

Finding Identity in a Collective Transcapescape: A look inside Transy House

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a phenomenological case study which explores what role a communal home for trans women plays in the development, expression, and validation of gender and sexuality in individual and collective identities. Within this trans-dominated landscape, six male-to-female transwomen who are marginalized from mainstream society find their home. The findings suggest that Transy House has a socio-spatial landscape that is precarious, but remains a safe haven to those in the queer communities. It affords residents opportunities to reconstruct social norms and hierarchies creating a potential site for resistance and empowerment. In this transcapescape, residents learn about the gender and sexuality spectrums while remaining faithful to the prescribed gender binary. Lastly, the research demonstrates the strength of the person-place relationship wherein the individual identity is manifested in the personal space and the collective identity is represented in the public spaces of Transy House.

While the physical landscape is often used to perpetuate and fortify hierarchal social frameworks, marginalized communities can employ spatial tactics to express, validate, and secure their individual and collective identities. There is very little space, though, for people who are trans to go where they can safely be who they are without fear of homophobic or transphobic violence. So, where does this leave trans people to locate themselves within society's socio-spatial framework? This paper argues that through trans-majority appropriation and control of a typically hetero-normative space, doors are opened to reconfigure social hierarchies and transform social norms. Within a trans-dominated space trans women are free to behave and present in trans-positive manners without fear of persecution.

Transy House is a unique example of a trans-dominated space that weaves together elements of the social and spatial environments creating a patchwork of individual and collective genders and sexualities. Within this socio-spatial landscape, a trans woman is not only housed and protected from a transphobic

society, but her feminine identity is created, enhanced, supported and sustained. Within this transcapescape, the collective trans identity is also strengthened and empowered through the newly created familial bonds, socio-political involvement, and the understanding of a shared trans-feminine experience.

THE MEANING OF "HOME"

Home, as eloquently stated by Lynda Johnston and Gill Valentine: "is a word that positively drips with associations." (1995). Homes, for example, are the first places in which we live, they provide the backdrop for domestic activity, and yet they are also places with strong personal and social associations. It can be a place for autonomy, control and personal freedom though, it can also be a place of trepidation.

Johnson and Valentine (1995) posit that for lesbians, the home has been a place of conflict due to past negative experiences

with adversarial, homophobic family members and with the heterosexual domestic life that the home represents. The heterosexual home (the typical family home of a lesbian) was a place of surveillance and discipline, whereas the lesbian home (the home a lesbian occupies either alone or with other lesbians) became an environment that supports, expresses, and shapes the lesbian identity.

In research I conducted on the experience of gender-variant people finding place (Felsenthal, 2004), I found that for trans people, the home served as a multifunctional platform for working, socializing and networking, in addition to providing a place for domestic activity (e.g. sleeping, eating and relaxing) and retreat. The dwelling thus contributed, supported and grounded their various selves (e.g. as worker, friend, activist, ... etc.). It was within this environment that residents found empowerment as individuals and in the collective to (re)build and develop their identities.

Additionally, the home, of all environmental contexts, is the place that most significantly represents and relates to the individual's self-identity. Claire Cooper-Marcus' seminal work (1974) along with psychoanalytic thought assert that one's identity, at both a conscious and subconscious level, is a universal experience that is manifested in one's home. The interior of the house mirrors the person's psyche and the outside façade and landscape signifies one's social performance. Likewise, Gosling and Ko (2002), using Brunswick's lens model to perceptualize the links between the self and the environment, assert that by looking at observable cues of a person's environment (i.e. *identity claims* and *behavioural residue*), one can create a fairly accurate picture of that person's personality. This paper draws on these person-place dynamics as a theoretical and methodological framework for research.

Communal dwellings, though, straddle the boundaries between public and private space. They provide a physical landscape for residents to express aspects of their identity and even have the illusion of being a private place where residents can "just be", at the same time, they remain landscapes in which one is still under the watchful eye of the group. Because of this socio-spatial dichotomy, manoeuvring within these public and private spheres influences one psychically and behaviourally.

THE HOUSE

Transy House is located in a rapidly changing urban neighbourhood of Brooklyn, New York. The neighbourhood edges Park Slope which is known to be progressively liberal with a large lesbian population. The house is a 3-story, turn-of-the-century, attached brick house with lime green aluminium siding. It has a front porch and a back porch that has been enclosed and made into a bedroom, 6 bedrooms and 3 bathrooms. The façade and much of the interior is in need of repair. There is insulation exposed in the walls of the back porch; holes and serious wear in the original wood, planked floors; water damage on the ceilings, walls and floors; holes in plaster walls; and peeling paint. To open up the space, doors have been taken off their hinges and placed in the narrow hallways forcing one to walk sideways down parts of them.

The house is also cluttered with boxes, stacks of magazines, and papers that are strewn about. The furniture, some of which are

antiques, and much of which has been taken from off the street, fills the rooms and is in disrepair. Navigating the interior spaces of Transy House is difficult and requires one to step over piles or boxes and move papers to sit. The walls of the public spaces are wallpapered with numerous large oil and watercolour paintings, mostly of trans women (identity claims). There are also trans-related newspaper clippings, photographs and rally signs seen throughout the house (behavioural residue).

Upon entering the house one is met with a strong smell that permeates the air from the numerous cats and dogs that also reside there. At one point there were 16 cats and 2 dogs, though, at the time of the study there were 2 dogs and 3 cats. The condition of the house has caused some people to "run out screaming", while others find a sense of security and intrigue in the chaos.

THE RESIDENTS

At the time of the study there were 6 male-to-female trans women and 1 biologically sexed and gendered female living there. Two of the trans women are post-operative trans women who completed corrective surgery to match their bodies with their felt gender. The other trans women take hormones to feminize their bodies such as breast and hip enlargement and slowed body hair growth. All of the trans women have been presenting as female for over 10 years. The owner and her partner are a self-identified lesbian trans couple together for over 15 years. The owner's partner has presented across the gender spectrum since transitioning and currently has an androgynous gender appearance. The other trans women in the house are sexually attracted to men. The biological female self-defines as a straight woman.

The residents' backgrounds significantly differ as well. One is multi-ethnic, another is Asian, and the rest are White. They range in age from age 20 to 57. One has her Ph.D. in Economics and works as a full-time, tenured professor at a local university, another is a jazz pianist who also teaches classes in Tarot Card reading, while others either are unemployed or work in the sex industry. The biological woman is an artist. One of the trans women arrived at the house after living in a homeless shelter, another from prison, and yet another from a psychiatric institution. All of the trans residents have experienced some level of transphobia such as being chased out of her home town at gun point. Their familial relationships also vary from having close contact with their parents, siblings, and/or children, to having no contact at all.

Transy House brings together many trans women who have psychological and behavioural difficulties, some have had drug and alcohol addictions, and most have not had experience living communally within a shared living environment. These factors brought together under one roof create a tumultuous socio-spatial environment.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents a phenomenological case study of a trans-dominated residential environment. My focus was on the residents' experience living within this transcape and how they

established, defined and expressed meanings for the self, gender and sexuality in the social and physical contexts.

To understand the socio-spatial environment of Transy House, I explored three elements: 1) the influence of social factors such as: social hierarchy, interactions, status, and roles of residents living in the house; 2) the use and presentation of the physical landscape including: colours, decoration, objects, furniture, layout, scale, traces/cues, and room locations; and 3) contextualization: socio-political position of the trans population, psycho-social history of the house and its residents, physical location of the house (i.e. Brooklyn, New York).

I spent about 6 months researching Transy House visiting the house about 3-4 times a week for anywhere between 2-4 hours each time. I performed 1-1 interviews and conducted participant-led tours with all of the residents and made observations as a participant observer. I also spoke to people from other trans collectives for comparison. Additionally, the owners provided me with archival material such as: home videos, manuscripts, a masters thesis, and a video on Transy House that aired on German television and was translated to me by a German friend.

FINDINGS

From the research I conducted in Transy House, five main themes emerged: 1) Transy House is a site with precarious social and physical landscapes, however, it is a transcape with the potential to become a powerful site of resistance; 2) through socialization with other trans residents, trans women learn about the gender and sexuality spectrums though they perpetuate the gender binary to strive for 'normalization'; 3) individual identities are displayed, supported and protected in the physical environment of personal spaces; 4) the collective identity is expressed and reinforced in the landscape of the public spaces; and 5) within the tumultuous social environment and the poor physical condition of Transy House, many trans women continue to find refuge in this trans-dominated space.

The Transy House Transcape

Unlike much of the queer space literature that posits the repeated public queer performance creates the queer space (Knopp, 1987; Desert, 1997; Valentine, 1996), a transcape, as I define it, is a trans-dominated space where trans culture and identity is played out safely and freely without fear of transphobic violence. It is a trans-specific landscape that users appropriate and control and, therefore, make their own trans-normative rules for behaviour and gender expression. Additionally, occupants are afforded opportunities to manipulate the physical environment to exhibit and fortify their trans identities. A transcape that successfully builds and synthesizes the socio-spatial environments will strengthen and protect the trans identity and can become a site of resistance that challenges the norms and values of mainstream society.

Transy House has the potential of becoming an important transcape. Residents try to strengthen and empower each other by creating an atmosphere that encourages socio-political engagement, and by developing a familial social framework that supports the trans identity. The philosophy of Transy House is: "We believe in taking political action to secure a social and

cultural space for trans people in the emerging global culture." (from the Transy House web site).

Trans-normative rules for gender performance and sexual activity (e.g. open displays of sexual expression such as nudity seen during my visits and in the videos) are also established within Transy House. Moreover, the physical environment presents numerous visual cues that reinforce and validate the trans identity (e.g. political rally posters, newspaper clippings on hate crimes against queer people and large paintings of prominent trans women).

However, Transy House residents exhibit hostile and even violent behaviours toward each other and toward the house. There have been physical and verbal assaults as well as significant property damage as a result of fighting and aggression. This tumultuous social environment hampers the trust and cohesion needed for collective empowerment (Forrest and Kearns, 2001). Additionally, the dubious and unkempt physical landscape residents created causes one to question the safety of the house and, in fact, it may even reinforce the marginal social position of trans persons. Although the findings indicate that this domestic transcape has yet to reach its potential as a transcape for resistance and empowerment, it remains a place for trans women to (re)build their lives and their identities while expanding a social network of other trans individuals. As one resident stated: "I was homeless for so long and now I have a space."

The Socialization and Perpetuation of Femininity

Admittedly, as a lesbian woman who enjoys challenging societal norms, I started this study bringing to it my own beliefs and biases about gender hoping to present findings that demonstrate how, in this particular transcape, gender is a fluid and dynamic identity that is constrained only by societal norms and expectations. The very act of transitioning from male to female establishes the very plasticity of gender's nature. However, what I found in Transy House was a transcape of trans-feminine women who prescribe to a hetero-normative, feminine lifestyle.

The women living in Transy House learn their general presentations and sexual possibilities as a result of social learning (Bandura, 1969). Through direct observation, modelling, and teaching, one internalizes gender appropriate behaviour. This behaviour then is repeatedly performed for one's audiences (Butler, 1999). Because there are few trans role-models and because media images depict male-to-female trans women as a comic or tragic figure, many of the trans residents use female movie icons (e.g. Marilyn Monroe) to emulate: "The only resources we have are media images. Forbidden to act feminine growing up, the only source to draw from is the media – one that is not real." One resident, in fact, used the name Marilyn and styled and dyed her hair similar to Marilyn Monroe's during her transition.

The owner of Transy House and her partner also became significant role-models acting as mentors and teachers of gender and sexuality for other trans or gender-questioning residents and visitors. Their own bodies and varied gender performances illustrated to others how one can blur the boundaries between being male or female. However, ironically, these very same people support and fortify society's dichotomous social frame-

work for gender, thus proliferate socially accepted stereotypes for women.

Additionally, the social landscape created by the trans women in Transy House mirrors the stereotypical family. The owners are known as the “house parents” and longer-time residents take on the roles of “older sisters”. Domestic activity parallels the hetero-normative family as well. The more feminine residents played out their “expected” gender roles by cooking and cleaning for the family. In fact, many participants revealed their dreams of finding a man to settle down with and to take care of making comments such as: “I would be a good wife and mother because [...]”

Residents “gender bait” or openly comment on the lack of femininity of other trans women, thus, fortify this prescribed gender binary and establish a set standard for feminine performance that prescribes to societal expectations. Whether this patrolling of sex and gender occurs because cultural norms have become so internalized and played out to the extent that gender performance is, as Bourdieu defines it, *habitus* (1977) or if it is because one must perform a femininity that adheres to the gender binary expected from a mainstream audience or face the consequences (Deaux and LaFrance, 1998 and Butler, 1999), all but one of the residents fortify female-male distinctions by performing solely as a stereotypical woman.

Person-Place Dynamics

The self is constructed from continual interactive dialogues with the physical environment. Fincher and Jacobs posit that “People’s relationships with places help construct their identities like their relationships with class, gender and ethnic groupings.” (1998). In both the personal spaces and public spaces of Transy House, the individual and collective identities are expressed and supported respectively.

Individual Identity and Personal Space

The residents’ unique identities are represented in their bedrooms. Within these personal spaces occupants have the control to personalize and territorialize their environment. For most of the occupants, the women intentionally created a room that corresponds to their existing, possible, or ideal selves. Therein, when they are within these spaces their identities are reinforced.

Although there is no empirical evidence that indicates what is considered a masculine or feminine environment, residents have explicit beliefs about what makes a space feminine that is demonstrated in their bedrooms. Women’s environments, they posit and present, are cleaner, more fragrant (i.e. accented using incense or scented candles), display feminine-typical colours such as pinks, lavenders and reds, use fabric to soften lines and edges, and are adorned with ornamentation usually associated with women (e.g. flowers). These conceptions of what makes for gendered space use stereotypical notions of femininity and therefore, through the environment, residents support and perpetuate the gender binary.

The bedrooms of residents who consciously perform a hyper-feminine gender expression blatantly exemplify these aforementioned person-place notions. The rooms of these very feminine

trans women are, as one resident described, “Queendoms”. They have feminine-typical décor such as walls painted or high-lighted in pink or lavender, burning incense to create a more “feminine fragrance”, and stereotypical feminine ornamentation. When entering her room, for example, one resident commented: “I absolutely feel more feminine when I enter the room. Everyone feels more feminine.”

The need to hyper-feminize bedrooms, though, may be a reaction to the more androgynous, if not masculine, appearance of the rest of the house. If one intentionally and effortfully creates a feminine self, one may want to ensure that this identity is represented and reinforced in the physical environment. However, in a collective environment the individual resident often does not have control over the appearance of its public spaces, therefore, she may personalize and territorialize her personal space with more blatantly feminine adornments.

Public Space and the Collective Identity

The collective socio-political trans identity of residents is manifested in the physical environment of the public spaces in Transy House. For instance, there are numerous exterior behavioural residue such as trans-rights posters and banners that line the hallways, a memorial for a well-known trans activist, and newspaper clippings taped to the walls. There are also self-directed identity claims, such as the large paintings of important trans figures hung on the walls of public spaces. The poor and unkempt conditions of the house (e.g. holes in walls and extensive clutter), though, are indicative of the problematic lifestyles that also characterize the house’s collective identity.

The dichotomous, possibly even ambivalent, identity manifestations exhibited in the physical environment of Transy House’s public spaces may reinforce residents’ feelings of subordination and marginalization produced from societal condemnation of their transgressive identities. This raises the question, “If one lives in substandard housing, does one feel, and therefore act, substandard?” At the same time, however, the rundown and disorderly physical conditions distinguish it from more mainstream dwellings and, thus, may impose an implied barrier that works to protect its trans residents from the outside world. Some visitors quickly leave the house because they are not comfortable in the space.

A Safe Haven

Due to the rigid and well fortified gender binary, we know there are significant repercussions to transgressing male and female norms. There is rampant prejudice and discrimination against those who challenge expected look and behaviour for masculinity and femininity. Witten and Evan’s large-scale, transnational survey on the trans population indicated that this group was more likely than the general population to experience violence against them (1999). In fact, according to the Remembering Our Dead website, that tracks anti-trans violence and murder, from the late 1990s to 2002, there was a documented average of one murder a month. However, in 2003, that rate doubled and continues to rise. Because of these grim statistics, finding a safe space is critical for survival and eventual resistance and empowerment.

The precarious conditions of the social and physical landscapes in Transy House, though, can easily challenge the notion that this site is a safe haven for members of the GLBTQ communities. Moreover, as discussed earlier, one can even raise the question of whether the site is potentially detrimental to the well-being of trans persons. Transy House does, however, enable trans women to escape a life on the streets, avoid the precarious public shelter system, and find refuge in a collective of like-individuals. Many of the participants, for example, described in their interviews that while Transy House has helped to put a roof over their head and offered a bed to sleep in, it also provided the emotional comfort and security of being with other trans women. For the participants in this study, the importance of providing trans women with a home, in both the physical and psychological sense, outweighs the poor conditions of the house and the volatile social dynamics.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Currently, trans space has not been explored in the social science and feminist geography literatures. Exploring the transcape, though, opens the door to understanding the connections between queer identity (in the individual and the collective) and place. Transy House illustrates the critical role the home plays in the lives of trans women affording them a safe space to practice and perform trans-feminine identity in both their behaviour and physical environment.

The findings here indicate a conscious and intentional concordance between the individual and her landscape. Contrary to existing literature on person-place dynamics, the findings show that the individual has a conscious understanding of the environment and makes targeted adaptations to it in order to express, support and validate her identity. This research also looks at the connections between the collective identity and manifestations on the physical environment, an area that currently has not been fully researched. Lastly, like the lesbian home place (Johnston and Valentine, 1995), this research presents new conceptions of the home as a potential place for empowerment and resistance as well as serving as a context for supporting marginalized identities. Ultimately, it is my hope that this research will bring back the “T” in GLBT social science research and explorations of queer space.

CONCLUSION

Place plays a powerful role in the making of identity and the crystallization of social positions. Its construction depends on continual dialogues with its users. The environment can usurp one’s power through a physical design that supports and proliferates a hegemonic social structure based on binaries or it can create slippages that open new doors for restructuring socio-spatial hierarchies. It is the individual, though, who has the tools to employ the spatial strategies needed to help them adapt to, claim, and/or control that space. Bell hooks eloquently describes the potential of the transcape when talking about marginality: “Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.” (1990: 152).

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