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De/constructing DIY identities in a trans music scene

Abstract

The emergence of 'trans' as a social and political movement and identity has created the conditions for the creation of a new music scene, organized around the gender(ed) identities of those involved rather than musical genre.

This paper examines the parallels between the attitude taken towards gender(ed) identity and the organization of events in the United Kingdom's trans music scene. Both entail de/construction through strategies of 'genre evasion' (Steinholt, 2012) and 'cut-and-paste' (Bornstein, 1994). This de/constructive process crosses boundaries and opens possibilities, enabling new modes of organization alongside new ways of understanding culture and identity.

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De/constructing DIY identities in a trans music scene

As an activist, I think about spaces. I think about the spaces that I challenge and create, and as I watched and applauded and ran around trying to locate performers I thought about the space that I'd helped open up in Pride. The spaces I am talking about are both physical [...] but also more abstract. Space is also about what is given voice, what is allowed to flourish, the possibilities that can be articulated (Gupta, 2012).

The past three decades have seen the emergence of an increasingly vigorous and outspoken trans movement in the United Kingdom. Resulting political and social changes have been accompanied by an increasing number of individuals willing to disclose their trans status and be publicly trans. With the development of 'new modes' and 'different codes' of trans identity and political activism (Whittle, 1998: 393), and an increasingly visible trans population, comes the possibility of 'trans' as an organising category for cultural forms (see Carrera et al., 2012 and Halberstam, 2005, for discussions of trans cultural forms in a range of geographic contexts).

By the early 2010s there was a growing music scene in the United Kingdom, which emerged from and brought together networks of trans activists, musicians and promoters for semi-regular events across the country. Events such as Awkward Turtle, Bar Wotever, Transpose (London), Moulin Rage (Brighton, Cambridge and London), Cachín Cachán Cachunga (Edinburgh and Glasgow) and the Nottinghamshire Pride Trans Tent (Nottingham) effectively created temporary trans spaces within pubs, bars, small clubs and community centres, or as part of wider LGBT Pride programs. These events tended to draw small but enthusiastic crowds of 'underground' music fans, with typical audiences ranging between 20 and 100 people. They drew heavily upon a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos most typically associated with underground scenes based around the genres of indie, punk or folk; however, the musical forms present at any given trans music event typically drew upon a far wider pool of genres. Efforts were often made by promoters (with mixed success) to ensure diversity in terms of age, class, dis/ability and

race. Rather than being defined wholly by musical style or participants' cultural backgrounds, therefore, this scene coalesced largely through the notable presence of *trans* people as promoters, performers and audience members.

The starting point for the research project that forms the basis of this article was a process of critical reflection upon the authors' own involvement as performers and event promoters within a loose network of trans-oriented events. The scene we discovered through this network worked actively to *not* define itself, and was populated by individuals whose own identities were similarly complex. Our findings describe a scene in which flexible 'trans' approaches to gender are reflected in the *spaces* that participants created in order to share and experience music and performance. We argue that this is a de/constructive process by which participants draw upon practices of 'genre evasion' (Steinholt, 2012) and/or 'cut-and-paste' (Bornstein, 1994) in order to engage with complexity and possibility in a deeply personal – but nevertheless *social* – manner.

Entering the field

This paper is based upon a small-scale ethnographic research project conducted in 2012-3. Our findings draw on materials associated with events, including gig posters, promotional websites, Youtube videos and blogs; four interviews with individuals deeply involved with the scene as musicians and/or promoters; and participant observation at number of events that we attended as audience members, musicians and/or promoters.

Both researchers are white, middle class women who have long been involved in alternative music subcultures. Ruth identifies as a trans woman, having transitioned from a coercively-assigned gender (male) to a self-assigned gender (female). Kirsty considers herself to be cis¹ and was less involved with trans community events at the beginning of this research.

¹ 'Cis' is typically used as an antonym for 'trans'. Whilst we consider the term 'cis' to be of use in discussing difference and de-centring the dominant group (Koyama, 2002), we believe that *categorical* distinctions between 'trans' and 'cis' are inherently problematic, as these result in an artificial binary that is insensitive to the complexities of gendered diversity (Enke, 2012). We therefore regard 'cis' as a contingent social phenomenon, as opposed to an essential category.

Ruth's trans identity has informed a long-running involvement with trans activism and associated cultural events. The authors play together in a band (Not Right) which was part of the trans music scene at the time the research took place, and have performed at a number of the events discussed in this article. This provided the inspiration for the research, offered access to the scene, and provided a starting point for identifying the events that inform this paper.

Our entry to the field was through 'Wotever Rock', a gig hosted by Bar Wotever at London's Royal Vauxhall Tavern in May 2012. At this event we recognized for the first time that we were interacting with a wider community of trans artists, activists and promoters. The invitation to play at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern came after a member of the Bar Wotever team attended a fundraiser at the band's hometown of Leamington Spa for Godiva Young Gays & Lesbians (GYGL), a Midlands LGBTQ youth group; this was another event which, on reflection, was organized by a trans promoter and featured a substantial number of trans performers from a range of artistic and demographic backgrounds.

In the months that followed, we found ourselves increasingly invited to play at similar events across the UK, where a high proportion of performers, organizers and attendees were trans. The questions we began to ask ourselves provided the original basis for this research project. Is there a trans music scene? If so, how might it be characterized; are there common elements beyond the prevalence of trans performers and organizers?

The design of our project was informed by grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990): the findings presented in this paper were generated and refined in an ongoing, back-and-forth process of data collection, analysis, and theory generation. Our aim was to inductively and reflexively produce theory that prioritized participant voices. This was important for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, we wanted to look empirically at how the events we were interested in were understood by those who participated in them, and construct the conceptual categories at the centre of our analysis accordingly. Secondly, trans people's cultural histories are all too often subject to erasure or appropriation (through theoretical abstraction) by cis academics who have had no direct involvement in them (Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2007). By

focusing our research on trans people's activities and understandings, we work to actively resist these tendencies through constructing new narratives and offering alternative cultural accounts. We further wish to move beyond tropes of trans victimhood in order to refocus on the rich cultural realities and possibilities of trans lives.

During the research process we drew upon a range of qualitative data, including interviews with – and cultural artefacts² produced by – individuals who participated in and/or organized events. We further recognized our *own* participation in this scene as relevant for our analysis, and therefore draw on participant observation as well as analytic autoethnographic reflection (Anderson, 2006).

We began the research by jointly reflecting upon events that we had participated in prior to the launch of the project (such as the GYGL and Wotever Rock gigs), and sampling information related to these events and others (including a number we had *not* attended, such Cachín Cachán Cachunga) through blogs and social media sites such as Facebook and Youtube. We used this to define the scope of the project: we would look specifically at the proliferation of events across the UK at which performers and organizers were predominantly trans. During this initial exploration of the field, we effectively answered our original research question: the proliferation of events and network of performers and promoters who linked these events indicated the presence of a 'trans' music scene. We therefore shifted our focus towards understanding how the scene operated, and how it was understood by participants. Both researchers kept research notes on our past and ongoing (trans-oriented) cultural participation, detailing (for instance) the atmosphere at events we attended, the nature of the performances, and the stated purpose of the events (for instance, were they political events such as fundraisers?) These were informed by participant observation at ten events, plus a critical reappraisal of four events we had attended in the past. The autoethnographic element of this project was therefore retrospective as well as continuous: this enabled us to draw critically on our past experiences in the same way that we would ask our interviewees to do. Some of our research notes were kept in private

² Including event pages on social media, posters, blog posts, lyrics, band and promoter websites.

fieldwork diaries: others were shared online in blog form, for instance through the Not Right website.

Our contacts from the events we attended formed a basis from which to recruit interviewees. We interviewed four individuals who had, like us, been involved in performing at and/or organizing trans-oriented events across the country. These individuals came from a range of quite different social backgrounds, but were all in their 20s or 30s and shared a thoughtful and reflective approach to gender that is common within the activist networks from which the trans music scene emerged. In order to ensure the anonymity of interview participants we have used pseudonyms in this article, and do not share explicit demographic information on these individuals³.

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted online using instant messaging software. This Internet-based approach enabled us to easily interview participants jointly. The time lag present within the conversation medium also allowed us to carefully formulate questions that asked for sensitive personal information. We asked extensively about their feelings and relationship with gender as well as more general questions regarding their cultural activities. Moreover, the interview medium enabled our participants to draw on related resources such as community blogs and websites, commenting on and linking to them as part of the interview, thereby providing us with additional data.

This interview process had a dual role in comparing our observations to those of others as well as collaboratively generating theory alongside our interview participants. This collective negotiation and our movement between data collection and analysis forms an integral part our inductive generation of theory.

We individually kept and coded our research notes as well as interview transcripts and cultural artefacts using a thematic analytic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We then compared and contrasted our respective findings; this informed a joint re-coding of the data.

³ Venue locations and the names of club nights, bands, and solo performers have, however, been preserved in this article; we consider them vital for contextualization and capturing the character of the scene.

Coming to terms with 'trans'

Whilst 'trans' is sometimes used as a shorthand for transsexual individuals undergoing a medically supervised transition from male to female or vice-versa, in this paper we use the term in a broader sense. Whittle (2006) argues that: '[a] trans identity is now accessible [...] to anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed with at birth, or has a gender identity at odds with the labels "man" or "woman" credited to them by formal authorities' (xi). In this sense 'trans' is oppositional: individuals move through the world as trans do so because their behavior and/or bodies do not conform to normative ideas of binary sex and/or gender. Thus, while 'trans' does operate as a 'politicised identity category' it can also be understood more widely as something that people *do* (Enke, 2012: 236; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

We argue that this *doing* of trans moves beyond the way in which people express gender, to incorporate the way in which people engage more widely with the politics and possibilities of gender. Within the spaces of the trans music scene we observed many examples this. Acts such as the queer cabaret collective Lashings of Ginger Beer Time and our own band Not Right exhibit a trans feminism through critiques of transmisogyny (Serano, 2007) as well as the wider objectification of trans women's bodies. Performers such as Lashings comedian/singer Sally Outen were very explicitly, visibly trans and discussed this within their acts, thereby countering tropes of transfeminine passivity and the notion of authenticity through 'passing'. Meanwhile, musicians such as CN Lester and Seth Corbin expanded gendered norms through performances in which they brought their genderqueer bodies into the public sphere *without* this being a focus for their performances. In claiming space *as trans* on their own terms within a public sphere, all of these performers worked towards an oppositional de-subjugation of 'trans'.

An alternative engagement with trans politics and possibility could be seen in acts such as The Mechanisms and Dr Carmilla. These performers drew upon iconography of science fiction and fantasy in order to deconstruct gender norms. For instance, the character of Dr Carmilla

(played by singer-songwriter Maki Yamazaki) is a lesbian vampire from outer space; in songs such as 'Exhumed', she describes being awoken from the dead and experimented on in a laboratory, before escaping and joyously embracing her monstrosity. In this way, Yamazaki's storytelling reflects a celebration of disruptive 'cyborg' possibilities within the literatures of feminist and trans theory, with technologically enhanced bodies posing a threat to the patriarchal divide between 'man' and 'woman' (Haraway, 1991; Stryker, 1994).

A wide range of oppositional engagements with gender could similarly be seen in our interviews. In addition to providing an in-depth, complicated account of gendered identity and selfhood, each participant described being 'trans' in terms of their relationship to others. For instance, Pat stated that: 'I definitely see myself as being "trans" insofar as it means being in constant opposition to current/historical norms of gender/sexed bodies/behaviours'. Similarly, Robin explained: "'[t]rans" is a useful shorthand I can give if I don't feel like telling people the long and involved story of my gender dysphoria, gendered expression, etc etc[.]'. Both Pat and Robin understood their identities in terms of a 'non-binary' paradigm, entailing a rejection of 'female' and 'feminine', 'male' and 'masculine' as the only possibilities for gendered understanding and expression. By contrast, Ruth's identity as a trans *woman* entails – for her – a different kind of non-conformity: a rejection of the normative cisgenderist (Kennedy, 2013) link between apparent physical sex, assigned gender, gender identity and gender presentation. Within the trans music scene, there was conceptual space for these different approaches to 'trans' to exist alongside one another, in what Monro (2007) describes as a 'gender pluralist' approach: 'conceptualizing gender as "fields" or "groupings" of – in some cases overlapping – masculinities, femininities, and gender diverse identities' (6.10).

Pat, Robin and Ruth's various understandings of themselves as 'trans' demonstrates the innate ambivalence of an oppositional trans identity. Within a different social world, they (like Dr Carmilla, and some of The Mechanism's non-gendered characters) might not be trans: they therefore recognize the conditional nature of this identity. However, this also imbues the term

with a queer fluidity: Pat, Robin and Ruth will *remain* trans so long as their gender/sex does not mesh with (cis)normative understandings of body/behavior.

In this way, 'trans' becomes a means by which individuals might label their own complexly embodied relationship to both social norms and external social actors, *and* an organizing principle by which people with differing experiences of gender but a shared experience of exclusion and oppositionality might come together to organize, socialize and indeed perform. This use of trans for both individual identity and as an umbrella term for multiple experiences was certainly the case amongst our research participants and within the trans music scene, reflecting the multi-faceted use of the term by activist-academics such as Whittle (2006).

'Trans' as de/construction

'Trans' does not, therefore, have a single, fixed meaning; it instead incorporates a multiplicity of meanings that vary according to both individual and social context. Drawing upon the interviews undertaken for this project as well as wider observations within the trans music scene, we argue that these meanings are negotiated through a process of simultaneous deconstruction (through 'genre evasion'), and construction (through 'cut-and-paste') with trans identity existing in the space between the two.

In describing their gendered identities, we saw performers and interview participants employing similar discursive practices of 'genre evasion' to those noted by Steinholt (2012) in his research with Russian punks. Steinholt's participants tended to either avoid genre labels or choose their own ways to define themselves. In this way they sought to avoid being pigeonholed or judged alongside others: '[g]enre evasion becomes necessary in order to protect the notion of an authentic voice that is not ensured by reference to generic convention' (Steinholt, 2012: 282). In a similar manner, participants in the trans music scene frequently sought to evade generic conventions of gendered possibility:

I'm not sure that there's any one thing we can agree on in terms of meaning when we speak of 'gender' - and maybe that's the best way of saying how I understand my own gender? [...] On a personal, philosophical level I'd say that I think the concept of 'gender' is so multitudinous and resistant to fixed definition that it ceases to have any 'true' meaning whatsoever. (Pat)

Pat questions the very *idea* of gender: or, at least, the idea that 'gender' can have any 'true' meaning. In this way, they seek to evade defining their own gender identity in any way that is fixed or absolute. We argue that this is a broadly *deconstructive* strategy, used to question and break down the rigidity of (cis)gendered language.

A second example of genre evasion from our findings entailed the use of a wealth of seemingly contradictory terms in order to distance oneself from the fixedness of these labels. An example of this can be found in Robin's description of their trans gender identity. Robin ascribes the following terms to themselves: non-binary, genderqueer, gender-fluid, androgynous, 'an effeminate queer man, a butch woman, a totally genderless thing, a person with [an] excess of masculine AND feminine traits'. In this way, Robin refuses to be bound by the limitations typically associated with these terms, and also seeks not to be 'pinned down' by a single gender(ed) identity. As Steinholt (2012) noted in reference to his interviews with Russian punks: '[e]vasion, it appears, is the point in itself. In this particular case the refusal to be pinned down reaches an extreme' (278).

In the process we describe as 'construction', our participants drew on a range of pre-existing ideas regarding gendered possibility in order to build understandings of their (trans)gendered selves. This typically took place even as participants *also* engaged in genre evasion. Robin describes their aforementioned list of descriptive terms as: 'picking up loads of different words and smushing them together until they reach an approximation of what I'm looking for'. Similarly, Maki Yamazaki's Facebook page describes her as 'queer, trans, grey asexual, genderqueer and thoroughly nerdy'. In this regard, we see parallels with Bornstein's

(1994) conceptualization of transgender identity 'based on collage. You know [... sort] of a cut-and-paste thing' (3). A complex identity that reflects the specific experiences and feelings of the individual can therefore be discursively *constructed* in a DIY fashion from whatever language is available. 'Trans' can be understood in this context not as a fixed identity, but as an oppositional movement away from rigidity and towards the creation of new possibilities through the acknowledgement of gendered (and sexual, and social) complexity and fluidity. This offers an alternative to the limited possibility of normative (cis)gendered language, whilst utilizing discursive tools that are already available. Our participants sought to redefine language, rather than be defined by it.

For some participants this de/constructive approach appeared to be the outcome of years of reflection. However, in one case we witnessed de/construction *during* the interview itself. Whilst Riley initially asserted that his gender identity was 'male', he almost immediately called this definition into question as he realized that 'male', as a lone descriptor, was too prescriptive to fully describe his gender identity:

Interviewers: what pronouns would you prefer us to use?

Riley: male if you please

Interviewers: [...] would you describe your gender identity as male?

Riley: yes

actually wait, no

[...]

Riley: I feel like I have multiple gender identities running parallel to each other and how I feel on a day to day basis contradicts identifying purely as 'male'

Interviewers: is 'male' a large part of your gender then, rather than the whole of your gender?

Riley: it's part of it, maybe not a large part but it's definitely in the mix

Interviewers: what genders do you see as being in the mix?

Riley: transgender, transmasculine, male, female

Whilst Riley started out describing himself as male, he continued to add description in order to add further meaning to his male identity, whilst simultaneously destabilising the boundaries of 'male' possibility. We also see again the de/constructive use of seemingly contradictory identities ('male'/'female') in a manner similar to the approaches taken by Robin and Maki Yamazaki. In this way, the binary logic of 'male' and 'female' as necessarily distinct is discarded as participants seek recognition as (in some sense) both. This also opens up the possibility for (some) individuals to be *neither* 'male' nor 'female'; as with Yamazaki's character of Dr Carmilla (who notably uses a non-gendered title), there are more meaningful ways by which people can be defined.

Indeed, some participants sought to deliberately move the conversation away from gender as we discussed identity. For instance, Alex explained: 'I might sooner be labelled by what I do, how I think, my loves and passions which is too complex to actually be readily appraised by visual scrutiny alone', describing themselves as a, '[m]usic lover, punk, techie, scientist, writer, reader, sibling'. Just as Robin and Riley utilise long lists in order to build a description of themselves, Alex here produces a list of identities tied to their greatest interests. This, too, is arguably a de/constructive approach to personal identity, with Alex seeking to define themselves through a complex interaction of activities rather than be 'pinned down' and defined in terms of their being visibly (gender)queer, in a similar manner to performers such as CN Lester and Seth Corbin.

For our research participants, being 'trans' can be understood as an outcome of *simultaneously* evading gendered definition, and constructing new gendered possibilities in a 'cut-and-paste' manner. Trans identities come to be in the space between these processes. Gender pluralism (Monro, 2007) is hence not simply an interpersonal phenomenon, but also a means by which *individual* engagements with gender might draw upon a great range of

possibilities for being. These strategies work to create space in which trans people might express and understand themselves and communicate with others in a more authentic way.

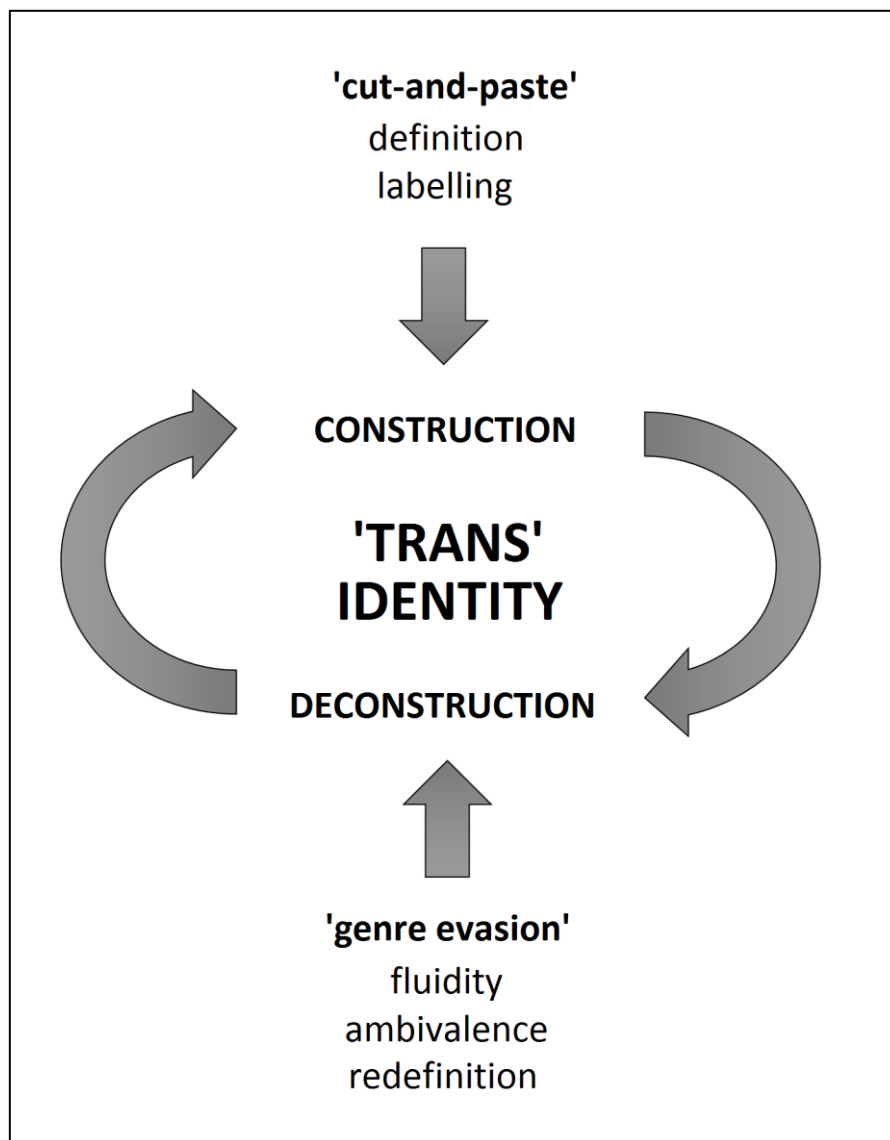


Figure 1: De/construction theory of 'trans', diagram by authors.

A trans music scene

In his seminal account of the emergence of new forms of trans identity in the context of Internet communities, Whittle (1998) describes how a 'reconstructive project of "new modes" and "different codes"' came to shape innovative and 'exceptionally influential' forms of activism (393). In a similar manner, our findings show that the de/constructive, gender pluralist

approaches to 'trans' employed by trans music scene participants came to shape their *cultural* engagement. As we examined scene participants' de/constructive approaches to (trans)gendered identity, we began to observe parallels with the manner in which they approached their involvement in cultural events.

Individual events constituted a scene that was linked by more than just a network of (trans) promoters, performers and audiences; they also shared an approach that complicated the idea of trans space. Just as participants' trans identities existed in a space created through both deconstructive genre evasion and cut-and-paste construction, the very way in which the events (and wider scene) in which they were involved might be understood as *trans* similarly relies upon de/constructive logics.

We noted that trans music scene events had the following shared elements:

- the events foregrounded trans performers,
- the events were not restricted by genre,
- the events were open to all even as they aimed to be a 'safe space' specifically for trans people,
- there was an overarching theme at most events that was often *not* related directly to a specifically trans identity or politic,
- the events were run along DIY principles.

For example, the Cutlery Drawer event *Moulin Rage* was organised by a trans promoter, and featured a line-up consisting primarily of trans solo performers (CN Lester and Ruth Pearce) or groups prominently featuring trans members and themes (Lashings of Ginger Beer Time and The Mechanisms). These acts represented a range of genres: Lashings of Ginger Beer Time put on a musical burlesque show, CN Lester performed a number of piano ballads rooted in alternative rock, and The Mechanisms were a space opera/fairytale-themed folk band. A great many trans people were present at the event, which (intentionally) created a 'safe space' in

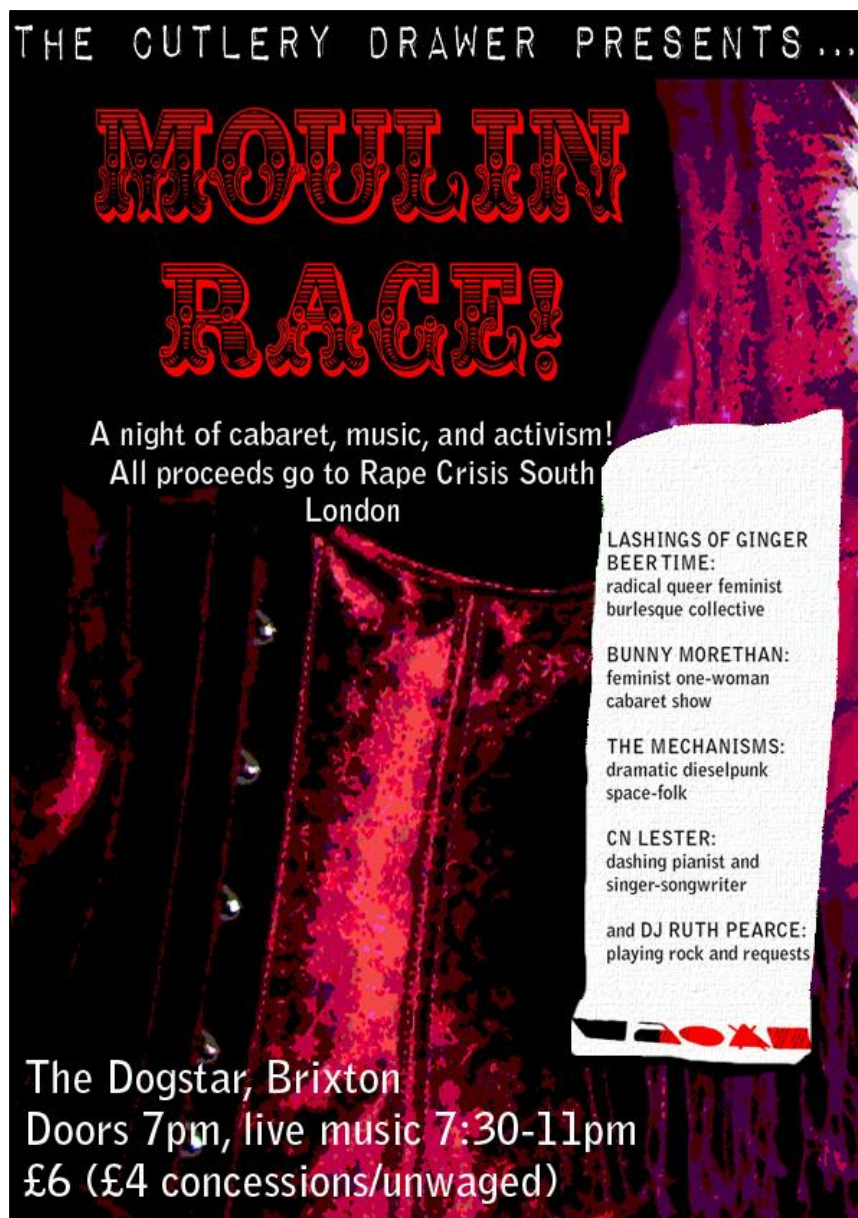


Figure 2: 'Moulin Rage!', poster provided by The Cutlery Drawer.

which attendees felt comfortable expressing gender diversity. However, this was not a trans-exclusive event: indeed, it was not even advertised as a trans-oriented event, with promotional materials focusing on the night's role as fundraiser for Rape Crisis South London (the 'overarching theme' of the night). Instead, the presence of so many trans performers communicated the nature of the night to those 'in the know', even as a cis audience was explicitly

invited and welcomed into the space. Finally, this was not a 'professional', for-profit event, with the promoter and all of the acts contributing in a DIY, non-profit capacity for the sake of both the music and the cause.

De/construction in and through the scene

In order to unpack how these elements can be viewed through a similar lens to the de/constructive approaches to gender identity, we turn now to an analytic discussion of further events. We focus in particular on the Trans Tent at Nottinghamshire Pride 2012 as a running example. Organised along DIY grounds by local trans group Recreation Nottingham, the Trans Tent provided a trans-oriented space within the wider annual LGBT Pride event in the city of Nottingham. As with Moulin Rage, it shared the defining elements of the trans music scene, as well as considerable crossover in terms of the performers who were present.

The majority of individuals who performed in the Trans Tent were trans. In this way, Recreation Nottingham ensured that trans people and their creative projects were prioritised and given a specific platform within a wider LGBT event. The Trans Tent was therefore a space constructed *by* and *for* trans people. Importantly, this afforded the organisers an opportunity to define the parameters of 'trans' for the purposes of the event. The trans people who were invited to perform in the Trans Tent represented a great range of (female, male, genderqueer and non-binary) gendered identity and expression, in addition to a considerable variety of intersecting identities in terms of age, class, dis/ability, race and sexuality. The organisers therefore took an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991), gender pluralist (Monro, 2007) approach, rejecting more prescriptive approaches to 'trans'.⁴ Moreover, the line-up was not exclusively trans. A number of

⁴ Whilst Recreation Nottingham's intersectional approach was fairly typical in the trans scene, the Trans Tent was arguably more successful in implementing this than some other events. Our interviewees and a handful of bloggers noted that many events featured predominantly youthful, white performers and audiences and/or oppressive behaviours such as 'skeezy class drag'. We observed that the diversity of performers and audiences was often linked to the diversity of music genres at any given event: for instance, predominantly 'indie' line-ups at events such as Coventry's Ditch Your Boyfriend club night tended to attract predominantly white audiences, reflecting a broader lack of diversity within the wider indie rock scene.

cis people performed alongside trans bandmates, or were booked as solo acts. This was a trans event where you didn't have to be trans: the boundaries of identity were not strictly policed. The 'trans' label for the event was thereby simultaneously constructed (in an intersectional, gender pluralist manner) *and* deliberately destabilised by the organisers, through practices akin to genre evasion. This was a strategy we'd similarly seen employed at Bar Wotever where the emphasis at Wotever Rock was on trans-fronted bands – The Makeshifts and Not Right – in a line-up organised by a trans promoter. However, there were also acts on stage who played with the possibilities of gender from a 'cis' perspective, including anti-macho male singer-songwriter Killer's Riches, and Battle Of You, who were fronted by two queer women and also known as 'B.O.Y.'. Echoing the way in which individuals might de/construct their 'trans' identities, events such as the Trans Tent and Wotever Rock de/construct the very notion of what a 'trans' space might look like.

The Trans Tent also featured examples of (quite literal) genre evasion. In contrast to most of the other tents and stages at Nottinghamshire Pride, which were usually organised around a specific genre – for example, the acoustic stage, the dance tent and the burlesque tent – the Trans Tent took a cut-and-paste approach to its artistic offerings: 'a little bit from here, a little bit from there' (Bornstein, 1994: 3). Our punk band Not Right followed an opera singer from the Better Strangers collective; there was acoustic rock from Dr Carmilla, comedy from Sally Outen, hip hop from El Dia, burlesque from Lashings of Ginger Beer Time, poetry, and spoken word. This genre evading element of the trans scene varied depending in part on the size of the event: an event with a larger lineup was more likely to have a greater diversity of cultural forms than a shorter night with a more cohesive focus such as Wotever Rock. Some promoters address this by holding a series of events in order to ensure variety over time. CN Lester's event Transpose has been running on an occasional basis in London since 2011. While particular iterations of Transpose might focus more upon one musical genre or another (or upon non-musical forms such as spoken word), the series has featured a similar range of acts to Nottinghamshire Pride's Trans Tents, over time, taking in (for example) folk from Wild,

genrefucking rock from Squid and the Krakens and Lester's own classically-informed alternative music. Such events therefore transcend genre; the unifying feature is 'trans', *even as* promoters seek to avoid any kind of prescriptive approach to the term (and sometimes, as with Moulin Rage, avoid the term altogether in promotional material).

Both the organising committee for the wider Nottinghamshire Pride event and the organisers of the Trans Tent claimed a commitment to community 'safety'. In the former case, this involved hiring private security services. Recreation Nottingham, however, took a different approach to providing a 'safe space' in their tent. The tent *itself* was seen as an investment in 'safety', a response to transphobic incidents at previous Pride events in the city. It was, nevertheless, open to all attendees of Nottinghamshire Pride, with a whole 'wall' of the tent removed in order to make the space literally open. Instead of closing down the space, a number of strategies were employed by the organisers in order to create and maintain 'safety' for the exploration of trans issues. Firstly, there was the aforementioned commitment to inclusivity and intersectional diversity; as Kat Gupta, a member of the organising team, later wrote: 'I want such a space to acknowledge the different and complex ways people identify, encourage exploration of intersectional identities and recognise that there is No One True Way of being trans*' (Gupta, 2012, no page number). Moreover, the safety afforded by this approach extended beyond trans identity: 'we were determined to [...] offer a space to our *allies* to perform in a friendly place where the complexities of *their* identities were welcome' (Gupta, 2012, no page number, emphases added). Secondly, a range of informative materials were made available, with resources and contacts for trans people and their families and friends, as well as facts about a diverse range of historical figures who might be understood as trans. Finally, a code of conduct for the space was prominently displayed, with basic guidelines for behaviour. The Trans Tent at Nottinghamshire Pride therefore operated to construct a trans-specific safe space, even as it deconstructed the very notion of 'trans space' by being open to the general public and not being exclusively 'trans'.

In this way, the de/construction of 'trans' spaces within the scene was very much about *extending* the liberatory potential of gender pluralist trans discourse beyond the boundaries of personal identity and particular trans communities, and into the wider material world.

Approaches to the space in which events are run vary according to the availability of suitable venues across the country. Some events are held in 'trans-friendly' venues: for instance, Queer We Go was held in Leeds' Wharf Chambers, which has a trans-inclusive 'safer space' policy on its website, and non-gendered toilets within the building itself. However, we consistently saw that in spaces which were not *already* set up in a specifically trans-safe way, promoters would often seek to *trans* the spaces they occupied. For example, Transpose is often (and increasingly) held within 'mainstream' venues such as Hackney Attic (which is part of the Picturehouse Cinema) and the Tate Modern museum of modern art. At these events temporary toilet signs are created to 'neutralise' the toilets. A similar measure was undertaken at the authors' 'feminist punk' event Revolt in Coventry, with both trans-inclusive women's toilets and gender-neutral toilets created, and signs prominently displayed in order to explain to cis attendees why this was happening. In this way, the politics of trans diversity, inclusion and visibility can be brought into wider public spaces as part of a commitment to trans attendees' safety.

A 'trans' approach was therefore very explicitly drawn upon as an organising principle of trans scene events, with the promotion of a diverse range of trans performers and the creation of a safe trans space being the *purpose* of the scene. However, just as we saw in our interview participants' reflections upon their gendered identities, there was a simultaneous process of deconstructing what it means to 'be' trans, and – by extension – what it means to create and participate in a 'trans space' or 'trans event'. This was done by ensuring that 'trans' was communicated in the broadest possible way, and in making the space not solely 'about' or 'for' trans. This both provided space to individuals who might have a 'trans' experience without identifying explicitly as such, and – as Gupta (2012) noted – meant that a trans recognition of *complexity* could be extended to cis allies. To promoters within the scene, trans discourse was



Figure 3: Toilet door sign at Revolt

seen to be of benefit to the wider world, not just to trans audiences; and in turn, it was beneficial for trans people to engage with wider communities and socio-political issues. For this reason, it made sense to organise the Trans Tent under the wider umbrella of LGBT Pride: 'trans' alone was *not* the overarching theme of the event. Instead, the Trans Tent was just one part of a large celebration of diversity, inclusivity and openness within a community-oriented, 'family-friendly' setting. Similarly, gigs such as the GYGL fundraiser, Queer We Go, Revolt and Cutlery Drawer gigs

are organised in a manner that emphasises 'LGBT', 'queer' and/or 'feminism' as wider themes, even as these events are organised by trans people and bring together a wide range of trans performers.

Conclusion

The very concept of 'trans' is fluid and contested. Its meaning(s) have shifted and evolved considerably during the last couple of decades, just as the meaning and possibility of preceding/coinciding concepts (such as 'transsexual', 'drag' and 'butch/femme') have also undergone significant changes. However, the emergence of 'trans' as both umbrella term and unitary identity offers individuals the means to conceptualise a particularly wide range of understandings and engagements with gender, both *as* individuals and in solidarity with other gender diverse people. Whilst some community groups use 'trans' effectively as a shorthand for transsexual, transvestite and/or transgender, and some focus upon non-binary possibilities such as genderqueer, genderfluid and androgynous identities, others have sought a gender pluralist (Monro, 2007) approach that provides space for any kind of engagement with gendered possibility. Within the latter camp we find the communities that constitute and contribute to the trans music scene discussed within this paper. Both the interviewees in this study and the wider body of promoters and performers encountered by the authors were keen to avoid prescriptive notions of 'trans' possibility and identity. This, of course, raises the question: how can we even understand something as 'trans' if the very object of discussion refuses definition?

In this paper we have provided a response through examining connections between the (trans)gendered identity of individuals involved in the trans music scene, and the manner in which the scene itself is organised. We argue that within this scene, 'trans' exists in the space between deconstructive strategies (grounded in genre evasion) and constructive strategies (grounded in a cut-and-paste approach): this is the case for events as well as personal identity. In this way, 'trans' performance comes to reflect personal approaches to identity formation. Just as our interview participants and many of the performers described 'trans' in terms of opening

up space for diversity and gender pluralism through genre evasion and cut-and-paste, the *raison d'être* of the events in which they are involved is to open up space for gendered possibilities.

The trans performance community was only a few years old at the time of research, with new events and spaces emerging all the time. Since our project was conducted, the scene has grown and diversified, intersecting in particular with pre-existing queer and feminist punk scenes.⁵ An example of this can be found in our own 'feminist punk' event series, *Revolt*; as we progressed with this research project we began to recognise that *Revolt* possessed characteristics of trans music scene events. In light of our findings, we began to reflexively incorporate observations and ideas from this project into our event events.

Our research provides a snapshot of the scene at a particular moment in time; however, this moment was an important one. The events and processes we describe in this paper could not have happened much sooner: the community required recent conceptual shifts and developments within trans theory and social movements in order to create the kind of diverse space we see in (for instance) the *Trans Tent* at Nottinghamshire Pride. It is this productive commitment to community-oriented diversity that reinforces the importance of a non-prescriptive approach to trans possibility.

⁵ More recent events include *Queer Fest* (Nottingham, Leamington Spa, Leeds), *Bent Fest* (London) and *Trans Pride* (Brighton, Bristol, Glasgow, Leeds). More recent acts include *Daskinsey4*, *Dispute Settlement Mechanism*, *Jesus and his Judgemental Father*, *My Therapist Says Hot Damn!*, *Nim Chimpsky*, *The Spook School*, *Slum of Legs*, *They They Theys* and *Voter Kernel*.

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