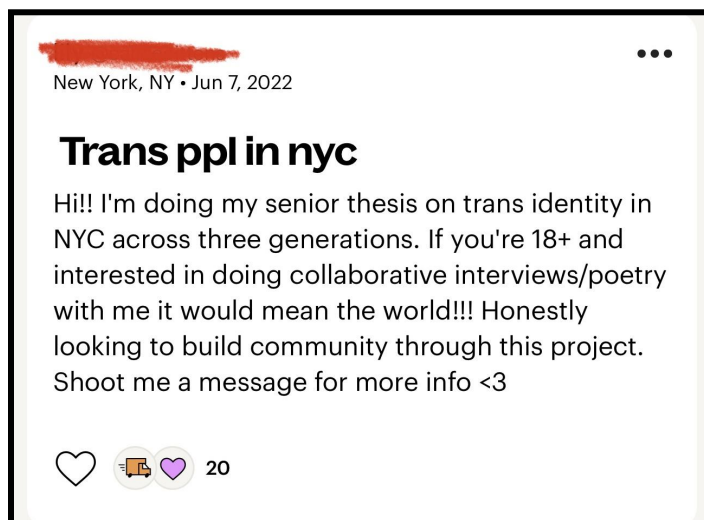


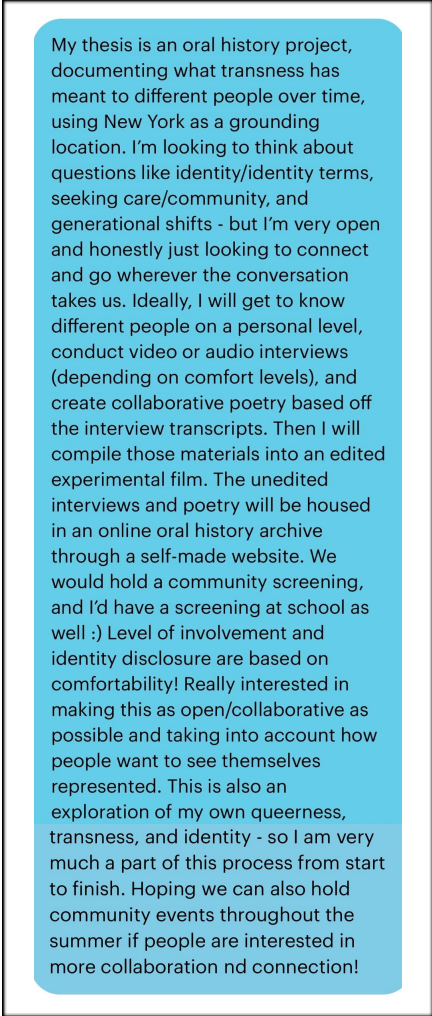
Reflections on *Trans Art and Subjectivities*

When I finished my junior year at [REDACTED] in May of 2022, I returned home to New York and eventually moved into an apartment in Morningside Heights, Manhattan, working as a barista at a cafe on the Upper West Side. This was the first time I had lived in New York City since my family moved from the West Village to the suburbs in 2003, when I was 3 years old. As a newly out trans person seeking connection, mentorship and a deeper sense of place, I wanted to engage with the New York trans community through a creative oral history project, which has come to be known as *Trans Art and Subjectivities*. At the time, the project was meant to consist of relationship-building, interviews, as well as collaborative writing and art with trans individuals across three generations: ages 18-25, 25-40 and 40+. I envisioned the project culminating in some sort of multimedia piece, whether that be a video, website or installation. While the terms of the project may have changed over time, its essence and core values remain the same. I aspired to foster community and produce a collaborative, creative archive of trans people, including myself, who were living in (and/or from) New York City.

I initially sought out project participants through an app called *Lex*, which brands itself as a sort-of queer “craigslist.” My early postings looked something like this:



Through posting on *Lex*, as well as Instagram, and pleading with New-York-based friends to connect me to their queer and trans networks, I engaged in dozens of virtual conversations introducing myself, answering questions about the project, and gaging whether or not folks were interested in meeting with me in person. When someone expressed interest in one of my postings on *Lex*, I would send them a “pitch” for the project, which at the time went as follows:



My thesis is an oral history project, documenting what transness has meant to different people over time, using New York as a grounding location. I'm looking to think about questions like identity/identity terms, seeking care/community, and generational shifts - but I'm very open and honestly just looking to connect and go wherever the conversation takes us. Ideally, I will get to know different people on a personal level, conduct video or audio interviews (depending on comfort levels), and create collaborative poetry based off the interview transcripts. Then I will compile those materials into an edited experimental film. The unedited interviews and poetry will be housed in an online oral history archive through a self-made website. We would hold a community screening, and I'd have a screening at school as well :) Level of involvement and identity disclosure are based on comfortability! Really interested in making this as open/collaborative as possible and taking into account how people want to see themselves represented. This is also an exploration of my own queerness, transness, and identity - so I am very much a part of this process from start to finish. Hoping we can also hold community events throughout the summer if people are interested in more collaboration and connection!

I juggled responding to messages from 10-20 different people in any given week. Eventually, I started to set up one-on-one meetings with folks who were excited to learn more. The first few one-on-one conversations were difficult, for many reasons. I had to learn how to verbally “pitch” an emotionally vulnerable project, as well as pitch myself as its facilitator, to

individuals whom I had only spoken to over text. I felt pressure to get to know people on intimate levels in incredibly short periods of time, as well as balance logistical concerns around the project with building real, trusting relationships. I quickly learned the difficulties of working around other people's schedules, as well as the importance of having flexible expectations. While one day a person may have been interested in meeting for coffee or even conducting an interview, the next day they may have changed their mind or stopped responding to my messages. And that's okay. To be honest, I was shocked that anyone would want to be involved in an unpaid creative oral history project in the first place. I knew people had busy lives, and a myriad of responsibilities, so I was grateful for all the interest that this project received – regardless of whether that interest culminated in an interview. However, in all honesty, at times it was difficult to keep a calm mind as the summer flew by and folks floated in and out of the project.

Ultimately, I decided to prioritize building trusting relationships before conducting any interviews or engaging with the formal contents of the project. I met with individuals to picnic in Central Park; get boba in the Lower East Side; attend music release parties; browse Barnes and Noble; and lounge on benches in Riverside Park, overlooking the Hudson River. We talked about our lives and experiences, roamed the city and bantered about random thoughts or interests. More than meeting up with “interlocutors” over the course of the summer, I was meeting up with friends, often engaging with 2-3 different people a week. While we may have discussed the terms of the project in our first meeting, after a while I was simply asking folks who wanted to hang out and seeing who stuck around. I also remained flexible with participants who wanted to connect over the phone as well as folks who did not have the time, or did not feel the need, to meet multiple times before the interview. For example, while I ended up hanging out with Angelo dozens of times before we actually recorded an interview, I only had a handful of text

conversations and 1-2 phone calls with Max before meeting them for the first time and recording an interview in their home.

When July passed and I had only conducted Max's interview – and completed no collaborative writing or artwork – I realized I needed to facilitate the interview process in a more intentional way. I confirmed with participants whether they wanted to participate in an interview and met with them to brainstorm interview topics and questions. After an initial conversation about the topics and structure of the interview, participants had the option to write their own interview questions, co-write the questions with me or review questions I wrote and make any changes they saw fit. I made sure to work within time-frames that felt doable and comfortable for each interviewee. I asked folks whether they wanted their interviews to be recorded through audio or video, the levels of anonymity they desired, as well as where they wanted the interviews to take place. I was sure to clarify the aims and scope of the project – especially in relation to how it would be edited and where it would be publicized. I assured participants that they would have the opportunity to consent to and/or make changes to their materials at every stage of the project. After clarifying all of these terms in a conversation, as well as reviewing each section of the consent form together, participants signed the consent form and, eventually, we recorded their interviews. Given time constraints, three interviews took place over the summer and two took place over the winter. Interviews were recorded across the city, state and interweb – from city parks, to downtown bars, to family homes in the suburbs, to Zoom. It was difficult to account for external factors such as weather, background noise and busy schedules. However, I ultimately tried to remain emotionally present and engaged during the interviews while ensuring everything was technically and logistically sound to the best of my ability.

Aside from the interviews, this project also engaged with collaborative writing and artwork. While Max submitted a written version of one of their poems and recorded a

spoken-word rendition to include in the project, no other participants contributed or directly collaborated with me on writing (as was their personal preference). However, with the consent of all interviewees, I was able to use the interview transcripts to write my own reflective poetry on the facilitation of this project and my relationship to transness. In this sense, the interviewees “collaborated” with me poetically through the language of their interview transcripts. Although the poetry ended up being more of a personal endeavor, I was able to initiate collaborative art making with multiple interviewees. I invited participants to meet with me this past winter, whether at art studios, public spaces or local cafes, to engage in collaborative artwork. M and I created clay figures in an art studio, while Max and I painted together in their favorite cafe — and some of this art is showcased on the pages “M” and “Max,” respectively. Angelo and I were meant to paint together in the Lower East Side, but we were pressed for time and ended up catching up instead. Although Alex, Zai and Angelo did not engage in collaborative artmaking due to time constraints or personal choice, Zai and Angelo submitted personal artwork to include on their website pages. Max and I submitted personal artwork to include on our pages alongside the collaborative pieces, as well. Lastly, after sending out the final website to participants for review and consent, M suggested I include artwork not only from interviewees, but to open up the archive to showcase art from trans people across the city. After running this idea by the other project participants and receiving positive feedback, I decided to post an open-call on social media and among friends. The art that emerged from this process is located on the page “Showcasing Trans Art.” All submissions were accepted and I am grateful for the folks who shared their art with this archive.

I created the website myself, and it houses all of the project materials. Each participant has their own page on the website, which includes their raw interview recordings and transcripts, brief bios and any art (collaborative or personal) they contributed to the project. My own page,

titled “Levi,” houses all of my reflective artwork and writing on the project. “Showcasing Trans Art” showcases the work of trans artists from across New York, and the “About” section briefly details the project and its methodologies. Participants had the opportunity to review their interview recordings, transcripts, artwork and the website as a whole (including my reflective poetry using their interview transcripts) before anything was published publicly. While some participants redacted words or phrases they did not want included in their interviews, Alex chose to redact their entire interview recording as well as larger parts of their transcript, and M decided not to include a bio.

At the beginning of the project, I intended to interview trans people across three generations of time. In reality, it proved difficult to find interviewees over 30, especially given that the majority of my connections for this project were made through social media and mutual friends. Given these limitations, I decided to adapt the project accordingly. As opposed to interviewing trans people across three generations, I interviewed trans people within my own generation, or roughly ages 18-28.

Additionally, I originally believed that this project would include some sort of edited video piece, whether documentary or video-poetry. However, given time constraints and the fact that most of the interviews for this project were recorded with audio only, I decided to focus my efforts on showcasing each participant’s full, unedited interview on the website. I found that including reflective poetry and artwork on my own page facilitated a more nuanced and ethical approach to acknowledging my positionality, and allowed me to intentionally channel what moved me from the interviews into my own creative practices. I wanted the website to center each participant, as well as their contributions to the project, on their own terms, as opposed to centering my own edited piece that may have limited the expansive possibilities for interpretation and multiple meanings within the interviews. I initially imagined this project to

include more than 5 interviewees. However, given the difficulties I faced navigating time and logistical constraints while also trying to form deep, trusting relationships with each interviewee, I am quite satisfied with how it turned out. I believe I was able to work closely with each participant to understand how they wanted to be presented on the site – and to ensure that I was sharing their story in a thoughtful, meaningful way. Regardless of the final product, I am so grateful for the relationships I built through this project. I came out in October of 2021, and I never had trans friends or community until this summer. M, Max, Angelo, Alex and Zai have taught me so much and it has been so moving to collaborate and connect with them. I thank them endlessly for their time, care and vulnerability.

Lastly, I would have hoped to host community events throughout the summer or winter so that the participants could meet each other, if they wanted to. While I simply didn't have enough time to do so this past summer, I hope to organize a release party in the future, or even a collaborative art session open to all participants (as opposed to simply myself and one other person). I attempted to organize an art session open to all participants over the winter, but it proved stressful to coordinate scheduling with everyone around the holidays, especially while I still had interviews to complete – which was my main priority at the time. I wish I had at least organized a casual hangout among participants before the release of the project, but I let shyness, passivity and fear of awkwardness get the best of me, and I forgive myself for that.

This project was initially inspired by Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied*, which I first watched in [REDACTED] course in the spring of 2022. I was struck by the way that the film collapsed the boundaries between poetry, performance and film; history and the personal; community and individuality. I wanted to collapse the boundaries between mediums in my own project; interrogate what is labeled as "history"; and create community-based media while centering the individual stories, complexities and creative practices of each participant. I was

also inspired by Riggs' insertion of himself and his story into the film. I aimed to not only facilitate my project, but to actually be a part of it. For example, my interview with Zai is actually a conversation between us, in which we both ask and answer questions. I have my own page on the project, titled "Levi," not only because I facilitated the project, but because I was thinking about my experiences and relationship with transness alongside my project participants – and as a project participant myself. I was also inspired by Agnès Varda's film *The Gleaners and I*, which I first watched in [REDACTED] course. Varda not only documents the lives and aspirations of "gleaners" – or people who scavenge – but she herself is a "gleaner," the camera the tool with which she "gleans" stories. As an anthropologist, I don't believe any piece of media can ever be truly "objective." *Gleaners* made me think more deeply about how filmmakers ultimately shape and are shaped by their films, and Varda has inspired me to actively embrace the power of reflexivity in my own project.

In the creative writing class [REDACTED], I have had the opportunity to write a 30-page poetry portfolio to be included on the website. This portfolio grapples with questions of power and positionality, community-building and my own relationship to transness. I was also able to take [REDACTED], the first trans studies course taught at [REDACTED] college. Through this course, I was introduced to a wide range of trans theory, films and multimedia artwork which have influenced and deepened my project. Some of these texts and cultural objects are listed below:

- bell hooks, "Is Paris Burning?"
- C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics"
- Cameron Awkward-Rich, "Everywhere We Look, There We Are"
- CASSILS, "Becoming an Image"

- Dani Bustillo, “With and Beyond Los Angeles’s Daddy Tank: Gender, Confinement, and Queer Desire”
- Jack Halberstam, “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies” from *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*
- Jian Neo Chen and micha cárdenas, “Times to Come: Materializing Trans Times”
- José Esteban Muñoz, “The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Creme Davis’s Terrorist Drag” from *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*
- Jules Gill-Peterson, “Trans of Color Critique Before Transsexuality”
- Kadji Amin, “Temporality” from *Posttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies special issue of Transgender Studies Quarterly*, pp. 219-222
- Kadji Amin, “We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents”
- Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*
- Marquis Bey, “Abolition, Gender Radicality” from *Black Trans Feminism*
- Marshall (Kai) Green and Treva Ellison, “Tranifest” from *Posttranssexual: Key Concepts for a Twenty-First-Century Transgender Studies special issue of Transgender Studies Quarterly*, pp. 222-225
- micha cárdenas, “Pregnancy: Reproductive Futures in Trans of Color Feminism”
- *Paris is Burning* (1990, d. Jennie Livingston)
- *Tangerine* (2015, d. Sean Baker)
- Treva Ellison, “Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender”
- Vaginal Creme Davis, *That Fertile Feeling*
- Vaginal Davis, “This is Not a Dream”

Thank you to my academic supervisor, [REDACTED] for supervising this project and supporting my vision from the beginning; to Alex, Angelo, M, Max and Zai for their trust, patience, vulnerability, and friendship; to all of the trans people who submitted artwork to *Trans Art and Subjectivities*; to professor [REDACTED] and the [REDACTED] creative writing class for reading and responding to my poetry with such care; and to Kali, Adi, Alexa, Catherine, Menasha, Xiao, Luis, Gabe, Rachel and Becky, for caring so deeply and for seeing me as I see myself. It is hard to believe that this process has come to an end.

I came into this project thinking about what it means to build an intentional community, and I will leave this project knowing that the relationships I've formed over the last year will not end when I publish my website. They will continue to grow and I will continue to nurture them, and this website will serve as a living archive of connection and creativity between trans people, ages 18-28, in New York City, during the summer of 2022 and beyond.