CHAPTER SIX: SEX WORK AND OTHER WORK

6.0 INTRODUCTION

Very early into fieldwork it was clear to me that sex work was a grey zone. Typically sex work is reduced to the generic purview of prostitution which lumps all types of “transactional sex into one conceptual frame” that means the “stigmatized exchange of sexual services and money” (Shah, 2014: 17). This type of framing in no way encompasses all the various instantiations of transactional sex. The borders of what was and what was not sex work were virtually impossible to define. Would going to a fancy dinner and a movie (and the man treated) and then having a one-night stand with a man be considered sex work? How about exchanging taxi rides for the occasional hand job? What about oral sex for a bottle of anxiety medication? What about travel for companionship? What about sex twice a week in exchange for a studio apartment? Or even long term emotional intimacy for a sex change operation? The boundaries between what was sex work and who was a sex worker were not always clear.

Sex workers did not only perform sexual services in exchange for money, but in fact were just as likely to participate in a variety of other informal labor practices, money earning, or bartering schemes. The participants often called their work “hustling” in the same way that Hawaiian men also referred to many different undocumented income-generating strategies as hustling — like doing yard work for cash, to selling random car parts salvaged at a junkyard, or drug dealing. From a material point of view, sex work was just another way to hustle through life and earn a living; and the body was one amongst other commodities for sale or exchange. And for the Hawaiian trans sex worker, your body was sometimes your only asset, your only real possession, and you did whatever you felt you needed to do with it to survive:

It was mine to sleep with, profit from, and modify. I grew up in a world where the sex trade, like the modifications we all went through, was part of the pact, a part of the journey we had to go through as trans women (Mock, 2014: 220).

Mock’s body was the only thing she owned, and so instead of seeing herself as a commodified body, she chose to view sex work “no longer as selling a *body*, but as selling the service of *labor power* in the production of a *service* sold to the client’ (Marjolein van de Veen quoted in Kempadoo, 2004: 63). On the other hand, although Mock begins by emphasizing how it was her body/her choice, she simultaneously presents this pact as one

without an alternative towards the end. This may be due to the fact that, “we embody a range of (often conflicting or contradictory) discourses and tend to reiterate particular paradigms to explain or justify our actions in accordance with the context in which we are being questioned” (Sullivan, 2006: 556). People do this everyday in order to live with themselves and/or give meaning to their lives. Perhaps one of the reasons Mock, who is a professional today, sprinkled lines like this throughout her book was to be able to rationally justify her past as a sex worker. In any case, Shah states that “sexual commerce exists on a continuum of income-generating options . . . and rather than delineating the parameters of ‘choice’ and ‘force,’ these options are part of a broader set of negotiations that people living in poverty” engaged and managed every day (2014: 112). So whatever Mock’s underlying motive, like Shah pointed out, instead of thinking of sex work in the terms of choice or force, it is most useful to focus on Mock’s main message — that the body was a tool for earning.

In this chapter, utilizing primarily Shah’s approach to examining sex work, I will explore the topic in a very broad and open way. Looking not just at the blurred contours of sex work and the hybrid functions that sex work serves for trans women who do sex work, but also at how it provides gender recognition and respect, serves as a means to acquire the feminine accessories required to pass, and is the answer to self-financing plastic surgery and a SRS. In addition, I will briefly discuss how the law works to institutionalize heteronormativity amongst trans sex workers in Hawai‘i.

6.1 HOW SEX WORK PROVIDES GENDER CONFIRMATION

A primary function inherent in sex work was recognition. In a way almost everything about sex work came back to gender recognition — to being recognized as a woman. When participants used sex work to attain money to pay for plastic surgery, it was about gender confirmation. When participants bought makeup and dresses, it was about gender expression, which was really about gender confirmation. As such it become the most addictive part of the job for many. Mock described the experience: “I quietly based my self-worth on the number of times I made a guy’s head turn. Objectification and sexism masked as desirability were a bittersweet part of my dream fulfilled” (2014: 156). She went further, explaining, “I could see the appeal of profits and the appeal of men, no matter their horny, objectifying, fetishistic intentions, validating the women we knew ourselves to be” (Mock, 2014: 171). The project’s participants chronicled the same experience — multiple times daily, each time a man stopped on the corner or sent a text message, and expressed desire, the steady flow of

attention on the job served as instant gender recognition. This validation the girls felt was one of the most enticing perks of the job:

When I am with a man, when he touches me, and wants me, I know that he wanted this [directing her hands towards her entire body]. I know that he found *me* attractive. Then I get to be that girl that I've dreamed of since I was that little boy. For that moment. And I feel beautiful (Lana, personal communication, Waikīkī, 1 June 2014).

Their identities as women were deeply intertwined and even dependent on sex work. The male attention — the double-takes and lustful energy — is equated with approval, an acknowledgment of womanhood that said, “you look like a woman” or “you are woman enough.” Consequently, the job provided the means to this constant gender confirmation. Riley revealed how it was a bit more complicated, that not only does it provide recognition, but that you learn to depend on it:

You have to understand what this [work] does to you. I need to be touched. I screw hundreds of men a year. Last year for a couple months straight I was doubling and we saw like six guys a day. I made bank but imagine! Of course now I crave it. I need to know this [turning around and shaking her butt in a swift and agile manner] is appreciated (personal communication, Wahiawā, 14 July 2014).⁶⁵

Upon further conversations, Riley clarified to me that “[y]es it is confirmation. It makes me feel like a real woman! Why else would I do it?” (personal interview, Mokolē‘ia, 13 August 2014). During this particular conversation we discussed passability and how she often gave “freebies” to men she found attractive, and how this was not about sexual pleasure but instead was about how their sexual desire confirmed her attractiveness and made her feel that all her sex work and resulting surgeries were worth it. So although sex work was only one dimension of the project participants’ lives (Shah, 2014), it served extremely important functions, like gender confirmation. It was also complex — both because it was difficult to discern the borders of what constituted sex work and what did not, but also because it was by no means isolated from their non-work life. The worlds overlapped. It was both a part of their identities and part of the transformation process to a new identity.

⁶⁵ (1) “Doubling” is in reference to two sex workers working together. Two of them servicing one man. (2) To “make bank” is to earn a lot of money.

6.2 THE BARTERING OF BODIES

In addition to providing monetary income, commonplace amongst the project's participants was the bartering of bodies for both pharmaceutical and recreational drugs. All of the women I encountered admitted to some sort of depression or anxiety related disorder. This was a consequence of both the type of work and also simply the state of being trans and subject to constant discrimination and rejection from not just strangers, but friends and family as well. For many of the participants, lack of a job in the formal sector (or a job with qualifying hours), and the consequential lack of medical insurance complicated this problem further. But, despite this obstacle, they appeared to be innovative and solution-minded:

I see this one guy like once month and he is really nice. Totally not attractive but nice. Sometimes he picks me up and brings me out to dinner and we have some drinks. Once we sat on the beach and talked for a couple hours. He isn't a creep like a lot of the guys. He just likes to talk about his family. Which can be weird but [pause and audible sigh] yeah he has a wife and a baby. I think a girl and she isn't walking yet. I normally can't stand cheaters but you know how it is. Well most of them are cheaters but it is harder with those that talk about it. Because then it is in my face you know. Anyway, at the end of the night it is always the same, he sucks me and caresses my breasts and then I give him a handie and then he shoots on my chest. He comes within a couple minutes. So it is easy work for a bottle of xanies. Pretty soon he will probably get tired of that same act. I've dated him maybe like six times. He will either find some other girl or move on to some kinkier stuff. Not all do but I can tell he's the type. I normally don't top men but I would pop a Viagra and do it for the Xanax. Hopefully he will be satisfied with a dildo for a while instead. I will milk it as long as I can. I used to have a prescription for it but then I lost my insurance. So that's life (Tiana, personal communication, Honolulu, 27 July 2015).⁶⁶

In telling me this story, it was important for Tiana to demonstrate the complexity of sex work. Both in what constituted sex work and even the complexity of the customers. No aspect of sex work could be simplified into a stereotype. Shah summarizes it as a

⁶⁶ (1) A "handie" is in reference to a hand job. (2) "Xanies" are in reference to the anxiety medication, Xanax. (3) "To milk" something is to take advantage of something or utilize a situation in this instance. But could also refer to "milking" semen from a penis.

range of services, and modes of remuneration and exchange, that occur under the auspices of sexual commerce, a concept that describes a continuum rather than a singular practice. The continuum of sexual commerce is part of a range of informal labor practices, where selling sexual services may be one of several income-generating strategies that people engage contemporaneously, or over a period of time (2014: 113).

It was also important for Tiana to show that she has morals and also that although she chooses sex work to barter for her medication she does not have another readily available option. Shah encapsulates this choice of work

as embedded within a complex discursive matrix that includes life and livelihood histories, the production of urban space, the mutually constituted discourses of caste and gender, and the ways in which economically impoverished . . . navigate the idiosyncrasies of state institutions, from the police to systems of health care (2014: 10).

Instead of caste here, Tiana was born into poverty, but it is equal in its effects. Despite her status she is resourceful and able to sidestep the health care system and provide for herself.

Tiana was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder a few years back after a violent rape. About a year ago, Tiana's mother lost her job and consequently her medical coverage. Tiana had been let go from three jobs in a single year, and had never worked enough hours to be eligible for health insurance anyway, so she only had medical insurance through her mother. Tiana's father has been in jail for over ten years and so her mother was the primary breadwinner. After the loss of medical coverage, Tiana could neither afford the weekly psychiatrist visits that were required for her to continue her medication, or the medication itself. Even though Tiana despised "topping men" (be the penetrator) because it was not what she considered a feminine activity, she was willing to do it for her medication. By comparing information I received from her over time and her original soliloquy, it is evident how the "real pain experienced can get transformed into so much light, and fabricated, talk" (Plummer, 1995: 171). Similar to the mechanic nature of her sex work, the human details of her story seemed to disappear in translation. One can see how sex work becomes just another type of service industry work (*see* Augustin, 2007).

The case of Kim, in this next example further illustrates this. Kim had an agreement with her "sugar daddy" in which he arranged for and paid for a studio for her, in addition to a bit of pocket money and the occasional gift, in exchange for intimacy. For her, she felt like

she was almost a therapist, doing a service for someone. Whether these feelings of intimacy and reciprocity were real or not did not matter, so long as he perceived them as real. The production of these feelings was part of her duties, in the same way many in house and care work (a babysitter, health care worker, or social worker for example) sometimes feign or at least emphasize these types of feelings as part of their work role (Augustin, 2007: 62). She described the arrangement:

It's real simple girl, he has mommy issues, needs someone to baby him. So he gets three nights a week and one weekend day. He has no say as to what I do with the rest of the time. He comes over. I call him baby and sweetie. I pretend I am in love with him and we are a normal couple. I ask him about his day. I cook for him. We eat dinner, watch a movie, and cuddle. Sometimes more, but not always (Kim, personal communication, Waikīkī, 6 August 2014).

Here Kim presents a simplified version of her agreement. It was clear to me while listening, due to its rehearsed quality, that she had told this story many times. It was necessary for her to maintain a certain visage amongst colleagues by emphasizing how lucky she is, ensuring her high rank within the trans sex worker social hierarchy. Kim was the only participant I spoke to that had an arrangement like this. Though most participants saw this as an ideal agreement, after calculating the hourly wage, Kim was obviously underpaid for such emotionally demanding work. Still, others were envious of and fantasized about this package deal because Kim did not have the additional stress of needing to save money to pay her rent every month. This meant that all the money she earned from sex work could be used to fund her transition.

Furthermore, Kim presented herself as the one with the power and control (both physically and emotionally) in her relationship. Kempadoo confirms that “[i]n most instances, there is little confusion between commercial transactions and an intimate relationship in the minds or lived experiences of women who engage in prostitution” (2004: 60). Moreover she describes this sort of “boundary maintenance” as a strategy utilized in “jobs that rest upon emotional and sexual labor, and that rather than being a destructive element, it allows the professional to control the extent to which public life intrudes into the private” (Kempadoo, 2004: 61-62). However in this sort of arrangement, it was evident that this sort of boundary maintenance, despite her insistence of its presence, was difficult. Kim probably processed and rehearsed her story in this matter because it helped her to maintain order, built her social image and even insulated her from acknowledging the dangers of her

situation. Plummer proffers that sometimes secrets “protect us from dangers” (1995: 57). Perhaps Kim chose not to admit (to me and maybe even to herself) that she was in a vulnerable situation because despite the dangers, this arrangement was of tremendous importance to Kim since like most trans sex workers in Hawai‘i, it was impossible to obtain a housing contract on her own for the reason that her name and gender were different than the birth name and gender demarcated on her personal identification, and also because she could neither document an income source nor a credit history.⁶⁷ In any case, although the agreement had gone on for eight months, it was liable to end at any time. If her sugar daddy got angry, jealous, bored, or just on a whim decided he did not want to be a party to the agreement any longer, he could withdraw his funds. They had no legal contract, and so she had no rights. But regardless of the negative aspects of the job, for her and many in the community, it was still a dream job come true, and many felt that they were actually providing much more than just sex.

6.3 COMPLICATING THE POVERTY STEREOTYPE

6.3.1 Sex Work as an Income Generating Strategy

Focusing on the economic need as the only reason for sex work is misleading and often completely dishonest (Augustin, 2007: 24-25). Although there were a couple participants who were totally homeless and suffering from poverty related problems, the majority of the participants complicated the poverty-stricken trans of color stereotype. I carefully tread here as to emphasize that I am in no way making light of the plethora of problems most trans people face, and especially the trans sex workers of color. But the picture I encountered is much more rich and layered than is often represented in statistics. Sex work for the majority of the participants offered the promise of a dream, the only way to pay for expensive surgeries that most felt were necessary for them to match their outside with their inside. These surgeries are not covered by public medical insurance and rarely covered by private medical insurance, so these surgeries needed to be paid for in full by them. Though for some participants, despite regularly working, saving money to get a single surgery, like breast surgery, might take years to achieve:

When I first start pooching I thought it was fun. It was exciting. But then it became a job. You got hooked to the money. And you can't stop. I'm only thinking about me working, and getting money for surgery, or for every goal I

⁶⁷ It is typical in Hawai‘i when submitting a rental application for the realtor to conduct both a background and credit check.

have. My world revolves around me working the streets. Now I've finally saved enough for my boobs. It took forever but I did it. (Chasity, personal interview, Waikīkī, 2 June 2014).⁶⁸

Saving for Chasity was especially difficult because the money earned from sex work afforded her food and shelter. Sex work provided money — her way to earn a living. It was about selling services to a client. Like every type of job, she was another body providing labor power, and this was the job she knew best.

Shah explains that for sex workers, the assessment of their work is “ultimately evaluated through a different set of parameters than those used in discourses that deem prostitution inherently violent and exploitative” (2014: 125). She further points out that the “difference between force and compulsion in this context [is] paramount, marking the difference between individuals exercising force and structural factors forming constraints that elicit a compulsion or need in this case, toward certain livelihood options” (Shah, 2014: 125). For those without familial support, like Chasity, most of their income was spent on living expenses. Hawai‘i has the second highest cost of living of all the states in the US, with housing expenses at about 2.6 times the average costs in the rest of the US (CBS, 2015; Kiplinger, 2014). With these sorts of living expenses, surgery is a distant dream, without the help of family or a sugar daddy to help with the expenses.

6.3.2 *Materialism or Simply Buying Respect?*

For others, sex work became a means to provide for addictions. With the compounded sex-work related stresses, the lure of the short-term pleasure of endorphins from satisfying a variety of addictions can prove more appealing than a distant fantasy of an imagined surgery. In addition to drugs and alcohol, some of the participants also seemed to be addicted to shopping, at least shopping had a prominent place in their daily lives — and obviously played an essential role in their subject formation. Fashion was a common theme of discussion, as someone would proudly display her new Michael Kors bag and another would reply with flaunting her new Coach shoes, telling everyone in the group how much she spent. This display of “conspicuous consumption,” simply might have been a way to remain positive in the long run by seeing and touching a tangible result of all their hard work. On a couple occasions I noticed the tags of dresses or purses, left hanging on participants, so that

⁶⁸ Chasity told me this at the beginning of the summer. We learned earlier in this paper that although this did not go as smoothly as she planned, she did finally get her breast surgery, with the help of a friend, Riley.

everyone could see how expensive it was. The first time I saw an attached tag, I mentioned the apparent mistake and was about to rip it off as a favor, when I was quickly instructed otherwise, “Nay, nay mary!”⁶⁹ Hands off! Dat brings in da *kālā* der. So dey know I’m da real ting. I don’t waste time wit broke ass niggaz. Time is money!”⁷⁰ (Brianna, personal communication, Waikīkī, 13 June 2014). For Brianna, buying expensive items, conveyed to others that she herself was expensive, helping to bring in the *kālā* or money. In her mind it said, that she was not just a cheap prostitute, but a woman of class.

Shah writes that “[w]hile many sex workers do find that selling sexual services is a way of mitigating or escaping poverty, the experience of poverty is not universal among people who sell sexual services” (2014: 10). Instead the picture was much more complex. A participant might choose to eat out at a restaurant and then not eat any other meals that day. A participant may live in a room with three other girls but choose to buy a pair of designer shoes. After being discriminated against for being a sex-worker by the larger community, visibly displaying a high-end or designer item might help battle the stigma and increase feelings of self-worth and honor. Evidently, it was also done in an effort to compete for social status and gain respect from the community. This seemed to be the case even when Hunnie first began escorting as a new teenager:

Mary, I started pooching Merchants when I was only thirteen. Tink bout that. I was a little hustler, popping in back at da projects with all dis *kālā* [rubbing imaginary money in her finger tips]. I could sponsor all da Halawa hood kids at da manapua man. I was a celebrity, trust (personal communication, Waikīkī, 27 June 2014).⁷¹

Hunnie grew up in *Halawa* public housing, and when she first started working the Merchant Street stroll, her access to money distinguished her from the rest of the youth in her neighborhood. All of a sudden, she could buy food for all the kids from the “manapua man” or the traveling food truck, and she quickly earned their respect. This is especially important

⁶⁹ “Mary” is an affectionate term that is unrelated to my name Maria. Any relation is coincidental. Participants used the term the same way someone would use the term “honey.”

⁷⁰ Full translation of quotation: “No, no honey! Don’t touch! That tag brings in the money. So that customers know I’m worth it. I don’t waste my time with men who don’t have money. My time costs money.” Note: the use of the word “nigga” here has no reference to race. It was just used as a slang word to signify men in this instance. Though one could argue that since it was using the term negatively by referring to men without money, then it was racist in its result but the race relations in Hawai’i are so insanely complex that I cannot begin to delve into attempting to explain them in a footnote.

⁷¹ Full translation of quotation: “Honey, I started sex work when I was only thirteen. Think about that. I was earning a lot of money, coming back to my neighborhood with tons of money. I could treat all the neighborhood kids to food. I was a celebrity, you can believe that.”

when you consider that because of her trans status she could have been especially vulnerable to harassment from the other youth.

6.3.3 *Purchasing Femininity*

Sex work also provided participants with the means to acquire the necessities to pass. For most of the participants, the key to passing were not just the body modification procedures, but equally as important were the accessories — the many symbols of femininity that affirmed their gender. These symbols took the form of material objects. Many told me stories of their first bottle of nail polish or first lip-gloss and what it symbolized to them. Sometimes it was a re-gift from a girlfriend. Sometimes it was stolen because they couldn't ask their parents to buy it:

In da seventh grade, I walked home past Long Drugs everyday. We would all go in an cruise 'round. Check out stuff ya know. It's so funny but I still remember dis like yesterday. For days we had been walking past da cosmetics section. My girlz knew already how I was so I never had fo' hide from dem. I kept looking at dis one — Maybelline Pink Perfection lip gloss. I was so sure I was gonna look ovahs mary [snapped fingers while waving her hand in the air as she giggles]. Ya know was gonna really bring out my beautiful sun-kissed skin [flings her hair back]. Anyway, so yeah I kept looking at dis Pink Perfection gloss an seeing how it would look on me. I couldn't buy it cuz my Mom knew all da cashier ladies an not like I had money anyway so I just slipped it right in [pats her leg where a pocket would be and chuckles]. After, we ran to Joselyn's house cuz her parents was always gone 'til late. I went into da bathroom an tried it on. Alone. I when lock da girlz out. I can still remember how when feel. 'Maybe she's born with it' [imitating the first half of the Maybelline advertising tagline from the nineties and posing]. Was like right den I could see my future queen self (Lei, personal interview, Honolulu, 3 August 2014).⁷²

Practically every participant had a story like this, and almost all could remember the events with great clarity, like a ritual event. It had been well over a decade since the day Lei shoplifted the lip-gloss, yet through the years she could still remember the exact shade of it. Even though she could only use it in private, just having it, symbolized to her that she was a

⁷² (1) To “look ovahs” meant to look very good. (2) “Queen” was often used in reference to oneself or others in the trans community.

girl. She told me she would keep it in her pocket at school and often gave it a squeeze whenever she was called by her birth name or teased for being a “faggot,” as if the tube of gloss gave her a boost of confidence or perhaps reminded her of the girl she felt she really was.

Cosmetics equipped these young transitioning trans women with the promise of feminine characteristics, because just like the Maybelline slogan hinted, no woman was born with the beauty and allure exemplified by the models in the advertisements, instead it was an image created by cosmetic products that could help you to achieve this vision. In *Gender Trouble* Butler proffered that

gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (2006: 191).

Thus it is understandable why these symbols of femininity, like make-up, shoes, and clothing become so important to trans women who seek recognition. The ultimate accessorizing queen, Riley, epitomized this material femininity. Entering Riley’s room was like stepping into the beauty and cosmetics department. Beauty products covered every square inch of her vanity and two dressers, and even waterfalled off onto the floor of her room. Perfumes, make-up, creams and lotions, hair products and removal mechanisms — the list could go on and on. In addition she had over one hundred bikinis displayed on a rack mounted on her wall that she made herself for the purpose of showing off the swimsuits. She also paraded dozens and dozens of designer purses in front of me from which she retrieved from neat stacks in the custom shelves of her closet and afterwards carefully returned each purse to its respective dust bag home. Her collections all had one thing in common — they were products that clearly belonged to a woman: they symbolized femininity. Butler argues that gender requires a public performance that is repeated, and that “[t]his repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (2006: 191). Similarly, Riley literally put on a performance for me — her audience, repetitively displaying all her symbols of femininity.

Riley’s example is extreme and yet not unique among the participants. The compulsion for symbols of femininity was an expensive habit. It usually was not just any purse that served as a security blanket, but it had to be a designer purse. For some girls, it

became their primary expense. Their income from prostitution disappeared quickly, and the possibility of another existence became less and less likely. Sometimes, it even led to arrest, when stealing seemed like an easier option than a date. Although this seems excessive, the seeming materialism was not just about displaying femininity, they also talked about it as a matter of self-worth (i.e, respect and gender confirmation), and in that case, sometimes they felt the risk was worth it.

6.3.4 *Addicted to Plastic Surgery*

But it was not just accessories that signified femininity and self-worth, but also surgeries. During my time there, I became accustomed to talking about body parts as commodities. Participants referred to breast implants as being sponsored by X or Y, or a pair of hourglass pumped hips as being equivalent to twenty dates. The more money you spent on body modification and feminizing accessories, the more you were coveted, the more you earned, and the more you were actually worth — because in a sense, their bodies as sex workers and trans women were literally investments waiting for a return of profit.

With the exception of one participant (exclusive of the two Hawaiian elders I spoke with),⁷³ every participant that I encountered, whether via interview or participatory observation, had had surgery or plans to have surgery.⁷⁴ The one participant who did not have surgery or surgery plans was a crack addict. Of all the participants, Katie had spent the most on surgery. Moreover, she was the only one of the younger participants (21 and younger) who had had surgeries. Katie had gotten a client to pay for her breast surgery at eighteen. Everything else she had paid on her own. Katie was one of the lucky few that had been able to live with family rent-free. She shared a studio apartment with her mother and adult brother. All three of them slept on the floor. Despite that, she was considered fortunate because she did not have to do sex work for rent. Katie, accepted life in poverty conditions, in order to devote all the money she earned to her surgery fund. She told me that surgery was more of a necessity than a bed.⁷⁵

⁷³ As I have previously mentioned, my initial intention before was to study trans sex work in the context of Hawaiian culture. As such, I interviewed a couple of Hawaiian trans elders. I cannot say what made the contrast between the Hawaiian trans elders and the majority of the participants so great. It is however worth noting that there was an urban/rural distinction (as I also mentioned earlier) and a large age difference.

⁷⁴ Moreover, each and every participant was either on hormones or had been on hormones before. In other words, each had undergone body modification procedures, and most had been or currently was a psychiatric patient. The influence of the medical industry ran deep.

⁷⁵ Although she stayed with me during my fieldwork, she normally lived with her family in the studio apartment described.

In addition to spending the most, Katie was also the most knowledgeable about surgeries and surgeons. She knew everything about the variety of surgeries offered and even the reputations of different surgeons throughout the world. Katie explained, “TSWorldMap taught me from age 16 how to succeed at being trans. It is one of the leading websites for trans women. It said get on hormones as young as possible and get FFS” (personal interview, Waikīkī, 11 June 2014). “FFS” was facial feminization surgery, and Katie was the only participant I encountered who had begun the extensive work required for a complete FFS:

I went to the leading authority on trans women in the West—Dr. Ousterhout. Check him out. He glamorized feminization. He wrote the book on it. Like literally. He even had a transition timeline in his office. Like a hormones, electrolysis, FFS checklist. So first he takes measurements of your face and says ‘An attractive female brow bone will project 0.678 cm, where as the average female projection is 0.723 cm, and this is where you are at. I’m gonna cut your skull open and cut out bone to bring you into the attractive female range.’ And that is what he does and he has made lots of TS girls totally passable. . . . And a lot of his girls become models. Dr. Ousterhout charged me \$33,800 for only the upper half of my face. It would have cost \$50,000 to do everything. He even has a trademark. His patients all have that mannequin look. He will tell you that no other doctor can give you the level of facial femininity that he can give you. But it really does make you really feminine. It imbues you with a sense of confidence. Because now I think well my upper half of my face is within female norms so no one can really say anything to me. I feel confident in my looks (personal interview, Waikīkī, 11 June 2014).

Every time Katie talked, I could not help but notice how much parts of her speech sometimes sounded like a promotional advertisement. Like Plummer remarks, “too often the self found may become standardized” (1995: 173). Katie told herself (and anyone who would listen) these stories over and over, cementing her identity, justifying the money spent, rationalizing it all out, in a way that was perhaps also therapeutic for her.

Katie was the only participant who had begun the FFS medical treatment because of the high costs for the surgery. It was not even a distant possibility for the rest. A few months after I left fieldwork, Katie had completed the rest of her surgery after moving to California and working intensively in order to pay for it. She paid \$37,000 for the bottom half. Apparently, it cost much more to do the surgeries separately. Katie’s surgical narrative begs

the question: “Does the denaturalization of the norm succeed in subverting the norm, or is this a denaturalization in the service of a perpetual reidealization, one that can only oppress, even as, or precisely when, it is embodied most effectively?” (Butler, 2011: 88-89). After the completion of her FFS surgery I spoke to Katie on FaceTime and she told me that she felt confident, just like she stated earlier in her previous interview, but in my opinion she did not sound — or look — that confident. In the end of the conversation, she admitted that she was still unsatisfied with her nose (which the doctor had just operated on) and that she was now wanted to save for her fourth nose job (as she wanted to redo the surgery that was just done) and the voice feminization surgery that she had described to me earlier:

So yeah . . . [omission by author] voice feminization surgery with Dr. Kim in Korea, which costs 10 Gs. The only reason why I consider it is because I look at the before and afters and they are doing really amazing work. There are vocal resonances and pitch ranges that you need to fall into. So you get cut with a mini-scalpel and then you fall into that vocal range. Insane examples where the male voices don't really sound male but later sound super duper girly. But all the girls that go to these surgeons end up looking and sounding the same. Like replicas. But yeah, seriously voice and face, I was always taught by TS on the internet, that that was everything. Everything concerning passability. Made the girl. (Katie, personal interview, Waikīkī, 11 June 2014).

Katie did not seem bothered at all by looking like a “mannequin” and sounding like a “replica,” as long as it was one that appeared feminine.

Katie had the drive and determination to become what she considered to be fully woman. Although Katie neither drank alcohol nor used any type of drug, she told me that she suffered from a “hormone and surgery addiction.” For example:

When I used to take estrogen — like full-blown shots because I’m still on pills now — I would find myself like craving more and more. I became addicted. It was like a combination of physical and psychological because your body — it learns to need it. It expects these hormones to come in. Like a certain amount. And then psychologically whenever I was feeling insecure, hormones was almost like a mini-surgery to me. Like its like, ‘ohh (snaps fingers) right there.’ It just softens everything and makes it feminine. It can even change the shape of your body. It’s so powerful. It was like ‘ohh yeah I feel a lot better now,’ you know what I mean? And then my blood tests told me that I needed to take a break

because my liver numbers is like really f-ed up (Katie, personal interview, Waikīkī, 17 June 2014).

Katie describes her addiction as both physical and psychological. She refers to a dose of hormones as a “mini-surgery.” However, after being informed about her liver, Katie stopped the estrogen shots, but continued with hormone pills. She seems unable to stop despite her health status. She described how this addiction came to be:

The trans girl, when she is a little girl and realizes she wants to be a girl, she wants to emulate Disney princesses and admires all the pretty girls in her life. And then she learns about these surgeries. And then it is like a binge. Like a buffet. Like a surgery buffet. I can get this done, and this done. I can have this, and this. Smaller feet, like her. Facial structure, like her. My body can be more like this. I can have an ass like that. I can have boobs like this [omission by author] I guess you could say I’m obsessed. I was entranced with all things feminine from age five. And I had a very clear idea of what it meant to look like a woman. Snow White for example. Cinderella; Sleeping beauty. I wanted to look like them; to look like a Barbie. It became so ingrained in my subconscious psyche. You can’t blame someone if it is ingrained in them. Of course I’m very Western. Very consumer. So I thought, ‘Wow, I can just go to sleep and wake up and be a girl’ (Katie, personal interview, Waikīkī, 17 June 2014).

Riley had also done her fair of surgeries. At twenty she had her breasts done for the first time, during which she did liposuction simultaneously. Then at twenty-two she did her breasts a second time. Later that year she had liposuction and a fat transfer. At twenty-four she received butt implants and had her hairline lowered. Dissatisfied with the result, although she swore she never would, she received a couple rounds of illegal injections of silicone in her buttocks just months later. One step further than a sketchy surgery clinic in a foreign country, was the traveling “nurse” who administered liquid silicone injections or “pumped” you right in the comfort of your hometown. These injections were extremely popular. Almost every participant had been pumped multiple times. The procedure worked like this:

You can get pumped anywhere really. Your cheeks, hips, bootie, wherever. You seen [Doll] right? She’s the queen of pumping. I would invite you but you know the nurse who normally does it got arrested. Sucks because she was using the real stuff you know like medical grade quality not the glue shit. So not sure when we

gonna get a new person coming around. But it's like normally in a hotel room. Everybody goes and she does like one person at a time and you pay per shot (Kim, personal communication, Waikīkī, 1 August 2014).

The dangers of these illegal injections are evident. The horror stories are easy to find with a quick Google search. But like Kim mentioned, many of the practitioners claim to have medical training and go around injecting people with anything from oil to a glue concoction. In any case, even the pure silicone injections have shown to have negative side effects, sometimes not until years down the road, when the injected sites can harden and turn black, and there have even been instances of deformity and death (*see* Lucas, 2015; Samadi, 2015). Despite these risks, many of the participants clamor to these “pumping parties.”

One would think that as opposed to illegal silicone injections, hormones would be easy to get, but sometimes also hormone therapy requires some illegal maneuvering around the medical system. For years all the transitioning girls in Hawai‘i went to Dr. R for their hormone needs. He was an actual licensed endocrinologist. Years before when my little sister had begun to transition, I went with her to his office to check him out. Dr. R circumvented the psychological requirements of the medical establishment because he believed it was more important for trans people to have safe access to hormone therapy instead of resorting to unsafe self-medicating practices without medical supervision. Dr. R regularly tested you, made sure you were healthy and regulated your dosage depending on your test results.

After Dr. R passed away a few years ago, one would need to be diagnosed by a psychiatric professional so that the hormones could be considered medically necessary to treat a disorder and then the medical insurance could classify the hormone usage correctly. In addition to hormone therapy, this process was also necessary for other gender affirming procedures like a SRS. In order to qualify for these types of procedures, one first needs to see the psychiatric professional on a regular basis. For the most part, seeing a psychiatrist requires both insurance and money. Understandably with so much planning and bureaucracy in the way, and without general access to a psychiatrist, most of the participants resorted to other avenues outside of the system, including self-medicating.

6.4 SEX WORK AS A MEANS TO AN END: SEXUAL REASSIGNMENT SURGERY

The final stage for most of the participants plans for surgery was a SRS. Though none of them had gotten it done, almost all wanted one. There were only a couple that were

ambivalent because in the world we live in, the world they live in, in order to survive, the participants were made to fit within the heteronormative framework. Not doing so could be the difference between life and death. Butler suggests that the body that does not embody the norm will determine “what and who will count as a human life” (2009: 76). Furthermore, she stresses that there are “cruel and fatal social constraints on denaturalization” (Butler, 2011: 91). As such, getting an SRS was one of the most important decisions facing trans sex workers.

But this decision was important for other reasons as well, not just because of the major physical and psychological changes they would have to face in body and mind, but also because by removing their penis, they would in effect also cut off their primary source of income. I heard a lot about the economic consequences for girls who got a SRS. What all the trans sex workers knew, was that it was the combination of a penis on a feminine body that made the most money: “It’s all about the laka. Got to hustle as much as can now because once I have it done, you know I’m just like any other girl” (Jessica, personal communication, Waikīkī, 30 July 2014).⁷⁶ Every working girl talked about those who got surgery and then could only make a fraction of what they earned before. Merchant Street was where customers went to find the trans element. It was said that every trans sex worker on O’ahu had worked Merchants, even those who primarily solicited online. I heard many stories about how so and so had gotten their surgeries done from Merchants. The participants talked about Merchants as if it were a person who had financed their surgeries. There were other strolls in Waikīkī and in Wahiawā, but there was a different customer base there⁷⁷ and none were as legendary for its money-making abilities as Merchants. The problem was that almost all trans sex workers began sex work in order to be able to either self-fund an SRS or find someone who would. So the goal they worked towards would also be the end of the career that many came to depend on, not just for money, but for validation, and community. This was the paradox that the participants faced. Because ideally one would want to stop sex work after the SRS was complete, but this was much easier said than done, when sex work was serving so many functions in their lives.

Regardless of the complicated decision that was inherent in an SRS, it was still the expressed goal for most of the participants. There were of course prerequisites to the surgery — hormone therapy and a psychological evaluation. In addition, some trans people choose to

⁷⁶ “Laka” is slang for penis.

⁷⁷ Merchants was known to be the place you went in search for trans sex workers. These were customers who knew exactly what they were looking for. The other places also had customers that were military and tourist based. This often required that the trans element was not disclosed.

get an orchiectomy in preparation. Three of the participants had gotten this procedure to help decrease testosterone production but also to make the transition to an SRS easier. Katie, however, had some misgivings about her choice to remove her testicles:

I was so dumb and young. Only seventeen. I didn't know. I got them removed because I just wanted to be fish. I didn't know what men want. Now, I'm not mentally stable enough to do this work. I think too much and I care too much about my body type and I'm always so ashamed (personal communication via FaceTime, 28 December 2014).⁷⁸

The regret she experienced was not just because it prevented her penis from functioning sexually and consequently made her less desirable by many in the customer base, but also because she believed the hormonal change caused her to be emotional and unstable. She said she constantly worried about what customers thought about her body and face. This bothered her much more than the fact that she did not have a fully functioning penis. Because although this was one of the most valuable assets for a trans sex worker,⁷⁹ Katie was widely seen as a very successful sex worker.

In any case, Katie could not mentally handle the sex work anymore, and she found a temporary solution to sex work,⁸⁰ but sooner or later she knows she will have to return to it because she will need an SRS:

Because I had an orchiectomy at 17 I need to have a SRS. There were significant changes in my body after. It is such an in between state. Your body is then not built for sex or to think about sex. You never feel comfortable with it. Because it isn't a vagina. And then you have no testosterone. So no sex drive or desire to use your natal genitalia. You are like it is kind of there for no reason. I pee out of it. So that is where I am at with my body (personal communication via FaceTime, 28 December 2014).

Even without the depressed tone in this narrative, it is easy to see that transition is not a clear-cut process for most trans women. It is a problematical path with both consequences and benefits. Butler explains that “identification is always an ambivalent process. Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms

⁷⁸ “Fish” is slang for looking like an anatomical female.

⁷⁹ Despite being at complete odds with it since the presence and use of it brought attention to what was considered the epitome of masculine quality — the penis.

⁸⁰ At the time of this conversation, Katie had just been granted a free room in a house for trans persons that were going to college in San Francisco. One of the conditions was that she abstained from sex work.

that are and are not realizable” (2011: 86). As such, being a woman or even becoming a woman is an inherently volatile affair. Katie is “beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses” (Butler, 2011: 86).

Celeste had also had an orchiectomy but she did not express the same ambivalence as Katie about it. Instead she saw it as a necessary step in the right direction towards her goal of a SRS. Celeste was a driven, career-minded woman. Despite working full-time in the airlines, Celeste admitted,

I’m not gonna lie I still do it to this day. If I’m not in a relationship. It’s just like a girl going to a club and having sex with a guy for free. Why not get paid? You know if a guy wants to sleep with me I will tell him, well this is how much it is gonna cost. And if he says well I can get it for free from that girl, then I tell him well go to that girl. You know I gotta think about my future. I feel like if I had my sex change I would feel complete. More complete. I’m still working on that. That is the last step. A lot of guys tell me that they can’t tell but I feel like everyone knows (personal interview, Pearl City, 19 July 2014).

Celeste conceived of sex work as just another “commercial activity in which women could earn potentially better wages for the amount of time they worked, with potentially better working conditions” (Shah, 2014: 128-29). It was like a second job, another income-generating activity. Celeste was like many “who are engaged in sexual-economic transactions” yet “do not necessarily identify themselves as sex workers” (Kempadoo, 2004: 83). Celeste continued to engage in sex work to save for her surgery. But unlike many of the other participants, Celeste did not have to worry about losing her sex-work income after the SRS, because she already had a full-time job.

Neither did Ava-Mahrie. Ava-Mahrie had quit working the streets when she learned that her medical insurance (via her job) would pay for the majority of the costs of her surgery. For her the possibility of a SRS was a soon to be realized reality:

I’m in the process of getting my sex change soon. I just got my psychiatric analysis. They like watch you and analyze you for a few months and see how you are. And my medical is gonna cover it. It began years back with discussions I had about how come the medical couldn't pay my hormones. Because girl it’s expensive. Going to the doctors and they don't know how to charge you. Because you not sick. They couldn't categorize it. So it was very costly. So I kept

calling the insurance and complaining and then I called the corporate headquarters of my company and complained. I voiced my opinion about the need for transgender benefits. And then I finally got a phone call one day from my district manager. It took a couple years but she said something I said or did had pushed this new medical coverage through with [name of her company]. And I was like ‘oh my gosh!’ That made me so happy. It was so amazing. So now I only need to pay ten percent co-pay and travel expenses and I can choose any doctor. I’m so blessed, because my poor fellow sisters all have to do prostitution to pay and even the ones that work a regular job still need to you know because it is tough. You cant make that much money you know. It is ridiculous (Ava-Mahrie, personal interview, Wahiawā, 27 July 2014).

Although Ava-Mahrie’s words never have an overt political agenda, there were always trans rights issues underlying her words. Perhaps it was a conscious motive to educate and provide information to the public. Ava-Mahrie was in fact the only participant I was aware of that was actively involved in the trans rights movement. In any case, Plummer explains that all stories are socially constructed and cannot be otherwise. Despite this nature, it does not mean that people are being deceptive. Plummer writes that “[w]hatever else a story is, it is not simply the lived life. It speaks all around the life: it provides routes into a life, lays down maps for lives to follow, suggests links between a life and a culture” (1995: 168). In that sense Ava-Mahrie’s personal story is her community’s story, and “stories perform political tasks” (Plummer, 1995: 17). And the politicized moral that comes through Ava-Mahrie’s story is that she was lucky to have a job and a way to get a SRS and that her opportunity should be available for her “poor fellow sisters” — the rest like her who had grown up trans, poor and of color.

6.5 HETERONORMATIVITY AND THE LAW

Sex work helped to economically provide for the necessities required to live as a Hawaiian trans person in a heteronormative society, but at the same time sex work is illegal in Hawai‘i. Sex work gave you benefits but simultaneously put you at major risk. Interestingly though, although sex work is illegal — and fell outside of what was considered normal practices — did not mean that it escaped regulation by heteronormativity. Because of its illegality, arrest and imprisonment were a daily possibility. Imprisonment was especially frightening for many of the participants because they knew that they would be placed in the

men's prison. Without a SRS, the presence of any state or remnant of a genital organ that could be called a penis, still classified them as men. This fear of imprisonment in the men's prison made it easy for the police to pressure girls into performing sexual services for free, or sometimes a nominal fee. So not only did sex workers have to be concerned about suffering violence at the hand of a customer, but they had to worry about being exploited by those who should have been there to serve and protect them.

The corruption of the Honolulu Police Department was put on spotlight in newspapers throughout the world a few months before I arrived on fieldwork, when the laws revolving around undercover officers and their tactics in busting prostitutes were being reviewed publicly, with the practice of sexual penetration under scrutiny. Hawai'i's former law permitted police to have sex in all forms with prostitutes in their investigations, and kept law enforcement exempt from prosecution for breaking the law. Hawai'i lawmakers, when attempting to rewrite the law to bring an end to this "sex exemption," were met with enormous lobbying effort by the Hawai'i Police Department which argued that this exemption was crucial to their investigations (*see Walker, 2014*). So this law in practice allowed officers to first get sex and then make the arrest. For many of the participants, this possibility was like a double punishment for the same infraction. The Department succeeded in their lobbying for this exemption on the new bill, with legislators initially restoring the exemption. But within a month legislators had changed their minds, deciding that police should not be legally permitted to have sex with prostitutes while performing their police duties (*see Lee, 2014*).

The repealed law was no longer applicable when I arrived for fieldwork but the debate did highlight the role of the police and the law for me as a researcher entering fieldwork. The change in the law was seen as a win for many of the participants. Though it did not bring an end to the sexual services that members of the police department received due to their status as "the law," it did at least assist participants in feeling less helpless when dealing with the police. They felt that at least now they did not have to worry about being arrested after having sex that was not consensual because it was under false pretenses, which felt like rape, and then punishment for rape. Now when participants decided to have sex with police after being threatened with arrest, they could feel that they had made a choice.

But even I was surprised by how commonplace this practice was. Growing up poor and of color in Hawai'i, you learn early on not to trust the police. However, despite my predisposition, I could never have predicted, let alone expected, the number of police officers coercing sex from trans sex workers to be so high. Some participants considered this to be in

the nature of a reciprocal relationship, similar to how Shah explains it: “well aware of their positionality in the spectrum of il/legality with respect to the state, [they] use the tensions between il/licit and il/legal activities in order to negotiate daily existence” (2014: 81). While others considered it to be simply rape:

Fuck dat, nevah again! I know my rights. *Māka‘i* or not. Nobody gonna take nothing from me. Befoa, I wen go along. Play nice. But I’m ova dat shit. *Maka‘i* abusing power li’dat. Straight up rapists deez fuckas! Trust sista, I will die fighting [shadow boxing combo]. To da end (Hunnie, personal communication, Waikīkī, 27 June 2014).⁸¹

bell hooks contends that “[o]ppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subject, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story” (Plummer quoting bell hooks, 1995: 30). Hunnie here and in every instance I spoke with her *defines her reality* and *tells her story*. Her narrative works to empower her. This story could easily be told in a manner that would have an opposite effect — one of victimization. Plummer resolves that “some stories may work to pathologize voices, or turn them into victims with little control over their lives; other stories may sense human agency and survival, giving the voice a power to transform and empower” (1995: 29). Hunnie emphasizes that she will fight and die before she becomes a victim. When Hunnie first began sex work as a new teenager, she was used as a sex toy repeatedly by dirty cops. Now years later, after multiple arrests and imprisonments, she has vowed that she will never be exploited by the police again. Because although the change of law was a small win in the big picture, for Hunnie, they were still on the losing side.

Though most participants were not so bold in their opinions about the police presence as Hunnie, every participant I interviewed had performed sexual acts with an officer. For those that worked the streets, the “daily life of doing sex work from [the] street included constant negotiations for the space to solicit clients, primarily with the police” (Shah, 2014: 120). Some participants had regulars who were police, but most were able to identify a person as a cop right away in order to avoid the entire relationship in the first place, because even if they began as a paying customer, it always would evolve into free sexual favors. There were however a couple participants who had had long term relationships with police

⁸¹ Full translation of quotation: “Fuck that. I will never let it happen again. I know my rights. Police officer or not. Nobody is going to take anything from me. In the past, I went along with it. I pretended to be nice and listened to them. But I am over that now—police abusing power. They are absolutely rapists. Believe me when I say that I will die fighting. To the end.”

officers. Shah underscores that we must dislodge “the notion that law and practice amount to the same thing with respect to prostitution” (2014: 113). Moreover, she points out that the “idea of a continuum of regulation for sexual commerce in everyday life countermands the idea that if sex work is somehow legally prohibited, then its criminalization is enforced in well-ordered and absolute terms” (Shah, 2014: 113). Instead, she claims that “the criminalization of prostitution works to erase the possibility of selling or trading sexual services in any way that is scrutable, visible, and easily perceived” (Shah, 2014: 79), or in other words that perhaps the exploitative and abusive conditions in sex work are produced by its criminalization.

However, the police did not use their position to coerce sex *all* the time. Their job performance required that arrests needed to be made as well. In addition to being mentally hard to deal with, this could be a dangerous situation because as mentioned earlier, in Hawai‘i, a pre-sex change trans person would be placed in the men’s prison. Furthermore, it also gave you a prostitution record that could affect you for the rest of your working life:

I thank God every day for giving me a good, stable job. I got lucky with [company name omitted] but it wasn’t what I really wanted to do. I wanted to work in Travel Industry Management. I mean that is what I first went to school for. Since I was little I imagined myself working at one of the fancy hotels in Waikīkī. They were so glamorous you know. But of course they do background checks. And each time it was so embarrassing. I just kept hoping once they would forget to do the check or maybe have a different policy. I tried at seven different hotels. But no it wasn’t meant for me (Ava-Mahrie, personal interview, Wahiawā, 27 July 2014).

For Ava Mahrie, her earlier career as a sex worker precluded her from getting work in the industry she was educated for. This “begs the question of how people survive when paid work is scant, at best” (Shah, 2014: 78). Instead Ava Mahrie was very grateful for finding legal work because many girls ended up being limited to sex work due to their record for prostitution. What is particularly interesting in her story is that the work she was excluded from was in the hotel and tourism industry — which represent one of the major consumer populations of sex commerce in Hawai‘i. The effect is then that she is permitted to work for the hotels on the black market but not for the hotels officially. Shah states that “police and local merchants together produce street-based sex workers as a population that requires and exceptional degree of police regulation” (2014: 140). In that way, Ava Mahrie as an always already trans sex worker is managed and regulated to a certain class. Shah argues that “the

often great distance between the letter of the law and the practice of its exercise” is “manifested in differential access to the rights of citizenship. Some are more completely apprehended and recognized as citizens than others, the state is working for some and not for others” (Shah, 2014: 141). Shah on a related note, further describes how sex workers inhabit criminality by virtue of their sex workness (2014: 132). If this is true, and we also consider that I often heard participants complain how in Hawai‘i a person who is visibly trans is automatically classified as a prostitute, then a trans person on a public street is a signifier for sex worker, and transness consequently becomes criminal as well.⁸²

So their inability to conform to heteronormativity, automatically made them vulnerable to be harassed and sanctioned by the police. Transness then becomes policeable. And the crime for being trans is not simply to be imprisoned, but to be imprisoned in a men’s prison and in effect have one’s gender legally mandated. As stated earlier, the law is contingent and works to serve those who are citizens, and we have seen already that some bodies, like trans sex worker bodies, because they do not embody heteronormativity and are doing sex work are actually seen as “illegal,” and hence are not fully recognized as citizens.⁸³ This type of policing of heteronorms works to reproduce trans sexual commerce. Under this logic if being trans is always already criminal, then a trans woman might as well choose sex work because it is assumed that she is always already a sex worker.

Moreover, Shah explains “how policing helps to produce sexual commerce in myriad ways” by focusing attention on how “police draw their legitimacy and authority not only from the legal sanction of their office, but also from their particular association with the law as a normative social code” (2014: 130). The police represent the law and in fact go by the appellation, “the law.” As symbols of the law, the police are arms of the state on the street. Next, if we concentrate on the dissonance between “the practices of local police and the aims and intents of the law” by pointing out the incongruity between how “the law provides parameters and deposes authority for policing the street, and the practices that take place under the auspices of law enforcement” (Shah, 2014: 129-30), then we see how both trans sex work and heteronormativity are reproduced. By sanctioning trans sex workers in the ways described in this section, heteronormativity operates as a non-legal and normative dimension

⁸² See Agustin’s discussion about how just being a woman who is standing on the corner with certain characteristics or behavior incriminates her as a prostitute (2007: 114). This was how it was to be a trans person on a corner—just her identity as trans incriminated her.

⁸³ The sex worker identity itself is also heavily policeable. Agustin writes that prostitutes are seen as “pathological, capable of contaminating good citizens and needing to be controlled (2007: 105). Thus the two identities combined, can create an almost exponential effect.

of the law. In all, the “differential and somewhat irregular nature of regulation on the street suggests that police, local merchants, and sex workers all inhabit multiple zones of morality/immorality, legality/illegality, and regulation” (Shah, 2014: 141). These differential normative mechanisms are important for the understanding of the trans-sex worker nexus in Hawai‘i — and for the institutionalization of the heteronormative structure.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE COMPLEXITIES OF PASSING

7.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the months, I heard a lot about what constituted passing and how one achieved passability. Learning the jargon of trans sex workers was an important step in my research. There were many words that were frequently used that although I understand what it means, have no easy or direct translation. One of the first slang words I learned during fieldwork was “fish.” A trans person who was fish appeared as a “certifiable natal female” (Katie, personal interview, Honolulu, 11 June 2014). This legitimacy was *the* goal for almost all of the women I grew to know during fieldwork. The way one came to pass as a genetic female was usually via body modification procedures. In that way, I needed to get accustomed to hearing talk about surgery in the same way that one would discuss dinner plans. Conversations constantly revolved around body modification procedures that had been done and plans for new procedures in the future. As mentioned in the previous chapter, money and work were measured by means of costs for individual surgeries. For the project’s participants, surgery was not a serious matter. Not in the sense that it was not important, because it was one of the most crucial elements of their lives, but because it was not looked upon as dangerous with the possibility of mortal consequences. Anesthesia and cutting human flesh were instead considered just routine stops along the road to womanhood. And this dream of womanhood was one and the same as passing.

Another word that is imperative in understanding passing is the word, “freak.” Unlike the word “fish,” “freak” retains its meaning across cultures. During my fieldwork I repeatedly heard this word used by project participants and also by those speaking about the participants. Merriam-Webster defines a “freak” as “one that is markedly unusual or abnormal: as a person or animal having a physical oddity and appearing in a circus sideshow,” and also as slang for a sexual deviate (Merriam-Webster, 2014). These definitions correspond to the way it was being used during my fieldwork. Some local merchants or members of the communities around the strolls where sex work took place used it as a general label for the trans population. And many of the participants used it to describe how they felt and how others saw them. The trans sex worker was a freak in both ways: for being trans and defying the two-gender system, and for being a sex worker — a sexually deviant freak.

In this chapter, I will generally explore the complexities of passing — specifically looking at (1) the spectrum of definitions of passing, including its inherent assumptions; (2) the impossibility of balancing on the fragile and unstable line dividing passing and freakdom; and (3) whether passing and assimilating into heteronormativity is even possible for a trans person in the first place.

7.1 ATTEMPTING TO DEFINE PASSING

7.1.1 *Aspiring for Hyper-femininity and the Side Effect of Freakdom*

At twenty-one, Katie was five years younger than Riley. Her daily routine was defined by regularity and prudence. Eating only what was necessary to sustain her, she partook in the same two spartan meals every day. First she would eat two scrambled organic free-range eggs with Tabasco and salt, paired with a dark roast coffee. For her second, and final meal of the day, she would eat between one and three organic potatoes (depending on the size), which she preferred to bake in a conventional oven when possible. She would then smash them and season with Tabasco and salt. She would either drink an organic soda, natural herbal energy drink, or a kombucha tea with this meal. About once a week she would treat herself to an organic dark chocolate pudding. In between these two meals, she constantly chewed on gum. The restraint I witnessed was militant. Katie was terrified of gaining weight because extra weight made curves less visible and in her mind surrounded her female gender in ambiguity.

Riley would grow irritated of Katie's habits surrounding food, especially when we ate out at a restaurant and Katie accompanied us but ordered nothing, and instead just watched us eat. Riley would then erupt in a comment about Katie binge eating in secrecy or how hormone usage made it hard to remain thin, and so Katie had to live as a "miserable anorexic." Although Riley ate as much as she wanted, she resorted to liposuction instead of obsessive dieting to regulate her body shape. In addition, Riley described to me once how she would wake up in the middle of night doing "mental transplants." I had no idea what she was referring to, and so she explained,

I keep hoping to find peace but every night I wake up wishing I was born this plain Jane genetic girl with husband and kids. Each day I look in the mirror for hours and measure my body parts and compare and do surgery and transplants in my head imagining what I would look like with another girl's body parts. Like you. I imagine your feet on me. Or your tiny little head. Small hands. Petite

shoulders. (Riley, personal communication, Wahiawā, 29 July 2014).⁸⁴

She talked about how she had a constant worry about her body parts and how sitting and eating at a small table was horribly uncomfortable because the close proximity made it easier for her to be judged. Instead, she avoided intimacy and tried to draw attention to her feminine aspects so that people would not notice her self-perceived masculine ones. But at the same time, I could not help but feel that she was her worst critic — that she overcompensated and was paranoid that every single look or giggle could be interpreted as criticism for her not being woman enough. I understood the history that caused her to be this way, but I also observed how much it disciplined her body.

Amongst my project's participants, receiving body modification procedures that were hyper-feminizing was common. Customers would demand the same look from sex workers as the trans porn stars seen on screen, and the trans sex workers would try to emulate this image and supply the demand. Of all the participants, Doll had received the most silicone injections. The only surgeries she had done were her breasts (three times), and the rest of her shape was accomplished solely through silicone injections. The cartoonish magnification of her hips and backside were further emphasized in her drag show numbers. It was seeing Doll that I first began to think about this particular body norm amongst the participants. I started asking Katie and Riley about it, and they were of the opinion that it was commonplace. Both admitted they would probably never be satisfied with their bodies. Riley was constantly photo shopping her photos — exaggerating her curves, minimizing her waste, making her head and feet tinier, editing herself to a hyper-feminine ideal. Riley told me that she chose to surgically enlarge her butt to the degree that one would know her gender immediately from behind: “the goal was to be sooooo female that there is never any doubt as to whether I am a woman or not” (personal communication, Wahiawā, 2 August 2014). Every time Riley received a look that she interpreted as odd, or heard a snicker from someone in the distance, she assumed that she was being recognized as trans. To avoid this unwanted conception, she opted for an excessive femininity. Ironically, this hyper-femininity amongst some of the participants almost became the smoking gun that would signify to others their transness. Riley and Katie were not at all blind to this and even discussed it with me, but nonetheless feared that they would never look feminine enough, and hence the aspiration for hyper-femininity and extreme body consciousness.

⁸⁴ “Plain Jane” is an expression for a girl who is average and ordinary looking.

According to Butler, gender is an “act,” that “is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (2006: 200). Butler’s approach highlights the complexities of passing: how aspiring for and achieving this hyper-femininity could in effect become the evidence that heteronormative society uses to incriminate the trans woman. The womaness reveals the “tranny freak,” as it were. This paradox demonstrates that there is no original “natural” woman. Instead, hegemonic gender norms are imitations of their own idealizations, as Riley and Katie’s stories clearly demonstrate, but which of course applies to any heteronormative expression.

7.1.2 *A Spectrum of Definitions*

There exists no clear boundary dividing successful passing and freakdom; one did not preclude the other. Instead, passing was complicated, and its definition was fluid. For Riley and the majority of the working girls, it often meant going unnoticed as a trans person, but noticed as an attractive female. Or at times it meant something even more complex: “Half of the time I couldn’t care less if people know the ‘T.’ So long as I get that look. That look that says who gives if she’s a man cause she’s pulling it. Fake it to you make it girl!” (Riley, personal communication, Wahiawā, 2 August 2014). Here Riley says that it does not bother her if people know the “T,” or know that she is trans. More importantly is the acknowledgment that despite being a “man”, she is “pulling it” — in this instance meaning that she has more than succeeded in coming across as an attractive female.

Katie’s approach was polar opposite to Riley’s. Passing meant for her to simply go unnoticed. It meant presenting herself as a genetic female, “living stealth” and about never being “clocked” or “read.”⁸⁵ Katie did not want any attention, and instead was having difficulty coping with the attention that being a “freak” generated for her. Katie spoke to me about the path to freakdom — of how her pre-adolescent life was full of fond memories, describing it as the “happiest I have ever been” (Katie, personal interview, Waikīkī, 17 June 2014). As a child she was allowed to play with Barbie dolls and was often mistaken for a girl. There was never any problem about who she was. But when she entered puberty, her gender variance became an issue: “I was a male bodied biological male who was expressing himself in an overtly feminine way, so bam [snaps fingers] ‘you a freak!’ Oh bam ‘you *māhū!*’” (Katie, personal interview, Waikīkī, 17 June 2014). As Katie left the freedoms

⁸⁵ To be “clocked” or “read” was to be recognized as trans.

afforded by childhood, hormones kicked in and her male gender became more obvious, her ambiguity was no longer okay. Because she didn't clearly conform to one of the two gender binary norms, she had been transformed to a freak. Mixing of the two genders was considered unnatural and inhuman. Katie told me that her mother, who had once served as her Barbie purveyor, therefore began to tell her that she was going to go to hell.

Over the years, Katie had begun to internalize this image of herself as a freak. She used negative words like “disgusting” and “gross” to describe elements of herself and referred to herself as a freak on multiple occasions:

Now imagine me 6'4" TS in heels walking around like [imitating carnival music sounds] didididididi, walking the strip [Waikīkī main road] over and over, going in circles until I pull a date. Like all by myself. Sideshow freak. And all people like [imitating gawking passerbys] with me and all my theater makeup on. God I was so ghetto (Katie, personal communication, Waikīkī, 14 July 2014).

In this description, not only was Katie a prostitute (a sexual deviant freak), but she was also because of her height,⁸⁶ without a doubt, trans (a freak of nature). She even described herself by dictionary definition. Her prominent place of work put her on conspicuous display — a “side-show freak” on exhibit for the tourists and soldiers of Waikīkī. In her narration to me it was clear that she saw herself as, and maybe even became, the performing circus spectacle she was perceived as.

Katie had described her time as a street sex worker to me because the Katie that I got to know during fieldwork had given up working the streets and was trying her best to survive working as a salesperson, earning just a bit over minimum wage, at an upper scale clothing retail chain in a premier shopping mall. After half a year with the company and repeated vocalizations about being available for more hours or on-call work, she was only getting an average of ten hours of work a week, and so had to supplement her income with occasional dates with regulars. As already mentioned, Katie wanted more than anything to blend into the crowd. One of Katie's best friends, Riley, even accused Katie of limiting their interaction in public spaces because Riley was often dressed in extremely revealing and sexually flamboyant clothing. Katie rationalized that the combination of Riley's dress with their suspect transness (both were quite tall) would result in their “T's being clocked.”⁸⁷ She mentioned more than once to me that Riley's type of everyday dress placed Riley in a

⁸⁶ In Hawai'i one's height is usually a top signifier of one's gender as most genetic women in Hawai'i are very petite in size, due to Asian ancestry being the racial majority in the state.

⁸⁷ Meaning again that they would be recognized as trans.

performance or “center-stage circus act” (Katie, personal communication, Waikīkī, 14 July 2014), very similar to the earlier narration Katie described of herself — the image she was trying to escape.

Riley was fully aware of Katie’s opinions about her dress and behavior, and had a different perspective entirely:

I will always dress how I want. You know how much old man vienna sausage⁸⁸ I had to lick for this? [Gesturing towards her body] I’m not gonna hide me just so I don’t offend anyone. Katie wants to disappear into nothingness. But in the end it is gonna be way worse for her. Because one day she is gonna get clocked and it is gonna make her world fall apart. She can’t hide forever. Now for me, I figure you treat me like a freak then I’m gonna act like a fucking freak (Riley, personal communication, Kailua-Kona, 5 July 2014).

Riley was not always so confident about embodying the role of the freak, however, as she feigns in her narrative. My impression was that she longed to pass nearly as much as Katie, but she did have different ideas about what constituted passing. Between the lines of Riley’s commentaries that normally came across as courageous and spirited, one could see that life as a trans person was not always as easy as she painted it. Most days, Riley valued acknowledgment from men, via attention, over passing as an average girl, but she admitted that passing afforded her respite:

When you make that decision and start transitioning, it is torture. Mental anguish. And that is because you have to deal with society. You get so depressed. Everyone puts you down. Society says you aren’t supposed to be that way. You can’t be that way. It makes you cuckoo [giggles as pointing her finger to her temple, sticking out her tongue slightly, and crossing her eyes] . . . Now it’s better. I mean I still have people coming for me but I took the initiative [gesturing towards her body] and curves don’t lie mary! (Riley, personal interview, Wahiawā, 23 July 2014).⁸⁹

Riley explains how in the beginning when she was not passing to the same degree, society was quick to judge and punish her. Riley understands that conforming to heteronormative standards decreased the likelihood of daily societal expressions of hate and disgust. But

⁸⁸ Vienna sausage is a local canned meat product. Each can has about 6 two-inch long sausages. Vienna sausage was a reference to an old man’s penis because the sausages tend to shrivel and wrinkle when cooked.

⁸⁹ “To come for” a person, is to publicly disclose that they are trans or to point out an unattractive characteristic.

most interesting in Riley's narrative is that she seems to grasp the idea that "the parody is of the very notion of an original" (Butler, 2006: 188):

[P]arodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself (Butler, 2006: 188).

Although Riley's unapologetic decision to "act like a freak" by utilizing extremely revealing clothing serves to perpetuate patriarchal heteronorms, it simultaneously exposes her to passerbys who recognize her transness due to the very fact that she is wearing such clothing with an obviously manufactured body. By doing this you see how her feminine performance, because of the fact that it is so flawless, reveals her and the female gender to be "derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic — a failed copy, as it were" (Butler, 2006: 200).

Not only did Katie and Riley's definitions of passing differ, but so did their viewpoints on freakdom's relationship to passing. For Riley, being a freak was an element of her identity as trans, and she understood that she couldn't escape it. For Katie, freakdom and passing were antithetical; there was no room for the freak in her definition of passing. Chasity,⁹⁰ for her part, was in agreement with Riley in regards to her definition of passing — in that it meant to go unnoticed as a man, but noticed as an attractive woman. For Chasity, however, the freak was both a side effect and a creation of society, and something that she hoped to eventually be free from. She pointed out to me that she felt that she was considered a freak both because of her occupation and the "perverted" acts she was required to do as a sex worker, but also because she was born anatomically a male, yet felt compelled to become a woman.

They label us and be like you are a freak or a monster or a sick fuck because we have to do the things that we have to do but you can't judge us because we are put into this situation for a reason because no one else wants to help us. They don't give a fuck about us. Being a transgender is basically like the worst thing in

⁹⁰ Moreover, in hindsight I see how coming from a society that believes very much in the importance of names, even Chasity's choice of the pseudonym Chasity for this project was interesting in itself. The name Chasity stems from the word chastity, which describes "the quality or state of being chaste" or in other words pure or a person whom abstains from sex (Merriam Webster). This choice of name was intentional, broadcasting to those hearing her story that she is the author of her own life and can choose to be Chasity, instead of the freak.

society's eyes to be. So they say we deserve it All we want is a normal life. But everyone else thinks we shouldn't have that and that we are weird and different and not normal (Chasity, personal interview, Waikīkī, 2 June 2014).

Chasity had given a lot of thought to what she wanted to say before her interview. She took control of her story for nearly three hours. Later, she repeatedly asked who would get to hear her story. This desire to be heard could be seen as a plea to the public and the moment when she could personally clarify how it was to live her life as a Hawaiian trans sex worker. Plummer describes this: “for many . . . who feel their sexual lives have become a source of suffering and anguish, the telling of a story is literally a ‘coming to terms.’ It is sensed as a necessary way of dealing with a sexual and gendered life” (1995: 34). Moreover, she told me her life story in a very lineal way, beginning with her childhood, to her teenage years, and her present life, and even ended with her plans for the future. Her storytelling helped to “lay down routes to a coherent past, mark off boundaries and contrasts in the present, and provide both a channel and a shelter for the future” (Plummer, 1995: 172). By providing me with her history, she could lay out her guide for her future, and in her future she did not want to live in a world where she played the role of the freak.

For the ladies working the streets of Honolulu, being “fish” and passing, no matter their personal definition, then symbolized the ultimate success. It was proof that you were woman enough, but it was also a social convenience. It allowed them to be treated normal, like “natural” females, and to avoid harassment — at least to a certain extent. For those in Riley’s camp, it was a thin line to navigate, ensuring that they passed enough to avoid harassment, yet still received male attention for their feminine beauty. But it was equally as challenging for those in Katie’s camp, where passing was almost the same as trying to become invisible. Both of these versions of passing depended on the same solution — loyal conformance to the feminine norm, whether that was achieved through cutting flesh, the illegal injection of silicone, or the communion of hormones. This conformance must be drastic because heteronormativity allows for only two genders — male and female. Hunnie summarizes it: “I got two choices, I gotta be either male or female. So fuck yeah if I gotta choose I gonna choose one hundred percent *woman!*” (Hunnie, personal communication, Honolulu, 25 July 2014).

7.1.3 *Other Viewpoints on Passing*

There were many in the general trans community who had a complicated relationship with passing. Some were opposed to passing and instead promoted choosing visibility, which I will return to shortly. But for many others, it was not that they chose not to pass, but that passing was not an option because the needed surgery was not available to them. And for those that transitioned later in life, passing was not as easy without the benefit of early use of hormones. Many of the participants boasted about the passability and high level of “fishiness” regarding local trans women in Hawai‘i, especially when compared to *haole* (white) trans women. On the other side, were the college educated, professional white trans women who lived in Hawai‘i, like Tracy Ahn here:

With someone who doesn't necessarily pass, it takes a bit more fortitude and a bit more guts. One of the ironies in our transgender community is that we all have a tendency to look up to the people who are prettier. There's very much a pecking order . . . We have our pageants, and we really admire people who pass But if we think about it, the real heroes in our community are the people who don't pass and can't pass (quoted in Matzner, 2001: 194).

Further into her narrative, Tracy Ahn discusses the local (as opposed to white) trans women in Hawai‘i and describes their transition: “people see them as women quick quick quick [snaps fingers], like that, and there's not an issue of them being transgendered, so their transition is easy” (quoted in Matzner, 2001: 194). However, the histories I gathered and the everyday instances I witnessed among local trans women showed anything but an easy time. Moreover, not all local women were the petite Asian type that Tracy implicitly describes. At least half of the participants, including Riley and Katie, did not fit this stereotype.

It was clear to me how this sort of narrative was divisive and fostered competition and antagonism, performing major tasks in “establishing contested territories and clarifying boundaries” (Plummer, 1995: 178), and marking out identities and differences. Both of Tracy Ahn's narratives — the first that placed local trans women who passed on an aesthetic pedestal above their white counterparts and the second that privileged the “real heroes” who do not pass — as well as the stereotypes that the participants had about white trans women, (re)produce social divisions. They police bodies and construct a hierarchy that values certain bodies over others. Furthermore, both perpetuate the assumption that natural genders exist, and that the category of woman is attainable.

Which brings me to some of the inherent assumptions of passing that were widespread amongst the participants and many in the trans community in Hawai'i. These assumptions are important in understanding trans subjectivity. The concept of passing assumes that there exists a division between (biological) sex and (social) gender, and that gender normally follows from sex, and that one is either born biologically male or female. Many of the participants described the existence of their inner women that had always already been a natural part of their identity. This is what they considered their gender. Their physical body did not correspond to their gender, and thus is viewed as the wrong body. This is their sex. In a way, gender represented their internal characteristics and sex represented their exterior characteristics. The goal of passing is then to align their sex with their gender via body modification techniques. One is not deemed a "real" woman until one has the bodily characteristics of a woman. Only after these two entities are aligned, is one a "real" woman. The trans identity that I encountered was based on these assumptions, and because passing was an integral part of this identity, these assumptions applied to passing as well, and consequently the participants did not feel like passing was a choice.

But as I mentioned earlier and said I would return to, there were some in the general trans community who promoted choosing visibility instead of passing. During a few conversations with participants, I brought up the idea of trans women who were living a life of visibility. I explained how I had read a variety of literature calling for trans people to be "open" and "truthful" about their identities and how this could provide for a more "authentic" self (*see generally* "Transgender Visibility: A Guide to Being You," Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2014). According to some of these trans activists, following Sandy Stone's (2006) lead in her breakthrough essay, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," the way to accomplish this is by placing less emphasis on passing or even foregoing it altogether. Stone's manifesto was rooted in an important theoretical point made by Feinberg who stated that "[t]ransgendered women and men have always been here It is passing that's historically new" (2006: 207). Stone took Feinberg's idea of passing equating to hiding, and revolutionized it. Stone "called upon transsexuals to critically refigure the notion of authenticity by abandoning the practice of passing as non transsexual (and therefore "real") men and women," comparing them to the gays and lesbians a generation earlier who "had been called to come out of their self-protective but ultimately suffocating closets" (Stryker discussing Stone, 2006: 4). Stone argued that "[t]ranssexuals who pass seem able to ignore the fact that by creating totalized, monistic identities . . . they

have foreclosed the possibility of authentic relationships. Under the principle of passing, denying the destabilizing power of being ‘read,’ relationships begin as lies” (2006: 232).

The phrase or verb “to pass,” when used in this particular way, means “to pass for” or “to pass as.” When trans persons pass, they are then “passing for/or as a woman.” This in itself assumes that the trans woman is passing as something she is actually not. According to Stone (2006), she is not real, and is in fact false, and passing has the effect of surrounding transgenderism in deceit and artifice. Interestingly, though, Stone’s theory is more similar to the actual practice of the project’s participants than it initially appears. In the same way that both the white professionals and the Hawaiian sex workers’ narratives were both based on the assumption of the existence of legitimate genders, so seems Stone’s theory. Gressgård writes that although Stone “provides a compelling deconstruction of monistic gender identities and their foundational assumptions, she nevertheless seems to perpetuate the modern idea of ‘integrity’ or ‘wholeness’” (2010: 545). This sort of argumentation presupposes that some part of gender is prediscursive or natural; that there is an authentic gendered self (Butler, 2011: xx), which is related to the same account of subjectivity that is the basis of the problematic identity formation for the project’s participants: that there is an inner gender truth; that they are trying to match their outside with their inside, and — concomitantly — sex with gender.

7.2 AN IMPOSSIBLE BALANCING ACT: WALKING THE LINE BETWEEN PASSING AND FREAKDOM

7.2.1 *Practical Functions and Impractical Consequences*

Contrary to Stone, Plummer explains that keeping a secret can have practical and important functions:

Sometimes there is a suggestion that all secrecy is negative and that all secrets should indeed eventually be brought out into the open [p]ersonally and socially, secrets can perform vital functions: secrecy may create necessary social boundaries and personal autonomy. They may help build identities, protect us from dangers (1995: 56-57).

The participants of this project, as trans women of color born into poverty, and some on the verge of homelessness, physical appearance became of utmost importance because it purports to put them on equal footing with others in the heteronormative binary and, to a certain

degree, protect them from dangers (although as we shall see in due course, all too successful passing could also be dangerous).

Another practical function of passing was the fact that it was required by the medical industry. Passing was a medical necessity for those who wanted to get a sex change: “You gotta pass mary. There’s no ifs ands or buts about it. How you think you get your letter? Your fairy god mother?” (Brianna, personal interview, Honolulu, 22 June 2014). In order to get a SRS, Brianna will need to prove that she is committed to full-time living as a female. She will have to be evaluated by a physician or psychiatrist who will determine if she is demonstrating a strong enough wish to pass as a woman. Of course this desire often is measured through passability (Spade, 2006: 322). Plummer, too, notes that a SRS is dependent on telling the “right” story (*see* 1995: 33). The right story is more than about the words that come out of your mouth, it is also about the story that you present with your appearance. Plummer brings it even one step further, claiming that “[a]t its most extreme, it is a ‘con game’ — learning the best story to fit the part” because “it is often only by incorporating the ‘textbook accounts’ into their life that they can become eligible for transsexual surgery” (1995: 42). For many, a SRS promised to solve their dilemma of freakdom — the genitalia that they felt made them a freak.

However, as we discussed earlier, this was not as clear-cut as many would have wished. For those like Katie, with a rather strict definition of passing, the process was a constant, exhausting, engagement. There is no finish line, where a trans person can say, “Yay, I’ve passed!” Detection is a never-ending possibility one has to live with and sometimes resulted in social anxiety. Obsession over how passable one was could dictate who they saw that day, or whether or not they would even leave their house. Often Katie would decide to not go out because she did not feel passable enough at that particular moment. The logic was that only when one appeared as an undeniable woman would society replace hostility with acceptance. Katie explained,

[y]ou gotta think of course that we want extensive cosmetic surgery because we are hated for our bodies. We are hated for what we were born with. What we have between our legs is not okay. We are told so by women and men. By society. On a daily basis. So why wouldn’t we want extensive cosmetic surgery to make ourselves over to a more acceptable societal ideal of what a female is? (Katie, personal interview, Honolulu, 28 June 2014).

Katie went on to show me a few YouTube videos showing clips from prime time talk show

hosts interviewing Laverne Cox. The loathsome comments on each video were astounding. It was evident that trans people are *hated* for who they are, for being different. For the commentators, and others with strong opinions against trans people, trans persons are believed to be committing the “epistemological sin of perpetuating falsehoods” (Stryker, 2006: 9). By choosing to appear as women, they “problematize the assumed correlation of a particular biological sex with a particular social gender,” making “false representations of an underlying material truth, through the willful distortion of surface appearance” (Stryker, 2006: 9). Katie therefore was of the opinion that in order to not be hated, and avoid this antagonism, one must look a certain way; one must pass undetected as a “natural born female.”

But no matter how much she wanted to believe that this fantasy could work, even she would admit that it was not a guarantee. It was in fact a gamble. Katie was a “mother” to Jessica and was so proud of how naturally “fish” Jessica was without any surgeries. Despite this, one evening Jessica, in tears and close to defeat, walked up to me and said:

I can't be out in public anymore with people looking at me like a freak. Why? For what? I don't understand why they have to do it. I was walking with a date to his car and he knew the “T” but anyway these guys drove by slowly and yelled ‘Oh she has a bigger dick than you!’ It was so hurtful. There is never a night where I don't get clocked. There is always somebody who has to say something. It confuses me like why the fuck do they have to . . . I did nothing to them. Why are they throwing so much emotion to me when I did nothing to those bitches. I am so confused. I mean I keep to myself. I don't act a fool like the other girls. I'm so low key and respectful and I don't even look at them (Jessica, personal communication, Honolulu, 28 June 2014).⁹¹

Even Riley, who usually strives to be the resilient and witty storyteller, showed her vulnerable side early one morning. Riley typically dated online, but after spending the night working on the street corner, she walked through the door, exclaiming, “I don't know how anyone can survive this and want to live another day!” The night prior a man pointed at her, jeering and screaming, “that's a dude!” while his friends laughed him on. She told me that she even chose to walk the back road home after that, despite its lack of lighting and seedy

⁹¹ Although I have defined these terms previously I will do it again for the sake of convenience. (1) “To know the ‘T’” is to know that someone is transsexual. (2) “To be clocked” also means that someone recognizes you as transsexual. However, it often is a bit more negative in meaning, and can mean a sort of forced disclosure that one is transsexual. Which is what Jessica means here.

feel. She purposely chose to increase her risk of becoming a victim of assault, because then she could avoid walking the main road and the possibility of people “coming” for her.⁹² In addition, Riley generally preferred to escort via online services because it gave her the ability to have some control and filter her dates via the internet, which afforded her the opportunity of not having to go out in public and spend the hours every night as a public spectacle, waiting for drunk men to “clock” her. And although it saved her from more instances of public harassment, it didn’t shield her from it, as men would still say comments about her in the privacy of her room. It was as if because they paid her, they had the right to ostracize her. But even more significantly, by seeing these men in private instead of servicing them on the street (behind a bush, a wall, an electrical generator), she increased her risk of assault, despite sheltering her from the public gaze.

7.2.2 Instances of Destabilizing Heteronormativity

A week after Riley walked into the apartment verbalizing her frustrations about people publicly harassing her, I brought up the subject again. She had clearly given it some thought, and provided me with this observation:

When I have face on and hair done, on point you know, and booty for days, all my assets on display, when my beauty is undeniable, full-blown fish you know, now that is when the haters show up, everyone and their mammas start coming for me (Riley, personal communication, Kailua-Kona, 5 July 2014).⁹³

It is when she is at her best, when she appears most female, that she receives the most negative attention. The embodiment of feminine perfection somehow strangely transported one back into the zone of the freak. Previously, I also quoted Jessica’s experience with harassment and noted that she was renown as being naturally “fish.” Jessica described the harassment as “emotion” being thrown at her.

Riley had similar negative experiences with passing. Her mantra was that “if I flaunt my obvious feminine aspects, then people don’t pay attention to my masculine ones. Work those tits and ass!” (Riley, personal communication, Wahiawā, 2 August 2014). But it did not always work out as planned:

⁹² As defined earlier, “coming for” a person, means to publicly disclose their trans identity, or another way to say that people are harassing you because you are trans.

⁹³ (1) “On point” is slang for flawless or perfect. (2) “Booty for days” here means that her buttocks looked great (plump) in her outfit. (3) “Full-blown fish” means that she looks exactly like an anatomical female. (4) A “hater” is a person who hates on you or is jealous of you. (5) “Everyone and their mammas” is just an expression that means everyone.

I went to my BFF's going away party. It was at another friend's parents' place because they were loaded and liked to host parties. Anyway, I didn't really want to go because I was the only TS and sometimes those sorts of events get uncomfortable but of course I had to go because we had been friends like forever. And it turned out to be a nightmare. I had people I barely know coming up to me and asking if the men I sleep with are gay and if I fucked them. But the worse was when the mother of my friend came up to me and pulled my hair when her husband was talking with me. Can you believe that shit?! I never pretend to be a woman, I am so open and play off everything so not to make a scene but she was trying to do a wig check. My hair is the one thing on me that is 100% real. She tried to laugh it off and say it was a joke but that is no joke. I just wanted to fall down and cry. I felt like a freak standing there and no one said or did anything (personal communication via FaceTime, 30 May 2015).⁹⁴

Could it be that Riley's performance was so successful that her friend's mother attempted to "wig-check" her in an effort to highlight the boundaries between abject and subject?⁹⁵ Butler (2011: xiii) explains that the exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed require the production of a domain of abject beings. These abject beings "reside" in an unlivable or uninhabitable zone, and they are necessary in order to demarcate the domain of the subject. According to Butler (2009: 150), "a subject only becomes discrete through excluding other possible subjects." So, maybe the act of the woman pulling Riley's hair in the story was an attempt to reinforce her own identity as subject. Perhaps, in order to cement her identity as a "natural" or "real" woman, she had to eliminate Riley as a possible subject.

Although this sort of psychological speculation into the unconscious motivations of this woman is beyond the scope of this analysis, I can at least say that Riley's performance provoked an emotional response, similar to the man Jessica described earlier who taunted her when she was with a client. And these emotional responses might indicate that the trans gender performances highlight the fictive nature of naturalized gender. I will now move on to describe what was a common experience for the project's participants:

You heard dat twink ah? Trying foa act. Try watch now. Two hours tops he'll be back. Tink we don't know. But always da same story. Jus' like grade school.

⁹⁴ (1) "BFF" is short for best friend forever. (2) To be "loaded" in this instance is to be wealthy.

⁹⁵ But what does it mean that the woman's attempt to demonstrate Riley's failure as a woman by exposing a wig failed, because Riley's hair was natural?

First call you names an den da fucka come back an beeeegggg for dis [grabbing her genitals] (Brianna, personal communication, Waikīkī, 20 June 2014).⁹⁶

I heard a version of this “He’ll be back” soliloquy more times than I could count during my fieldwork. Here Briana refers to a man (whom she pejoratively calls a “twink”⁹⁷, which implies that he is a man who pretends to be straight but actually possesses homosexual or transsexual desires) who insulted her. He was “trying foa act” or trying to strut his masculine power. Brianna compares it to elementary school when a boy that likes you teases you. She ends by saying he will “beg for this” and grabbing her genitals, emphasizing that this same man will return and solicit sex from her because of the trans factor that he earlier spoke out against.

I witnessed this bizarre sort of sexual ritual on many occasions. It was just as Brianna said. These men would walk by in a group of friends, and usually one man would obnoxiously and overtly react in an exaggerated public display of disgust to the trans factor. He would usually yell a couple of slurs, being sure to be loud and noticeable to all around. Then a couple hours later, he would return, usually a bit intoxicated, always without his friends, and ask for a date. It is possible that their prior vocal attacks served as a public confirmation of their heteronormality and manhood in front of their friends, because their desire for something “other” (than a woman) threatens the stability of their heteronormative ideology. The heteronorms, and perhaps consequently the foundations of identities, are being disturbed in the encounters with trans women, perhaps even more so when desire is involved. In this way, the trans body represents embodied confusion — the sex/gender confusion that they are accused of instantiating.

7.2.3 *The Paradox of All Too Successful Passing*

One reason that passing was so complex was its inherent contradictions. Earlier I discussed how appearing too feminine could have the effect of revealing that one was trans. A related aspect was the fact that passing was a double-edged sword; the joys experienced from passing were so entangled with the implicit dangers. These risks were part and parcel to passing. Because like I mentioned earlier, not only could being too good at passing make one a victim of harassment, it also had the potential to be dangerous. Some clientele sought out

⁹⁶ Full translation of quotation: “Did you hear that ‘twink?’ Trying to be tough. Wait a bit and see. In two hours he will be back. He thinks we don’t know but we know. It is always the same story. Just like in elementary school. They tease you because they like you.”

⁹⁷ The slang “twink” is in reference to the dessert twinkie that has a general phallic like shape, is beige/yellow colored, and is filled with white cream.

the participants because of their trans element, but for a large part of the customer base, this element was unknown. Instead, these customers were looking for something else completely: an anatomical female, and that ‘disturbance’ could quickly turn fatal:

Even now, I can feel his hands on my neck sometimes when I close my eyes. Feel the *mana* leaving me. Bless Hunnie Girl for popping up. I would have been *make* mary if she never come around that corner. Most dates know already. And I was just gonna blow him so sometimes they don’t wanna know. Then some prick walked by and called me a man and then you could see in his eyes [the date] right then when he looked at me that it was over (Lana, personal interview, Waikīkī, 1 August 2014).⁹⁸

In this instance, when one bypasser deciding to ostracize her Tiana’s life was threatened. She described her *mana* or life force leaving her, and said that if her friend did not show up, she would have been *make* — meaning she would have been dead. We could also invert this logic and ask if it was in fact her all *too* successful passing that almost killed her. The paradox is then that if your performance is too real, and you successfully “trick” someone, it could have the possibility of leading you to your deathbed. It was speculated in *Paris Is Burning* that this was what led to Venus’ murder, and this was often the speculation amongst participants when a fellow sex worker died a mysterious death, like the death of Khloe chronicled in chapter five. According to Gressgård, “cross-dressing never fails as dramatically as when it fully succeeds. ...All too successful cross-dressing evokes horror [,,] because it effaces all traces of incongruity between the posing subject and the attire it has chosen to appropriate” (2010: 551, in reference to Bronfen).

Although the anatomically female sex workers kept a different stroll, tourists visiting Hawai‘i couldn’t always know where was what, nor could newly stationed soldiers:

They usually know. But not all do. And sometimes it is easier to lie. To pretend. Be that girl they want. Be Cinderella. Because the money is right there you know. And they just want a service. But yeah it can be scary I guess. Especially when they wanna start muff diving. But we have our tricks to deal with that. And we all have rules about going to a hotel room alone with a guy and things like that. But no one ever follows it all the time. There have been a couple girls who were killed here. You know. But then it’s forgotten. It is easier to not to think of it. Which is

⁹⁸ *Mana* and *make* are Hawaiian words that are defined in the text. “To blow” someone is to perform oral sex.

why I guess most of us are on something. And anyway we are all injected full of poison anyway, so you know, we aren't meant to live long lives. That is just how it is. (Tiana, personal interview, Waikīkī, 25 July 2014).⁹⁹

Most of the participants had suffered at least one violent episode at the hands of a customer. In addition, every single participant had been raped and many had survived rape more than once.¹⁰⁰ Many took the risk because they thought they would only be giving oral sex, but things do not always go as planned, as Tiana illustrates above, pointing out that sometimes, sporadically, a date may want to give oral sex instead or receive oral sex. This is okay if they know the “T”, but if they don't, and the excuse of having your period does not work, then the chances for violence increase exponentially. Those who are “tricked”, those who commit violence against trans people, might excuse their violent behavior by claiming they have been unjustly deceived by a mismatch between the other's gender and genitals (Stryker, 2006: 10). The possibility of this occurring is something that understandably none of the participants wanted to talk about in depth, but Lana's earlier recollection of how her date reacted by strangling her when he found out she was not all he believed her to be was uncomfortably commonplace. In a society that has clear and strong gender distinctions, the momentary confusion might shatter the foundation of everything. Butler writes that the “loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (2006: 200). Hence, society is afraid of immutable categories and structures suddenly becoming mutable and unpredictable.

These violent instances did not only apply to girls doing sex work, however. A couple of girls also told me the story of Emiko. Although I met her twice, I was never able to have a private talk with her, so her story is not a first-person account. Emiko worked as a trolley driver part time, and there was this guy who kept hitting on her one week. She apparently enjoyed the attention and flirted with him, but somehow or another, he learned that she was trans. So, one night when she was walking home after being done with a shift, he showed up behind her with three friends, and they gang raped her. Clearly, trans persons in general, not only trans sex worker, are “monstrous by reason of their embodied inversion

⁹⁹ “Muff diving” means cunnilingus. An example of a trick that she is referring to in this passage, would be claiming that she was menstruating.

¹⁰⁰ I am not by any means (by making this distinction) calling rape non violent, I just differentiated here for the terms of convenience between physical assaults (that were not sexual in nature) and sexual assaults. Though, due to the nature of their job one could argue that all physical assaults were sexual in nature, or vice versa, that all sexual assaults are physical in nature.

of dominant gender identity and, concomitantly, their embodied demonstration of the contradiction in normative subjectivity” (Gressgård, 2010: 551). Furthermore, “[i]n so far as gender is linked to the category of humanness, improper gender tends to become allied with inhumanity” (Gressgård, 2010: 550) and consequently a seemingly inhuman thing is easier to injure without guilt or moral rationalization because “it is living but not a life” (Butler, 2009: 8), which returns us back to what bodies matter, and what bodies are disposable.

Every participant I spoke to believed she would not live to old age. If not because of violence, then because of a body modification complication (and the statistics were in agreement (*see* Odo & Hawelu, 2001)). This belief in an early death probably led them to take more risks, not just in regards to body modification procedures like illegal silicone injections and continued self-medication of hormones, despite liver tests showing impending failure, but also in regards to high risk sex — like being alone in a private room, having unprotected sex, and misrepresenting their genitalia. But every participant I spoke to, without a second guess, said all the dangers were worth it, even when to outsiders it seems that the risks so disproportionately outweigh the actual real benefits.

7.3 CRUEL OPTIMISM AND THE MYTH OF PASSING

The project’s participants all yearned to be women, in the way that they understood it – in the heteronormative sense. This desire to be a “full” woman controlled most aspects of their lives. The dilemma was that this quest for womanhood, in the end, was an obstacle to their flourishing and could, as we have seen, even be life-threatening. Berlant refers to this paradox as cruel optimism, explaining that “optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving” (Berlant, 2011: 2). I began the analytical part of my thesis by discussing the variety of narratives that both encompassed and permeated the trans community in Hawai‘i. The cultural myths of romantic love (like the *Pretty Woman* myth) and upward mobility (like the *American Dream* myth) are two examples of cruel optimism in work. An even greater and more omnipresent narrative that demonstrates cruel optimism is the fantasy of passing itself. In this chapter, we saw how passing was complicated business. The ending scene in their fairy tale was that moment when they were finally accepted, fitting into society, and passing for always. What makes this fairy tale cruel is that it provides them hope and gives them possibility, but in reality it *is* this impossible dream that is the problem in the first place. I will get back to this idea in a

moment, but before I continue I would like to discuss the prevailing mainstream trans rights propaganda that is encapsulated in the “born in the wrong body” trope.

In Norway, TV2 premiered a prime time television series in 2014 called *Født i feil kropp*¹⁰¹ (translated to “Born in the wrong body”). In addition, there was a series of major newspaper articles utilizing this phrase. The head of the transgender treatment center in Oslo¹⁰² declared that “born in the wrong body” should be the official label for transgendered people in Norway (Gaarder, 2014). Moreover, the treatment center puts forward the motto that everyone has the right to the *right* gender (“rett till rett kjønn”). This same ideology can be found in Hawai‘i and throughout the US, propagated both by trans rights organizations and popular media. Because this is the mainstream rhetoric utilized in regards to trans rights, it allows society to simultaneously filter trans bodies through a normalizing system via medical and psychological treatment, and maintain heteronormativity. As pointed out earlier in this chapter by reference to Stone (2006), being born in the *wrong* body implies both that trans people are mistakes (i.e., further promoting the freak of nature mentality), and that genders are real and natural, and come in two — that there is a *right* body. Accordingly, one must align one’s inner and outer so that the inner gender and the outer body are in order — coherent. The use of this ideology and the constant media attention on trans women’s bodies, not only reinforces the dehumanization of trans women and their systematic othering as freaks, but also promotes a fairy tale ending to some members of the trans audience, like my project’s participants, that may in their wishful thinking misinterpret glorified media attention as acceptance.

Which brings us full circle to my first empirical chapter discussing the popular trans narrative of Janet Mock. Mock has become a spokesperson for this fairy tale ending; her testimony of her “path to womanhood” and “love” (see the cover of the book) sells this dream. Her physical embodiment of this picture perfect female heteronorm and her accompanying romantic, professional, and social successes can be translated for many as symbolizing acceptance. However, this story is a perfect example of the cruel optimism I discuss at the beginning of this section. Whether the dream being chased is becoming a woman via SRS, or passing as an anatomical female, full assimilation into heteronormativity can never be a reality — the dream can never come true. But cruel optimism is not just about having a dream that is detrimental. It also serves a fantasy function: it “enable[s] a concept of the later to suspend questions about the cruelty of the now” (Berlant, 2011: 28). Berlant

¹⁰¹ First broadcast on TV2 in the fall of 2014.

¹⁰² I am referring to the Harry Benjamin Resource Center in Oslo, Norway.

notes that “optimism involves thinking that in exchange one can achieve recognition” (2011: 43), and this dream of recognition is the very problem (2011: 49). The project’s participants find themselves “bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (Berlant, 2011: 2). The scene of becoming accepted as a woman, accompanied by all its promises, binds them to their lifestyle; and the lifestyle to the scene. But what makes this optimism so cruel is that “the loss of the promising object/scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything” (Berlant, 2011: 24). Even though it’s presence threatens their well-being and even their existence, “the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant, 2011: 24). The scene of transformation into a full-fledged accepted woman “makes life bearable” (Berlant, 2011: 14). The identities that have been building up since they were children, of the little girl stuck in the body of a boy, the dream that they could align their gender with their body — their entire world picture — would be broken down without this belief in a fairy tale ending. This optimism is perhaps cruel, but as Hawaiian trans sex workers living in a heteronormative world, it is also a survival mechanism.

AN AFTERWORD

The title of this thesis is in reference to the paper's epigraph quoting American writer, Joan Didion, when she wrote, "[w]e tell ourselves stories in order to live" The voices I heard and the narratives I witnessed demonstrated this truth. We all, constantly, tell ourselves stories in order to get by, and to keep going. Sometimes others hear these stories as well, but we tell them mainly *for* (as a benefit to) ourselves — so that we can survive. Without stories, who are you? Our lives are in fact made up of stories; our identities constituted on stories. Without stories, you have no proof that you exist; you have no history to pass on, and no future to look towards, however fatalistic that future might be.

I consciously decided to not write a conclusion because there can be no conclusion. I would have loved to end with a proclamation of hope, but that would just be another instance of cruel optimism. That is not to say that life is a tragedy, that everything is a futile melancholy. Instead, this lack of ending highlights the fact that the story is still being written. It continues. And changes. In this paper, I shared a story of Riley and how she had in effect rewritten a collective narrative in her community, where she was recast as the hero who saves the day. Riley is now making this practice of giving a new ending to old stories a habit.

While in Hawai'i during the spring of this year, I met Riley and she gave me an update on her life. She told me how she now had an apartment in Australia, which she rented out with her boyfriend. Riley paid for this apartment not only when she was in Australia, but also while she was away. In addition, she also occasionally sent her boyfriend money to help cover other expenses he had. Others in the community did not look at Riley's new situation as ideal, and instead they condemned her. Not only for providing financial support to a man but also because of whom the man was. He was also a sex worker. He had been doing part-time sex work since he was a newly orphaned young adult that needed to provide for his teenage brother. Ten years later this practice continued. The others in the trans community took issue with the fact that they did not believe it was Riley's role to be providing monetarily for a man; instead it was considered to be the man's role. But more so they took issue with his sexuality, insisting that Riley's boyfriend was gay because he had sex with men for money.¹⁰³ Riley argued that some of them also had sex with men for money (i.e., were

¹⁰³ See §1.2 for further information. Dating a "straight" man was of utmost importance for gender confirmation amongst the participants, and the participants wanted to avoid any connection with homosexuality as an identity. More than once I heard a variation of this explanation: "I know he is straight because if he was gay he wouldn't

the penetrators) and did that act make them gay? Riley also wondered about the boyfriends that some of the others had. Why was it okay for those boyfriends to be “tranny chasers” that dated someone because of the trans factor? Weren’t those men in one degree or another fixated on the penile element?¹⁰⁴ What did that mean, if it meant anything at all? Where was this line between what was straight and what was gay? And most importantly, why did any of it even matter?

Riley’s experience here is a condensed version of the arguments of this thesis. It showcases the contradictory and constructed nature of these types of distinctions, and the inseparability and complexity of sex, gender, and sexuality. Riley breaks apart the norms within her community that reproduces and reifies heteronormativity for trans people, questioning the rigid boundaries regulating both her and her behavior. And even though she appropriates some of these norms, she is not subordinated by them, and instead succeeds in challenging them (Butler, 2011) — pointing to the complexities inherent in not just trans people, but in all of us. Perhaps in doing so she opens up the possibility for others in her community to also begin to question the norms, and write and tell *new* stories. So although not a proclamation of hope, it is a story of survival.

but really I have nothing but myself
to go by; nothing
stands in the realm of pure necessity
except what my hands can hold.
Nothing but myself? . . . My selves.
After so long, this answer.
As if I had always known
I steer the boat in, simply.

-Adrienne Rich, excerpt from the poem “Integrity”
in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, 1981

want to be with a person who looked like a female.” This assumes that one has to be either straight or gay, which once again conforms to heteronormativity. Interestingly though, shouldn’t this logic also apply to Riley’s boyfriend?

¹⁰⁴ Since none of the participants had had SRS they still had a male anatomical organ, and many of these men tended to date only trans persons who had not had a SRS.

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APPENDIX:

Consent and Information Letter for Research Project:

Performing Transgenderism in the Sex Economy of Hawai‘i

Background and Purpose

My name is Maria Mehr. I am a graduate student studying Gender and Development at the University of Bergen in Norway in the Department of Health Promotion and Development. As part of the requirements for earning my master’s degree, I am doing a research project. The purpose of my project is to learn about the lives and stories of transgender persons working in the sex industry with Hawai‘i’s culture and history as a background. I will mainly be interviewing transgender sex workers. In addition I will be interviewing cultural experts. I am asking you to participate because you are either a transgender person working in the sex industry in Hawai‘i, or you are a cultural expert with knowledge about Hawaiian history and *māhū*.

What does participation in the project imply?

If you are a transgender person working in the sex industry and you choose to participate in this project, I will interview you once or twice at a location and time convenient for you. The interview(s) will consist of a total of about 30-40 open-ended questions. It will take between one to two hours, depending if the interview(s) is completed in one or two sessions. Interview questions will include questions like, “What do you think I should know about you?” “How important is your physical body to your gender?” “How would you describe your job and its occupational duties?” “What do you hope for your future?” If you would like to see a copy of all the questions I may ask please let me know. Only you and I will be present during the interview. If permitted, I will audio record the interview so that I can later write down the interview and analyze the responses. I will also take written notes. You will be one of about twelve transgender persons working in the sex industry that I will interview for this study. If you are not interested in a formal interview, but would prefer to have informal conversations with me on this same subject matter we can arrange that to.

If you are a cultural expert and you choose to participate in this project, I will meet with you for an interview at a location and time convenient for you. The interview will be informal and conversational and will take less than 30 minutes. The interview conversation will concern Hawaiian culture and history with a focus on *māhū* both historically and present day. You will be one of about three cultural experts whom I will interview for this study.

There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this interview. The results of this project may help me and other researchers in the future learn more about the perspectives of transgender persons working in the sex industry in Hawai‘i.

I believe there is little risk to you in participating in this research project. You may become stressed or uncomfortable answering the interview questions or discussing topics with me during the interview. If you do become stressed or uncomfortable, you can skip the question

or take a break. You can choose to not answer any question(s) at any time for any reason. You can also stop the interview or you can withdraw from the project altogether.

What will happen to the information about you?

All personal data will be treated confidentially. I will keep the recording of the interview and field notes in a locked cabinet and any digital data in a password-protected computer with data encryption. Only my University of Bergen advisor, Haldis Haukanes, and I will have access to the information. When I report the results of my research project, I will not use your name. I will not use any other personal identifying information. I will use pseudonyms (fake names) and report my findings in a way that fully anonymizes you, protecting your privacy and confidentiality. If you would like a copy of my final report, please contact me at the number or email listed near the end of this consent form. The project is scheduled for completion by May 31, 2015. All data and audio-recordings will either be erased, destroyed, or made anonymous as necessary by this date.

Voluntary participation

Your participation in this project is complete voluntary. You may stop participating at any time without stating any reason. If you decide to withdraw, all your personal data will be made anonymous.

If you would like to participate in this project or if you have any questions regarding the project please contact me at (808) 687-1211 or Maria.Mehr@student.uib.no. You can also contact my university supervisor, Haldis Haukanes at Haldis.Haukanes@iuh.uib.no or at +47 55 58 92 59 or if you have any questions or concerns.

The study has been notified to the Data Protection Official for Research, Norwegian Social Science Data Services in Bergen, Norway.

If you consent to participate in this project, please notify Maria Mehr and keep the above information sheet for your records.