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I am not that Caitlin: A critique of both the transphobic media reaction to Caitlyn Jenner's Vanity Fair cover shoot and of passing.

In this article I discuss and critique transphobic media reactions to the celebrity Caitlyn Jenner's 2015 Vanity Fair cover shoot. I then consider these in the light of Garfinkel's (1967) concept of 'passing' in his celebrated case story of Agnes and argue that 'passing' is often conflated with 'being out'. I argue that the two are significantly different and claim that the former is implicitly based on a public lie. I use several auto-ethnographic narratives to illustrate the argument.

Passing. Transgender. Transsexual. Transphobic Media Reaction.

I live, as the Chinese curse says, in interesting times. I'm a 'non-binary transsexual' who first 'came out' permanently in adult life a few years ago despite having had gender identity 'issues' since early childhood. My coming out was just a few years before the media storms that surround the coming out of some high profile media celebrities in everyday society. One such celebrity, Caitlyn Jenner, lives in the eye of a storm whilst protected from it by wealth and privilege. I have no such protection and the media obsession with her coming out reverberates hard upon my life.

We are told that transgender is at a 'tipping point' (Steinmetz 2014) and it now seems that transgender stories proliferate in the news. In her research of media stories of transgender Capuzza (2014) argued however that we transⁱ remain largely invisible in 'hard news' stories and are instead reported as 'sources of entertainment' (121). Whilst a reader may 'read across the grain' that the 'power of media lies within their ability to embed normative discourses, including those that are cisnormative' (115). The popular media and journalist choose not just what stories are reported but how they are reported: 'the media's role in constructing and

regulating sex/gender identities influences how marginalized groups see themselves in terms of both identity and agency' (116). The media thus has an important role both in how transgender people are represented and how we understand ourselves (see also Ringo [2002]).

In this essay I wish to consider one 'soft news story' and how it in turn may relate to an oft repeated trope that trans people attempt to 'pass' in society. Following Sedgwick (2008 [1990]), I want to discuss the complicated and entwined manner by which minority lives and identities may be organised yet resist organization, and how oppression may manifest both vertically and laterally within a sex/gender system. It is not just however that white, heterosexual, middleclass males often dominate and organise a sex/gender society based on heterosexual norms; nor is it just that they receive legitimation and validation from a popular media whilst delimiting and devaluing others; but also that minorities may seek to validate their own status by policing the boundaries of, and what is acceptable within, their marginalised groupings according to interpretations of what that dominant group may find acceptable (Rubin 1984; Bersani 1995; Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005; Halperin 2007; Dean 2009). Trans identities, organised by a concern with 'passing' in public that repeats and judges according to a dominant binary heteronormative standard, may be left complicit in their own oppression whilst a validity is conferred on those who organise and judge. My purpose in writing this essay is thus to consider how passingⁱⁱ marginalises, invalidates and erases a specific minority trans identity – non-binary trans – who have no wish to pass. (Any who may think that 'erase' is an overstatement may wish to refer to 2015 statements from the UK Ministry of Justice that declared that non-binary people do not exist and so have no need of protection and rights.)

A few brief technical definitions.

What is and who constitute the category 'transgender' has yet to be decided. In this essay I use a simple concept from Thanem and Wallenberg (2015) whereby trans are those whose sense of their own gender is different to the gender assigned at birth by the medical profession. By corollary cisgender people are those who accept their assigned gender; cisnormativity describes how our society naturalises sex and gender as a binary, static condition; and cissexism reveals how society implicitly preferences people who are cisgender. A simple example is how the designation of public toilets as 'male' or 'female' recently allowed some USA states to cissexually mandate use to discriminate against trans.

Trans is not a homogeneous, single group and may include: transwomen, transmen, binary and non-binary transsexuals, transvestites, cross-dressers, gender queer and gender fluid peoples. The specific identities and labels vary and change depending on individuals, times, places and as reactions to oppressive modes of organising identity (Halberstam 2005). Nonetheless whilst trans communities are heterogeneous and whilst 'membership' may not be fixed what may survive is a sense of marginalisation in and by a traditional cisgender society and even within an increasingly accepted homonormative LG(bt)ⁱⁱⁱ subcultures. A trans grouping includes transsexual identities which in turn is comprised of different identities including a numerically dominant binary and marginalised non-binary ones. Here binary transsexuals position themselves within the heteronormative sex/gender system of contemporary society, 'transition' from one sex/gender pole to the other and so repeat, are organised by and confer a legitimacy on that dominant system. Non-binary people do not regard themselves however as either sex/gender but may regard themselves as 'fluid' between those two extremes or refuse to be categorised as either and so question the naturalisation of that system.

A madness in the method?

My at times polemical essay contains some indented sections written in the 1st person as an autoethnography both emotive and subjective that intends to elicit a response. The autoethnography is not constrained to those sections however and whilst the long sections on the media reception of Caitlyn Jenner and on ‘passing’ are closer stylistically however to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2008 [1990]) might once have bearded as academically flat prose they too are autoethnographical. Stylistically rather ‘flat’ they still fail the academic requirement for objective neutrality and are at heart autoethnographic as they reflect a struggle I have where it is presumed that trans people share the same common ground premised on an ability to pass just because the media say so repeatedly. It now seems timely to consider just how the media obsessions with trans and passing play out.

Enter Caitlyn

The June 2015 issue of the American fashion and style magazine ‘Vanity Fair’ featured Caitlyn Jenner both as cover model and in a biographical interview with accompanying photoshoot (Bissinger 2015). The issue appeared after Caitlyn ‘officially’ came out as a transwoman in an interview with Diane Sawyer for the ABC TV channel on April 24th, 2015 (Sawyer 2015). My intention is not to recap Jenner’s biography, her relationship with her family, or her status as trans but to consider the often negative media representations of Caitlyn, their concern – or obsession - with passing and how these coupled with an at times transphobic academic stance affect trans lives.^{iv} In doing so I wish to foreground the specific trope of ‘passing’ long discussed in management literature since both Erving Goffman wrote of stigma and Harold Garfinkel and Richard Stoller of their patient, Agnes. I should declare that I have a vested interest as I am a non-binary transwoman who serendipitously shares a

name with Caitlyn Jenner - my middle name is Caitlin. Caitlyn's cover article and the subsequent media coverage is, to me, an interesting example as it involved someone in the 'public eye' who by 'outing' herself refused to 'pass'.

On being Caitlyn

I have to confess that I had never heard of Caitlyn Jenner or 'The Kardashians' before my daughter told me about the 20/20 ABC news interview (Sawyer, 2015). To this day I still have not watched a single episode of 'The Kardashians' or 'I am Cait', but whilst I pay little heed to her and her family, I now understand that they are minor celebrities much loved by the mass media for their excess. What I have seen and read about Caitlyn Jenner doesn't endear her to me: we share no political ground; I do not move in her social circle and never will; I find her views on minorities offensive; I do not like her public self. Whilst I write about her I do not know or speak for her but nonetheless find the media reaction to her revealing of attitudes and beliefs to and of transgender people.

The media reception of Caitlyn immediately following her Vanity Fair cover was dominated by adaptations of a limited number of sources – most probably PR copy provided by Vanity Fair itself - that reported the 'objective' and supposedly 'neutral fact' that Caitlyn was the cover model of Vanity Fair and repeated trifles from the magazine. These 'neutral' articles nonetheless took a hetero and cisnormative stance, presented a binary gender 'transition story' common to both popular media and management (Muhr and Sullivan 2013). Transition presented as *the* high water mark of a life story reduced trans lives to products of a sex/gender system elided both the differences of lives processually lived (Scheman 1997) and of the existence of non-binary peoples. Such transition narratives implicitly repeat that the norms to which we all must aspire are presumptively cisgender and representative of a dominant sex/gender system.

Not all of the media reaction was ‘neutral’ to Caitlyn’s story; some carried opinion pieces (or ‘op eds’) that ranged from supportive (see Anon [2015] for a summary of some of the positive reactions. See also Laverne Cox’s [2015] Tumblr post of support) to those that were, to put it mildly, negative (Helmer 2015; Hopkins 2015; Rorke 2015) and some that may be regarded as transphobic (Burkett 2015; Dell’Antonia 2015; Wimberly 2015; Garelick 2015; Walsh 2015. See McKay [2015] for a review of Fox New’s transphobic news coverage of the Vanity Fair cover. Fox News has a history of transphobia – see Maza [2013]). There were literally thousands of comments made by members of the public on social media, including many transphobic ones appended as comments to these various on-line media reports (see Cohen [2015] for an artist’s interesting use of transphobic twitter comments). The more vituperative articles attracted greater and greater numbers of nastier, more openly transphobic public commentary as a public found validation in echoing that media storm.

Whilst many articles called Caitlin by both her chosen and her previous names Wimberley’s (2015) transition narrative placed Caitlyn in quotation marks but left her previous name unmarked, thus calling the name ‘Caitlyn’ and her status in to question. In another *New York Time*’s issue Gill (2015) specifically focused on the spelling of Caitlyn and opined that the replacement of the second ‘i’ with a ‘y’ revealed Caitlyn as silly, vapid, childish and argued that she should instead have a name that reflected her physical age: Gill was silent on the many, many cisgender people in contemporaneous British and US society who also use alternative spellings of a first name. For many trans people the choice of first name is fundamental and emotive, symbolising a break with an assigned gender identity. Gill’s snarky critique inferred that if Caitlyn – and by extension all of us - could not get something as ostensibly simple as a name right what hope have we to make the ‘right’ choice about our gender: we are but silly children who should accept the names and genders assigned to us by adults at the start of our unliveable lives. We are damned not just by what

we do and who we are but by the names which we live by and for having the temerity to choose.

I'm ushered to a seat and the job interview starts. 'Tell us about your first name. Why did you choose it? What does it mean?' Asks the deputy Dean. I can't help but wonder what this has to do with my ability to teach and if they intend to ask all the candidates that same question. Burkett (2015) vacillated between Ms and Mr Jenner and referred to her continually with male pronouns. For Rorke (2015) the Vanity Fair cover was an exercise in marketing strategy, a 'publicity stunt' (one wonders what any Vanity Fair cover is if not these things) that 'camouflages the years of self-doubt'. In the UK Hopkins (2015) commented, 'some of the best looking men I know are drag queens' so conflating transwomen with drag queens before she criticised Caitlyn for her privileged life (see also Burkett 2015; Helmer 2015 and repeated in some trans communities [Welsh 2015]) with little, if anything, in common with women who worked at careers and families to 'quietly transform the lives of others as a condition of motherhood, womanhood, childhood. We are so much more than our hair, our dress, our makeup or how flat our pubic bone looks in swimwear' (Hopkins 2015). Hopkins's criticism implicated transwomen as superficial surface; appearance with no substance or history.

Hopkins's op ed. was printed in *The Mail Online*, the internet version of a UK newspaper with a long history of articles that deride and attack not only transgender people but anyone whom that paper sees as different to some hypothetical 'middle Englisher' who might undermine a 'British way of life'. This paper infamously published an op ed. by Richard Littlejohn cited by a UK coroner as 'contributing' to the suicide of Lucy Meadows. (The paper and Littlejohn maintain their innocence by citing the fact that Lucy didn't mention the article in her suicide letter and continue on with their vituperative transphobia.) *The Mail* and its opinion writers are not alone of the UK papers to attack trans people – we are a

common and easy target for polemical journalists of the UK press irrespective of political persuasion.^v

For Garelick (2015) Caitlyn appeared to be ‘a strangely static, oddly youthful and elaborately adorned body that *is*, rather than *does*’; a superficial surface where even her ‘new chosen first name feels bizarrely girlish, conjuring more a college student, or maybe a sixth Kardashian sister, than a grandmother’. Oh dear Caitlyn now it’s not just childish to call yourself ‘Caitlyn’ but also bizarre!

Burkett (2015) went further and accused both Caitlyn Jenner and unidentified ‘advocates for transgender rights’ as anti-feminist and proclaimed in an essentialist manner that transgender women are not and can never be women and represent a danger to ‘real’ women. Burkett’s repetition of a rather specific feminism rooted in the 1970s ignored how such claims have been substantively criticised within feminist movements since then.

Walsh (2015) shockingly strident transphobia compared Caitlyn to a ‘mentally disordered man’, ‘a tragic sight’ that was ‘disgusting’ before he repeated the fallacy that transsexual people ‘very often’ regret transition. He declared Caitlyn a product of a ‘liberal use of Photoshop... dismantling, dismembering, mutilating, and editing himself’ - a description that echoed the language of well-known academic transphobic discourse - and proclaimed Caitlyn a ‘fake’, ‘the picture was literally the definition of inauthentic. If it wasn’t inauthentic, then nothing is’. (The accusation of photo manipulation also appeared in Dell’Antonia’s 2015 article albeit that her writing was somewhat less malignantly transphobic.)

The popular media is not however the only form of organised discourse concerned with trans people, academia is another and the two may at times seek legitimacy in each other: several articles claimed an authority because they were written by academics irrespective of academic discipline (see Burkett 2015; Garelick 2015) or referenced

transphobic academic accounts. Some academics have openly vilified trans people for decades (see fn.1 in this essay) and the popular media provide such narratives a salience yet rarely give equal space to trans-positive academic accounts. In the UK transphobic academics – including one who lives and works 12000 miles away in Australia - requested a 2015 UK Parliamentary Subcommittee on transgender rights to refuse improved legal rights in the UK. They substantiated their vilification by referencing each other and unsubstantiated, often discredited, transphobic media accounts as ‘evidence’ in an apotheosis of bigotry. For some it seems that public notoriety and influence trumps objectivity: when public recognition carries success and may be part of a pathway to academic promotion to be transphobic is not necessarily an impediment to a career but may help make it. A cissexist society does not just seek validation but organises and rewards it.

This failure to differentiate, repeated in and by repetitive transphobic media commentaries (Burkett 2015; Garelick 2015; Walsh 2015) of Caitlyn Jenner’s Vanity Fair cover shoot, all argued that a trans woman is always ‘inauthentic’ regardless of how well they may pass. This transphobic circle of repetition provided the media with a specialist, authoritative (but not authorial) ground for its accusations, which in turn allowed the academic to claim to both reach out to and objectively ‘reflect’ (rather than uncritically and non-reflexively repeat and enact) the ‘natural’ order of things.^{vi}

For those who held fast to notions of ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ it really didn’t matter what pose Caitlyn assumed, how well she performed her gender, what clothes she wore - she could never pass because she is not an ‘authentic’ woman. Burkett (2015), for instance, proclaimed that Caitlyn cannot be a ‘real’ woman because she had not suffered as a woman in patriarchal society. Whilst women do suffer in patriarchy Burkett presented her specific experience as a middle class woman in a safe, well paid academic position as that of all women and presumed gender oppression to be the exclusive ground only of ‘real’ women – the violence, abuse,

sexual assaults, high unemployment and homelessness rates and poverty that I and many trans people suffer was glossed to instead repeat again, again and yet again the same debunked, tired rhetoric as truth. Caitlyn, a minor celebrity, caught in time and represented as someone born a man but who transitioned to become a woman can now never 'pass' as a 'real' (read assigned at birth) woman: the genie is out of the bottle and (nearly) everyone knows her story repeated ad nauseam. She cannot pass, so why bother?

A demand to pass

I confess that I am bemused by the negative reactions to Caitlyn's cover photo. Yes, it was sexist and ageist; yes, it was photo-shopped; yes, it repeated a stereotypical 'beauty myth' and yes, it was of yet another vain, self-important media celebrity but the magazine was Vanity Fair; the cover was just another in a very long line of rather similar cover photos of privileged women. The only difference was, I would suggest, that Caitlyn refused to pass as a 'real' 'authentic' woman and instead announced herself as a transgender woman. For some however there not only are 'authentic' women but also a particular 'correct' way to be a transwoman that clearly does not include being rich, famous, privileged or in trying to be 'glamorous' and in the spotlight.

Such singular foreclosures of how we should 'be' and act ignore that transgender people are each very different not only to cisnormative folk but to each other (see Cueto 2015 and Crystal Frasier's 2015 Tumblr Vanity Fair campaign) in heterogeneous subcultures. We potentially have differing gender ontologies where passing may be a goal for some but an irrelevance or something to be opposed for others. But ontology may be too grand or too course a word here where the relevance or otherwise of an acceptance, or refusal, of a politicised gender identity may reveal more an ephemeral orientation and an attempt to manage or embrace a public stigma (Goffman 1963). Regardless of these differing ontologies

– if ontologies they are - transgender people are foreclosed and tolerated in society but only whilst we conform to specific norms and ‘pass’ (quietly by you on the street and in to invisibility) or may be regarded as objects of pity (Namaste 2000 ; Gressgard 2010; Davis 2009 ; Gagne and Tewksbury 1999). If we transgress these norms or ask that people stop laughing at us ‘freaks’ (Garfinkel 1967, 124. See Thanem [2006] for a discussion on freaks) then we become intolerable. Much of the negative media coverage of the cover photo portrayed Caitlyn as monstrous and a freak simply because she did not present herself either as an object of public pity; simply because she had the audacity to try and appear glamorous; simply because she sought attention.

Although I was referred in early 2015 to a NHS gender clinic my first appointment will take place in July 2016. Despite this very long wait I have already been forewarned of how to behave and dress: If I do not conform to the clinic’s expectations then I risk my status as transgender and so also put at risk access to treatment. Looking like and wearing clothes similar to cisgender women is not acceptable; I’m expected to be and to exude a hyperbolic femininity, to be, in short, just like Garfinkel’s Agnes, 110% female.

Caitlyn’s cover-shoot depicted a hyperbolic femininity that trans women are criticised for in the media and by some academics. So it’s rather ironic that access to medical treatment is policed by a medical profession whose demand that I be hyperbolic leaves me open to being named by an often transphobic media as ‘inauthentic’, ‘deceitful’, ‘dangerous’, ‘a freak’, ‘a pantomime dame’, ‘Frankenstein’s monster’, ‘a male rapist masquerading as a woman’... (Terms which seem to have originated in and repeat transphobic academic accounts.) A particular cis-normative convention of what a transwoman is applied and I am expected to conform to it.

To ‘pass’ requires that we be hyperbolic and so cannot pass as a ‘real’ woman (Carrera et al 2012). This impossible demand, this implicit refusal pays little, if any account, for whether or not I might want to ‘pass’.

I wish to now turn to and consider the concept of ‘passing’ and how that in turn is used to normalise trans and determines what society tolerates of us. In doing so I wish to foreground specific aspects of ‘passing’: what passing means; why it may be important to

pass and what the consequences of failing to 'pass' may be. I then put forward my own perspective as a non-binary person who is outside the sex/gender and for whom 'passing' is largely an irrelevance to try to articulate why 'passing' doesn't matter so much to me before reconsidering if 'passing' might matter for Caitlyn. I finish with a short reflection on why I don't think 'passing' protects me at all.

Passing...

Subjectively, we ask: Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me? By what norms am I constrained as I begin to ask what I may become? What happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place in the given regime of truth?

Judith Butler (2001, 621)

The work of achieving and making secure their rights to live in the elected sex status while providing for the possibility of detection and ruin carried out within the socially structured conditions in which this work occurred I shall call 'passing

Garfinkel (1967, 118, 137)

Nearly 50 years ago Garfinkel (1967) wrote a classic case analysis of a woman called Agnes, since discussed in management and academia more generally (Connell 2009; Connell 2010; Denzin 1990 and 1991; Jenness and Fenstermaker 2014; Kessler and McKenna 1978; Knights and Thanem 2011; Rogers 1992a; Schrock 2005; Stoller 1968; Thanem 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987; Zimmerman 1992) and which may even be ethnomethodology's 'sacred text' (Denzin 1991, 280). Agnes, a transgender woman, mistaken as an intersex person by Garfinkel and his colleagues, had 'developed a number of procedures for passing as a "normal, natural female"' in order to achieve continually 'the accomplishment of gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987, 131) where the continual issue for her 'was not so much living

up to some prototype of essential femininity but preserving her categorization as female' (132).

Passing is what a transgender person is expected to work at, whether physically (Garfinkel 1967) or emotionally (Shrock, Reid and Boyd 2009; Snorton 2009). It is both the 'essence of transsexualism' (Stone 1991, 232) and 'the most critical thing that a transsexual can do' (Stone 1991, 231). 'Critical' implies a tension: it is something crucial to being a transsexual whilst at the same time judges, evaluates and brings about a crisis when it questions what transgender 'is'. The crisis, for me, is that passing implicates an acceptance of a binary sex/gender system.

Passing is a process whereby trans provide 'clear gender cues [as] part of normalising [their] transsexed selves' (Davis 2009, 108) in order to achieve in public a social acceptance and recognition of an external gender presentation that aligns with their internal sense of self (Namaste 2000; Rubin 2003). As Davis (2009) states to pass presumes both that an individual presents as a binary sex/gender but that they also hide their gender non-conformity even whilst others may regard them as 'claiming an illegitimate sex/gender status' (107. See also Goffman [1963]; Bolin [1988]; Gagne and Tewksbury [1999]). Cisgender people however are 'doing [their assigned] gender rather than passing' (Zimmerman 1992, 196) because a cisgender person's gender status is 'basically secure' (195). (Zimmerman here disagrees with Rogers [1992a and 1992b] who contends that cisgender people do still have to pass at their assigned sex). Cisgender people 'do' gender naturally but trans people have to work and pass at gender: by implication the former is 'authentic', the latter deceitful.

For transgender women the supposed 'goal is to be feminine women' (Lorber 1994, 20 cited in Dozier 2005, 299) in order to align gender display (being feminine) with gender status (being taken for a female) based on one's gender identity (a sense of gender self)

(Lorber 1999; Dozier 2005). Lorber (1999 and Dozier [2005]) remain silent however on non-binary people where gender identity may have little to do with display and where the 'goal' is not to be a binary.

If one's appearance supports the (assumed) gender status then more scope exists not to follow a stereotypical gender display: someone 'obviously' a man may wear nail varnish without their gender being generally questioned because they are obviously male. Status here may be questioned depending on the colour and type of nail varnish – few may query black varnish on an otherwise 'masculine male' ('hey it's only rock 'n' roll') but a candy floss pink glitter is just too 'girly' not to warrant raised eyebrows and questions – but is not significantly at risk. The question is 'why is he wearing pink nail varnish?' and not 'is it a man or a woman?' A transgender woman who does not 'obviously' appear to be female however needs to act even more feminine (Dozier 2005) in order to avoid a question of 'is it a man or a woman?' There is thus a tension and balance between appearance and behaviour that becomes more acute as one's identity becomes more ambiguous and as one's *evidentness* (Goffman 1963) becomes more difficult to ignore. If you over do gender and are hyperbolically feminine you no longer pass and your gender identity is questioned. If you however underplay your birth assigned gender then sexuality rather than gender is questioned: I am attacked more often for being a 'faggot loser' because I don't look sufficiently male than for looking too female.

Passing is a means whereby trans may be recognised and accepted as a gender other than that to which we were assigned at birth. It is however rather more than this: it is also a standard that we are judged by and held accountable to, and ironically one that we are blamed for. Passing can only be done in public and implicates those who attempt to pass as 'duplicious', 'frauds' and 'liars' (labels commonly affixed to transgender people in academic

and media publications and in law.) Serano (2007) and McKinnon (2014) discussed how transwomen are regarded as either deceptive or a pathetic joke. The former are dangerous as they 'pass' in order to deliberately deceive unsuspecting 'normal' folk who may claim a legal defence of 'trans panic' should they see through the disguise (TDoR 2015 cites many cases where such a legal defence mitigated charges of assault and murder); the pathetic joke is a tragic figure because of a failure to pass. We are damned if we do and damned if we don't, so why bother?

Why do so many of us try to pass? We are told that 'passing' may be a mechanism whereby vulnerable people may attempt to mitigate an *evidentness* that leads to social stigmatisation (Goffman 1963, 48-51). If we pass others might ignore our *evidentness* and a belief in a binary social sex/gender rule will remain unchallenged. If we pass normal people will not be panicked in to verbally abusing us, physically assaulting us or even possibly murdering us. Problems occur however if our *evidentness* is so great that it cannot be ignored or if we do not want it to be ignored. The rule is challenged, the culprit's stigma is evident for all to see and punishment ensues as those who are vulnerable to our gender transgression panic^{vii}. We are told to pass in order to protect those most vulnerable to us, you.

The consequences of failing to pass

The key criterion for passing is the possibility of being found out
Zimmerman (1992, 195)

Passing involves both an ability to present an 'unambiguous, consistent display' (Zimmerman 1992, 195) and in also being able to evade questions that might undermine an otherwise coherent narrative. An inability to "pass" at work may result in discrimination, ostracization and ultimately job termination (Gary and Elliot 2008). Those who manage to stay in work

may suffer a 30% loss of income (Schilt and Wisall 2008) but many lose jobs, homes, families and friends (Grant et al. 2011; Whittle, Turner and Al-Alami 2007). A failure to pass in public often leads to verbal, physical and sexual assault (Grant et al. 2011; Namaste 2000). Grant et al. (2011) state 64% of transgender people have been sexually, and 61% physically, assaulted including, according to Shrock (2009), 10.2% assaulted with a weapon and potentially raped and murdered. For those who are not as rich, famous and privileged as Caitlyn Jenner, or even just middleclass, the alternative to 'normal' employment may be sex work, which in turn carries the additional risks of social opprobrium, criminalisation and the dreadful spectre of HIV (Namaste 2000, 2005 and 2009). 23% of transsexual people suffer not one but several devastating social consequences listed by Grant et al. (2011), where 'ticking' three or more is regarded as so catastrophic that one may never recover (autobiographically I 'tick' 7 of those 10). In the UK it takes many years from referral to surgery and where one must 'pass' daily at work, on the street, in public. Is it any wonder that the suicidal ideation rate for 'pre-op' transsexual people is 41% compared to the 1.6% rate of the general population (Grant et al 2011)? It is perhaps little wonder that many trans remain in 'stealth' in order to avoid these potentially catastrophic consequences.

Failing to pass, not trying to pass and the politics of passing?

As a teenager I tried to be a punk with attitude. I didn't care what people thought of me or my friends. I rebelled against society and wore clothes and makeup that signalled my refusal to conform.

Just 16 this week, we're going out to celebrate my birthday. On a warm Spring Saturday evening I'm wearing a ripped, short, black dress held together with some safety pins over a t-shirt (Alternative TV), ripped jeans and black DMs with red laces (the laces are important. In this city red signifies Far Left; Yellow NF.) My candyfloss pink hair is down and tied back having refused to stay up in a feathered Mohican.

Into the kitchen comes Paul dressed in a string vest, combat trousers and DMs. His dyed black hair is up, hairsprayed to within an inch of its life. He looks great but he should as he's spent over an hour getting ready.

'You shouldn't go out dressed like that. The neighbours don't like it. You're asking for trouble.' That's Paul's dad speaking but I think he means me as well.

'Like I care.'

Paul signals he's ready so we leave the house and saunter up the main road, towards town along a route that takes us past several pubs including one, 'The Swan', well known locally as a dive. Six people are outside it as we approach; four men and two women, probably in their 20s and scallies by the look of them. It doesn't take long before the verbal abuse and cat calling starts. We've heard it all before, the same tired litany of 'F'ing punk scum' and so on. One of them calls me a 'slanty-eyed Chink' (I'm part Chinese). We continue walking. Two policemen are nearby so we must be safe.

'Fuck. That's a boy. The one in the dress – it's a boy.' Glass shatters on the ground behind me.

'Run!' Paul pushes me and takes off. I start to run wondering where the police are. I glance over my shoulder; the police are still there, watching, silent, not moving, unmoved. Five adults have started to run after us. A second bottle is thrown and hits Paul. He goes down. A third hits me and they're on to us.

We never made it in to town that day. I don't remember much of what happened but I got off lightly, a few bruises, some cuts and a broken nose. Paul - jaw fractured, collar bone broken - lost an eye.

I've never known why we got jumped that day. It would be easy to say it was because I failed to pass but I really don't know. It may have been the dress but it may have been because we were punks, or because I'm part Chinese, or the red laces, or because they were just scallies looking for a fight, or maybe some entirely other reason. I've never known why Paul got more of a beating than I. Maybe he fought back more; maybe they thought I was a girl even though they knew I was a boy; maybe my physique announced that I was no threat to them (then as now I weigh less than 48 kilos); maybe the police moved before it was my turn.

It would be easy to say that it happened because I failed to pass but I really don't know. So why bother.

Gagne and Tewksbury (1998) argue that trans people need to pass in public settings and in their relationships with significant others both in public and private. Contrary to this I contend that passing is not a repeated act performed in private with, or for, a significant other.

They conflate the issue of ‘coming out’ to a significant other with passing for a general public in public.

Coming out (rather than passing) to a significant other means that the transgender person reveals to their significant others that they are trans. Coming out differs from passing for two important reasons: firstly, it is a deliberate revelation to a significant other of a private ‘secret’; secondly, once out the significant other knows the secret - you can only tell that person once. Passing, in contrast, is the repeated maintenance of a gender identity in public settings and in interactions with a general public who do not know.

When I first came out my ‘ex’ asked that I keep my gender private. She said, ‘You can dress whenever you want to at home if you guarantee that no one will call at the door.’ A request that, to me, really said ‘don’t ever dress’ whilst giving me a supposed freedom to do so.

She wrongly presumed that I did not want surgical reassignment. Several years later on toward the end of a drive to the airport she somewhat nonchalantly said, ‘... and you don’t want surgery.’ A long silence ensued. I focused on the motorway traffic as I didn’t know what to say. I signalled to enter the slip road off the motorway. ‘...you DO want surgery...’

‘I’ve never said I didn’t.’

I entered the approach road to the airport. ‘Shall I give you a knife? You could cut your dick off and save time. Do the job yourself.’ Silence from me. ‘I don’t want a relationship with a woman. I’m not a lesbian and I don’t want people to think that I am...’

I pulled to a stop at the drop off point, ‘You have a relationship with a person, not their genitals. I thought that you had married me and not my dick.’ She got out and for the first time ever I didn’t get out to help her with her suitcase. I just sat there, waited, willed and longed for her to go so that I could pull out in to the traffic and start the lonely 2 hour drive back home in silence.

Coming out has an implication for passing clearly demonstrated by those who are also non-binary. If an imaginary person is non-binary^{viii} then that person does not present to a binary heterosexual society an ‘unambiguous’ display but is *evident*. Such an ‘imaginary’ person

(imaginary for UK official purposes) is *always* out, can never pass in a binary heterosexual society and so cannot avoid abuse that follows from an openly binary gender transgression. Passing acts as a limit condition for coming out as it reveals the trans person, for whatever reason, is not 'out' in public, presumes a conformance to a binary heterosexual matrix and marks them as a dangerous, deceitful liar. 'Passing becomes the outwards manifestation of shame and capitulation. Passing becomes silence. Passing becomes invisibility. Passing becomes lies. Passing becomes self-denial (Bornstein 1994 cited in Roen 2001, 508). If one is 'out' what need is there to pass in public?

Secrets and lies

the supposed opposition between lying and concealment so dear to conventional moralists – and in one way and another to all of us – can be stated as the difference between attempting to conceal concealment (of the truth) and apparently not concealing concealment
Smyth (2015, 167)

I think everyone has to work at being a man or a woman. Transgendered people are probably more aware of doing the work, that's all
Bornstein (1994, 66)

It seems to me that 'passing' offers at best a localised, temporary and partial respite. There will always be someone who 'sees through the mask', some occasion where one lets one's guard down. It is presumed that 'passing' becomes easier as we become more confident and more used to and practiced at a gender role and better able to self-monitor' and correct our gender performance (Schrock 2005), yet as Whittle, Turner and Al-Alami (2007) point out transwomen may fail to pass many, many years after transition. (It may be that there is again a tension here – the more used we are to passing the more relaxed we become to a point where it may appear natural; be too confident, too relaxed however and the mask may slip.

This is merely conjecture on my part as I am not aware of any empirical studies that have considered this.)

Is it any wonder that many transgender people try to pass given the alternatives? Which would you rather – exclusion and effacement from the lie of a binary heterosexual society^{ix} and a very real daily risk of abuse and violence, or to pass and hope that you are not caught lying? The transgender person who passes may well be lying but whose fault is that anyway? Aren't we all implicated as liars in this very public secret? *J'accuse*.

I rarely have 'nights out', not because I don't want to and not because I'm worried about going out but quite simply because I have very little money to spend socialising. So this for me was a rare occasion driven partly by boredom and partly as I'd just got off a bus after a 7 hour journey. Tired, bored, a little bit frazzled and certainly not looking my best (no makeup, tousled hair, skinny jeans, t-shirt, coat and walking boots) I wandered in to a bar that's on my way back to the hostel from the coach station. So I stand there feeling scruffy, out of place, alone and nursing an OJ, not entirely sure why I'm here but not wanting to leave just yet.

'Shake.' A stranger standing next to me proffers his hand. I try to ignore him hoping he'll go away but to no avail. 'Shake my hand.' He repeats and I give up and put my hand in his. He tries to kiss it but I snatch my hand back.

'I'm just being friendly. Be nice. I'm harmless. I'm just being friendly.' I smile politely and hope that he will go away and leave me alone.

'Smile more. You're very pretty you know but you should smile more.'

'Thank you.' Polite but hopefully delivered in a cool, indifferent and impersonal tone. I turn away from him and sip my OJ. He moves off to talk to someone else at the bar, leaving me to my indifference.

A couple on the other side of the room leave and I snatch the opportunity to go and sit at their vacated table. I take my coat off, sip my OJ and with my back to the bar listen distractedly to the DJ. A few records further in to the DJ's set someone pushes me on the shoulder. It's the man from the bar. 'You're a man. I'm not a fucking homo. I'm not a fucking queer.'

'I never said you were.'

‘I’m not interested in your sort. I’m not gay.’ He stands bristling; I turn away hoping that having run his course he’ll get bored and leave me alone. ‘I’m not gay,’ he repeats.

‘I never...’ I start to turn towards him and he hits me. Hard. My face collides with the table top as I hit the floor. I briefly lie waiting for the kicks that never come. Luckily for me he’s said his piece and left. Embarrassed, I worry that others might be looking but everyone is so very busy, carefully not looking.

I pick my glass up, pretend that nothing untoward happened and even if it had that I don’t care. I avoid crying and just manage not to start shaking. I pretend no-one is looking at me and everyone pretends not to. I do this for a few moments – just long enough to maintain the pretence – then I stand, put my coat on and leave.

Back at the hostel I inspect the damage: The bridge of my nose is cut and bruised; grazes on my forehead and right cheek; blood on my t-shirt from a nose bleed. I wasn’t trying to pass at all but it seems that I did; just not for long enough. I feel like I’m 16 again^x.

Some trans are ‘indifferent to passing’ because they do not feel that they can (Thanem and Wallenberg 2015). Rather than fail and be judged a ‘pathetic’ attempt at a woman (Serano 2007) they instead present as an heterogeneous mix of gender cues and styles. An ‘indifference’ to passing is subtly different to being publically out and refusing to pass. Being out is a demand to be allowed to live outside the binary and its normative standard.

To choose to remain out rather than attempt to pass (Connell 2010) or be indifferent to passing (Thanem and Wallenberg 2015) applies particularly in the case where the person is also ‘non-binary’ (Gagne and Tewksbury 1998) and outside of and different to a binary heterosexuality. Being out does not do, undo, or redo a binary gender matrix (Connell 2010) and nor is it a hyperbolic performativity (Butler 1990 and 1993) since both presume one remains within that matrix and may be understood and judged by its normativity. To be out declares that one has an ‘essential self’ that is constant and authentic (Monro 2012), that endures despite time, ageing and any medico-techno transformation or transition of the body and so questions traditional transition narratives (Prosser 1998) and rather importantly that whatever it may be it is neither male nor female and so rejects a position within the binary

heterosexual matrix (Bornstein 1994; Connell 2009). Being out is a refusal to be silent, a refusal to disappear, a refusal to be dragged in to the binary and be named, shamed and judged by it.

So where do we go from here if we are out and refuse to pass if not to a trans politics? Connell (2009) argues that there is a need for a transgender politics based not on assimilation in to, or a broadening out of, feminist movements but of solidarity between feminists and transgender peoples that requires feminists to consider their own solidarity and gender solidarity. Whilst I have a sympathy with Connell I think the question is posed too soon - our politics, at present, is too febrile and not yet a collective one. We each must try to understand ourselves first in order to identify and agree a solidarity before we might relate that to the sex/gender binary. We must first understand better how we make our lives liveable (Scheman 1997) and then develop a different understanding of gender that accepts difference and stops judging. But first I just wish to be allowed a life that is not a gender battleground that others fight over.

What do we do with a ‘problem’ like Caitlyn/Caitlin?

Caitlyn Jenner stood accused of being, amongst many things, a hyperbolic representation of femininity; she overdid her gender performance, her exaggerated femininity revealed that she was not a ‘real’, ‘authentic’ woman. The cover shoot however was not her attempt to pass as an ‘authentic’ woman but a public declaration by her that she is a transwoman. This is much the same as Agnes, whose boyfriend, family and the entire medical team (let alone anyone who reads Garfinkel’s [1967] and Stoller’s [1968] accounts) knew her gender status and that she had transitioned. The secret is out and is ‘intransigent’, a demand for recognition (Connell 2012; Jenness and Fenstermaker 2014), where ‘the contradiction has to be handled’

(Connell 2012: 868) because everyone knows the 'secret'. She is evident; already 'read' (Connell 2010); already 'clocked' (Jenness and Fenstermaker 2014). It may be that her performativity is just too hyperbolic for many but perhaps we should judge less - and be slower to judge - if she passes and instead allow her to have a liveable life.

Past caring about passing, why bother? An open ending rather than a conclusion.

Structurally my essay defies an academic standard as there is no clear 'conclusion', no summing up of points made and none proven. Autoethnographies are expected to be a reflexive narrative on memory and experience and I, I lack the wisdom needed to bring such clarity to my life, without which I certainly cannot say how others should live theirs and how they should be understood. So by way of ending all I offer is a vignette depicting where I am in my life and perhaps why passing means little to me yet still reverberates upon my shattered life.

I now live alone as a transsexual woman 24/7 365 and have done so for some time. After 4 months of homelessness I was given social housing 2 weeks ago. I am however still unemployed. So I find myself in England's 2nd largest city having arrived after 8 hours on a bus for a job interview. Early afternoon and having neither the money for lunch nor a lot of time I start to walk from the bus station up in to the busy shopping centre and towards the interview place. The walk takes me less than ½ an hour during which time 7 people verbally abuse me - 'Get fucking real ya freak. Get a proper life battyboi.' - 2 also throw food and coffee at me, 1 spits in my face and 1 slaps me.

I arrive shaken, not stirred and sit in reception: all I can think about is that I don't want to be here anymore. I want to go home. I want to close out a world that doesn't want me in it.

'Are you here for the interview?' A voice from behind me breaks my introspection. I stand, turn to her and try to smile. The woman, a little surprised at seeing me, gracefully recovers her poise and takes me towards the interview room. I ask to be excused briefly to go to the toilet. Alone in the cubicle I start to shake and cry for several minutes before I finally manage to pull myself together, splash cold water on my face and go in to face the panel.

I like to say that I can afford to be out as I have very little left to lose. I own very little; I have no partner and few friends; there are very few ties that bind me. No protection.

I like to think that I'm very much past caring about passing; I'm non-binary and don't try to pass as male or female. No protection.

I've been abused many times so why the upset, why the tears?

No protection. Nothing to distance and protect me from your vulnerability.

Passing is an impossible normative standard by which I am judged and that makes me vulnerable. Passing limits me to a 'reiteration of norms' where I am a 'sedimented effect' of, and judged by, those binary norms (Butler 1993, 10). Passing does not protect me; I do not pass, I never will. The routine verbal and physical abuse I face in society reminds me repeatedly of this brute fact. The demand of passing, a technique by which a heteronormative cis-gender society protects its own vulnerability to non-conforming marginalised genders, organises, judges and finds us wanting.

Society's vulnerability damages me and leaves me crying. Passing is what I am expected to work at - not for my sake but for yours.

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ⁱ I use trans in common with many transgender people as an abbreviation to denote transgender person, or transwoman or transman.

ⁱⁱ I will try to refrain from placing 'pass', 'coming out' and their various derivatives as much as possible for the sake of clarity but remain aware of the issues that surround and complicate such terms.

ⁱⁱⁱ I capitalise the former two as the dominant partners of a grouping where bisexual and trans identities are marginalised, glossed over and often discriminated against in what is an increasingly homonormative subculture.

^{iv} I intentionally transgress academic referencing standards here as I deliberately will not cite much of the transphobic academic literature that stretches from the 1970s to the present day. Any reader who wishes to read what this literature says, either from curiosity, or for their own research or

perhaps if they doubt what I claim as a ‘deceitful’ transsexual say may refer to works by Sandy Stone (1991) and Raelyn Connell (2012).

^v Anyone interested in how the political left of centre UK media have published transphobic op eds. may wish to investigate those of Suzanne Moore and Julie Burchill published in *The Guardian* and *The Observer* in early 2013. Burchill’s openly transphobic op eds. for *The Guardian* can be dated back however to at least 2002.

^{vi} The op eds. from academics like Burkett (2015) and Garelick (2015) reflect nothing but themselves ad infinitum, ad nauseam without even a tain to their mirror. See Rodolphe Gasche (1986) for a prolonged discussion on the tain of a mirror, reflection and reflexivity.

^{vii} For those who may think that I exaggerate or that I am too melodramatic see: Butler’s (1993) description of the murder of Venus Xtravaganza (see also Prosser’s [1998] critique of Butler’s reading of ‘Paris is Burning’); Halberstam (2005) discussion of the murder of Brandon Teena and; the murder of Gwen Araujo (Lloyd 2013). The Human Rights Commission estimates that “one out of every 1,000 homicides in the U.S. is an anti-transgender hate crime” (Human Rights Commission 2011 cited in Lloyd 2013). In 2015 there was nearly 1 homicide per day of a transgender person (TDoR 2015).

^{viii} In a reply to a UK public petition to recognise the right to self-identity the UK Ministry of Justice stated that non-binary’ transgender people do not exist. We must therefore be imaginary.

^{ix} The existence of gender non-conforming people unmasks the lie of a natural binary heterosexual society. Furthermore if, as Judith Butler (1993) has argued, there is no originary ground for sex and ‘man’ or ‘woman’ then gender performativity may itself be the repeated iteration of a fiction. This is an impossible dream where the transgender person has a doubled ‘never-never’: I was never male and so have never lost being male; I was never a female, can never become one as there never was female. (One might add that the second ‘never-never’ is partially distorted in feminist criticisms of transgender from academics such as Grosz [1994] as ‘I was never female and can never become one’. See Salamon [2010] for a critique of Grosz.) What is elided following Butler - binary cisgenders are also implicated as their gender - is also based on nothing: there was no ‘(fe)male’ that you could ever have been and so a claim to be a ‘(fe)male’ is a fiction. So who is lying now? To paraphrase Rogers (1992), ‘we are all passing: we are all lying’. It is beyond the scope of this article (yet gain) to do this argument justice.

^x With apologies to Pete Shelley and the Buzzcocks.