

PASSING NOTION: THE EXPERIENCE OF FOUR TRANS IDENTIFIED
STUDENTS AND THE VIOLENCE OF ASSIMILATION

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors College of
Texas State University
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

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San Marcos, Texas
May 2016

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the transgender students, staff, faculty, and alumni of Texas State University.

This work is dedicated to the transgender people who do not yet know they are transgender.

This work is dedicated to the transgender people who never got the chance to know they were transgender.

This work is dedicated to the transgender people who have lost their lives to acts of transphobic violence.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the three people who participated in my thesis work by offering me their perspectives on passing during their time at Texas State: Sarita Espinosa, Ely Doyle, and Aiden Diaz. I literally could not have done it without you. Thank you for not only being wonderful interviewees, but being wonderful friends and supporting me in my work.

Second, I would like to thank Dr. Brandon Beck and Mrs. Diann McCabe for serving as my thesis advisor and second reader. I can think of no two people who could have inspired me more to produce a thesis on such an immense and intimate topic as this. Thank you for your continued support and understanding through my process.

I would also like to thank my mother and father, who will likely never read this, for bringing me into this world and their continued patronage of my academic endeavors.¹

¹ A very fancy way of saying “For supporting me and putting up with my crap for 23 years. Regardless of if you read this or not, I love you.”

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Abstract

Passing, as a concept, serves to put down members of a minority who do not fit a stereotype devised and perpetuated by the societal norms and majorities that exist around them. This hinging of humanity on abstract and superfluous ideologies passed down from bitter generation to bitter generation leads to astonishing levels of violence against transgender people. This work seeks to explore the college experience of four transgender students and alumni – two trans male identified students, one agender student, and one femme non-binary student – and their experiences with passing or not passing in different collegiate settings. Each person was interviewed, except the author who herein offers his own narrative, about their experiences in classrooms, religious settings, and organizations with regards to the pressure from others to pass in some way, shape, or form at Texas State University. Each of these students openly expressed a strong displeasure for the stress they felt to pass to be safe, even in actions as small as choosing a bathroom and other actions as large as standing up for themselves or others. These experiences are not, unfortunately, unique to these four students or to this campus – they are regular occurrences in the lives of transgender people, and it is high time for these experiences to be a thing of the past. That starts with aggressively and actively opposing the concept of passing and the violence of assimilation.

Assimilation as Violence Against the Self

Passing is a normative social construct used to violently erase minority experiences by removing the security and safety of being if certain parameters aren't met. The catch is that you don't set the parameters. The parameters have existed longer than you or anyone around you can remember. In regards to the transgender community, these parameters involve fitting into an absolute stereotype of the gender "opposite" of what you were assigned at birth. Transgender women are expected to always be what society sees as traditionally feminine – soft, dolled-up, passive, and beautiful. Transgender men are expected to be the opposite – loud, crass, strong, and aggressive. And good luck to you if you don't fit into a trans-binary space – passing has ravaged our community to the point that "safe" spaces perpetuate this violence tacitly and willingly. Passing has seeped into every corner of our existence, it has uprooted our comfort, but not so many examples are as telling as those of popular media.

In the last 5 years, American television has seen an astounding increase in transgender representation. The issue is that the representation isn't always good, and is more often than not a fun-house mirror – it's distorted and grotesque, yet people go and go and go. They watch and watch and watch. Now, it would be foolish to say that all representation is good or bad² since different outlets will often portray different aspects of the transgender experience – some focus on family, some focus on work, some focus on sex. But you constantly have to be prepared to take one with the other. On the positive end of representation, it sparks a conversation. For the first time in years, the media is attempting to portray and talk about transgender people. On the other hand, you

² Everything has a flaw; everything has a catch.

basically can't watch an interview with a transgender actor, actress, or person without someone asking about their genitals or saying something to belittle and undermine a transgender person's identity.

An excellent example of this is a 20/20 interview from 2015 with Nick and Bianca Bowser, a married couple who both happen to be transgender. In the interview the hostess says to Nick about his wife, "you're having sex with a man," and to Bianca, "you're having sex with a woman."³ She doesn't say this necessarily to harm Bianca or Nick, but because she's misguidedly thinking that because Bianca and Nick haven't had gender affirmation surgery⁴ that they aren't really the gender they identify with and present as. This sort of thought process is pervasive in American culture and it leads to these micro-aggressions – many of which are non-intentionally, but nevertheless, harmful to transgender people. Transitioning and passing as male or female as a concept has become so embedded in people's minds as a necessary condition for being transgender that some transgender people are even out there perpetuating this myth. Caitlyn Jenner, who came out last year as a transgender woman, said in an interview with Time⁵ that she feels that transgender people have to pass to be taken seriously because if they don't they'll make other (cisgender) people "uncomfortable." The issue with this sort of language is that it puts the pressure on transgender people to meet a certain parameter to be treated like human beings – implying that transgender people's humanity is conditional on their conformation to a societally imposed role, instead of placing responsibility on people who perpetuate these beliefs.

³ ABC 20/20 Interview titled "Meet the Bowsers: Transgender Parents Raising 2 Sons" by Jon Meyersohn, Francesca Ferreira, and Alexa Valiente

⁴ Gender reassignment surgery is often used an interchangeable term here.

⁵ TIME Interview titled "Caitlyn Jenner on Privilege, Reality TV, and Deciding to Come Out" by Katy Steinmetz

Another place this stems from is essentially all serious portrayals of transgender people in media are of transgender people who easily “pass” in society. People like Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera are looked to as what a transgender person should be – and that’s, again, not an inherently bad thing. These people are arguably good people, fighting and advocating for the transgender community day in and day out. That doesn’t change the fact, however, that when the only transgender faces people see in media are portrayed either by passing binary transgender people or by cisgender people, they begin to form unrealistic and grotesque expectations that somehow all transgender people need to meet this standard, regardless of whether they care about passing or even if they’re binary or not. The only “non-passing” transgender roles are repeatedly given to men or women and are indicated to just be men/women parading around in women’s/men’s clothing.^{6,7}

Not all transgender people are passible as a binary gender – more importantly they shouldn’t have to be to feel safe in their communities. Yet every single day transgender people are the targets of slurs and more often than not the targets of extreme violence, especially transgender women of color.⁸ The average life expectancy for transgender people is 31 years. Transgender people are constantly being harassed just for existing – unless they pass to the point that their trans identity is erased.

This shouldn’t be how things are. But it is. The reason I’m writing all of this, the reason I’ve done these interviews and dug through article after article about members of

⁶ In a Wikipedia entry titled “List of Transgender Characters In Film and Television” there are approximately 125 entries. I found about 7 where a transgender character was portrayed by an actual transgender person.

⁷ The movie “About Ray” is a prime example of this and the absolute hell-storm that ensued when the creator of the film said her intent was to capture what a “girl” who was trying to be a boy felt like and so there was no reason to cast an actual transgender actor.

⁸ For more information please consider looking into the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, but I will warn you it’s utterly disheartening.

my community being killed or misrepresented on the grounds of passing is because the time for change is long overdue. I don't claim to know the exact ins and outs of every single transgender person's story, but I do know mine. I know that the things that I've experienced are, in some derivative, experienced by most if not all transgender people. I don't know if this will make any difference. I hope it does. But if I'm able to just tell these stories then it's enough for now.

My Past Is Invisible

It always starts basically the same way. A slight furrowing of the brow as a professor squints down at their roster in disbelief and distrust. They are gathering wood.

“S?” they’ll ask, holding a letter in their mouths like it’s a bomb.

Always, my stomach sinks and my heart catches in my throat.

“It’s Isaac,” I say, offering up prayers to any god who will listen to me.

Please stop staring, please stop staring, please stop staring.

More often than not, this seemingly simple, albeit anxiety filled, response will elicit a look of amusement in their eyes. It’s not real to them yet. They don’t know I’m holding my breath in so my resolve does not shatter and so my faith is not broken. They don’t know that the letter they hold in their mouths and the name I give them are me begging to be left alone. To be normal. To, just once, not have to explain my existence.

While I wait for the response, I gather my own wood. I lay down on the twigs and prepare to die.

Please don’t ask me, please don’t ask me, please don’t ask me.

“So what’s with the S?” or some derivative will be asked, leering smiles from my peers and expectant looks from professors I’m supposed to trust my education to burning into my flesh. A single-letter-named witch, burning at the stake.

My resolve shatters and my faith breaks. I retreat into myself.

“My dad was really obsessed with Ulysses S Grant, and his middle name is just the letter S.⁹ So my dad thought it would be a brilliant idea to just name me S.”

From that moment on I have to be wary of who to talk to. Some people will blow

⁹ I don’t know if this is true or not, all I know is that it’s convincing enough.

it up into a big deal. They think my fabrication is so fascinating that, surely, I myself must be fascinating.¹⁰ Some people couldn't give a damn less, and those are the people I orient myself towards.

The truth is, I carry a dead name.¹¹ My mother chose my name as carefully as she chose my father, as carefully as she chose where she wanted him to build our home, as carefully as she does anything.¹² I've always respected that about her. I could not, however, suffer myself to carry the crown jewel of her expectation – a final child. A youngest daughter.

At least, that's what she thought she got.

I was born in the later days of fall, 1992. Like most, I don't really have memories of that moment or the time surrounding it. I suppose my parents were happy, but I can't imagine they stayed that way for long.¹³ They took me home, swaddled in pink, to the expectant hands and smiles of family members who were never far.

“She's got her momma's eyes.”¹⁴

My parents, true cradle Catholics, had me baptized right away. My sins – existing – were supposedly washed away in the blessed water. My infant body with no concept of time, place, or anything else, was entirely absolved of my sin of existing as a human being on this planet. Or so I thought.

I grew up, mostly, in the Church. I was taught from a young age that while yes, we were baptized to rid ourselves of the original sin, and yes, we were saved by the grace

¹⁰ Not to say I'm not fascinating, but damn give a man a break.

¹¹ A common term in the transgender community for someone's name designated to them at birth.

¹² Frankly, she's an over cautious woman prone to paranoid delusions.

¹³ Imagine the two most truly conservative people you can giving birth to an anarcho-communist and you've about hit the nail on the head.

¹⁴ My mother says this was her favorite comment from family members and strangers alike.

of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and yes, we would soon receive the holy sacraments of Communion and Confession and Confirmation, these things alone were not enough to save us.¹⁵ We had to be good. We had to strive to be holy. We had to go to mass every week; we had to go to CCD¹⁶; we had to listen to our parents without doubting, we had to make sure that we walked in the light of God, always.

It was too much.

The first time I tried to kill myself I was seven years old. I was supposed to receive Communion for the first time in a handful of months. As the clock struck 1, my white and black chevron jump rope wrapped around my neck as many times as I could manage while still holding on. The ends of rope in both hands, I pulled until my knuckles glowed white; there was no way to know that my hands were not capable of choking the life out of me the same way the world around me already was. I was too young to know that we are harder material than jump ropes in seven year old hands, but I was old enough to know that my mother would never love me if she learned who I was and neither would God.¹⁷

By the time I was in the second grade I'd been called what I thought was every name in the book.¹⁸ But the worst of these was being called tomboy. Much in the same way we never like admitting truths about ourselves, I fought the constant mockery of my peers to hide what I knew already – I wasn't like girls. The desire to fit in, however, was overwhelming. So I went to tea party birthdays and wore pink dresses with Esmerelda

¹⁵ If God himself isn't capable of saving me just by sending his only begotten son to be crucified so that I may be absolved of my sins, I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do about them.

¹⁶ Catholic Catechism Development

¹⁷ I've never been able to disappoint my mother through action so completely as I believe I do just by existing, regardless of her claims of pride in me.

¹⁸ I'd be called considerably worse things the older I got. It never really stops and it doesn't necessarily get better. You get better at blocking it out. I don't think those are the same thing.

“high heels” and asked my mom for Barbies. I don’t want to imply that there’s anything wrong with these things at all – what was wrong was my desire to hide myself in them.

So there I was, jump rope in hand, the darkness beginning to close in. I thought that, if nothing else, I could at least choke the demons who told me these things. The demons were trying to lead me away from God. They were lying to me, but I knew then that they would never stop. If nothing else, I could eradicate these thoughts of “boy.”

I came to a few hours later,¹⁹ a sheen of sweat coating my face and neck. The burns weren’t that bad – I wasn’t as strong as I thought.

And I wept.

Not the loud sobs I would muster the 6th time I attempted suicide and failed, but quiet sobs that only happen when you can’t comprehend the depth of reason you have to be crying. The thought entered my mind then that maybe God had some great purpose for me. Death couldn’t take me, in that moment, in that way, because God still needed me here on Earth. So I tried my very best to put on a braver heart than my own when I slipped into those Esmerelda heels.²⁰

It wasn’t long until I found myself literally praying for death. Every Sunday I sat silently in the pew, holding my mother’s hand and staring at the crucifix trying to bargain with God.²¹

God, if you kill me here and bring me back a boy in front of my mom so she knows it’s important, I promise I’ll never sin again and I’ll even be a priest if you want. God, are you there? Did you hear me? I’ll never sin even once, I promise.

¹⁹ I think, I mean it could have been minutes, 7 year olds don’t catalog life moments like they should.

²⁰ Seriously I think I wore them every day for a year after that. I knew that girls my age didn’t wear them anymore, but I was going to wear those damned heels until I felt girl enough.

²¹ There were some weeks where my mother had to physically carry me out of mass because I refused to leave. My prayers weren’t answered yet, why would I leave?

I stopped listening to sermons and instead imagined what I would look like, stepping out of a column of heavenly fire and lightning as the boy I wanted to be, the boy I knew I was. More often than not, I looked exactly the same; I was just a boy. But I gave myself my father's eyes. During all of the Sundays spent praying for my salvation, I never once had a word for what I was. Growing up in a small town in north central Texas, words like "transgender" didn't exist. So I called myself what everyone else called me, all the way until I graduated high school. Tomboy. Lesbo. Dyke. Faggot. Freak. I bore all these titles and more every single day.

What killed me was the word my mother had for me once she discovered I was bisexual at age 15.²²

Abomination.

She never said it to my face. But I knew. I knew the night she confronted me that nothing would ever be the same.²³ I knew that she thought I was nothing more than punishment sent for her by God. I was her cross to bear. And if she couldn't handle this, how would she ever be able to handle me explaining that I would never be her little girl?

The 6th time I attempted suicide was the last time I did so intentionally.^{24,25} At 16, I couldn't see any other way out. It had been a year of hell. My mother would conveniently forget that I was bisexual and I had to come out 7 times that year to her alone. Every single time she shut down completely. She would clench her jaw and fists until her knuckles shone as white as mine had; I knew she was trying to strangle herself.

²² Paranoid delusions told her I wasn't safe on the internet, so she read through my MySpace. Dial-up internet very possibly ruined my life.

²³ Nothing can ever be the same after you blame your youngest child for the cancer that killed your little sister. It just can't.

²⁴ Not to say it was the last time I hurt myself intentionally, just the last time with the goal being death.

²⁵ In a dissociative state I drove from San Marcos to Kyle in the middle of the night in the midst of the Memorial Day 2015 floods. I have night blindness and almost no traction on my tires. I should undoubtedly be dead.

I didn't stop her. My father had found out and told me that he loved me but that, "lesbianism isn't a lifestyle [he could] accept."²⁶

One night my father was working an overnight shift at the station – something he rarely did at the time. My mother was fast asleep. I could hear her snores across the house. I blamed myself for that too.²⁷ Staring around my room at the tidy piles of junk everywhere, I debated writing a note. What would I say? *Sorry I have to commit a mortal sin to keep myself from a bunch of smaller or potentially also mortal sins.*²⁸ Nothing I could think of covered it. But I didn't want to leave this world without saying goodbye, so I scrawled out the first thing that came to mind²⁹.

~~*Mom and Dad*~~
Mom, Dad, Rachel, and Justin,
I'm sorry. I can't keep doing this. I'm so tired. God is calling me home.
I'm sorry.
I'm not a girl. I never have been.
I'm sorry.
Please don't bury me in a dress.
I love you all more than you will ever know, and if God forgives me, I'll see you in
heaven.
Goodbye.

I can't think of a single time I was so calm as I was that night, walking into my father's room and grabbing the gun I wanted to take me out of this world. My spine was iron and my lungs were lead and smoke. Slowly and with intent, I walked to my mother's room to kiss her forehead one more time.

I didn't make a sound.

²⁶ My father firmly believes that you can be gay or straight but there is no in-between and one of them is evil.

²⁷ *She can't even sleep because she's disgusted with the thought of you.*

²⁸ The doctrine of the Catholic Church is unclear on the degree of sin that being transgender is.

²⁹ On a page of a spare Bible I had. I've always had a penchant for drama.

Back in my room, I sat next to my neatly scrawled note. It was the best my handwriting had ever looked. It's funny how the only thing I was worried about was my handwriting. Not about death or what it would do to my family or to my mother to find my lifeless body. I was thinking of how proud my mother would be of my cursive.³⁰

Stop procrastinating and do it.

One swift motion. Gun in my mouth, eyes shut, exhale. And I squeezed the trigger.

And nothing happened.³¹

I tried again.

Nothing.

Third time's a charm.

Nothing.

And I broke down. Never in my life had I wept so intensely and so fully. Again my head filled with thoughts of a grander purpose. I guess that's my survival mechanism. Try to die. Don't. Come back stronger.³²

I no longer actively try to kill myself. I "pass" as male, so the probability of someone calling me a woman is just about zero on a regular basis. But the things I have to do every single day to accomplish this may as well be killing me regardless. Every eight days I inject myself with a dose of testosterone.³³ Every single morning I bind my

³⁰ I still think of whether or not my mother would be proud of my handwriting.

³¹ I did scrape the roof of my mouth pretty bad so I guess technically something did happen just not quite what I intended.

³² At very least come back deluded with a sense of grand purpose given to you by a God you don't know if you really believe in.

³³ Common side effects of testosterone include but are not limited to nausea, vomiting, headache, anxiety, depression, skin color changes, increased/decreased sexual interest, oily skin, hair loss, breast swelling, numbness or tingly feeling, acne, increased risk of heart disease, and increased risk of cervical cancer. But I'll take it.

chest with two medical grade binders and hope that it'll be enough.³⁴ I do this not because I necessarily want to, but because I know for a fact that people will not respect my masculinity without it. I've been trained and conditioned to think that my identity as a trans person is dependent on my ability to pass in a cisgender oriented society. Over the last few years I've been trying to push this mentality down, push it away, push myself towards something better than this. I don't need to pass to be a valid human being, and I struggle with that concept every single day. No one has helped me in my fight to come to terms with this as much as Sarita. I can't tell their story in the same way I've told mine, but I hope you listen nonetheless.

³⁴ I absolutely do not suggest doing this, it's horrible for you and you will injure yourself as I have done hundreds of times.

The Shape of People's Bodies Doesn't Define How They Identify

"What can I get you to drink, ma'am?"

I see Sarita's jaw tense for a split second before they respond, "Just a water, please."

A major issue with living in the South is the "hospitality" that you can't just opt out of. Sarita knows this better than most. They hear "ma'am" directed at them every single day, but they aren't a woman. They're a non-binary person who gets placed into a box of femininity for the comfort of cisgender people who don't want to work for their understanding.

Sarita stopped identifying as a girl just before they came to Texas State University and started identifying with the identity of genderqueer.³⁵ After joining a queer organization on campus, they started exploring other aspects and concepts of gender. The term they identified with the most was the term agender. This is a term used to describe someone who doesn't identify with a male or female gender, or with any gender for that matter.³⁶ Sarita is, in many ways, rebelling by existing. Their identity is an identity that stands entirely against the concept of passing – how can someone pass as something they simply aren't? Nonetheless, people constantly want to pressure Sarita to pass one way or the other.

"So, do you feel like a boy then if you're trans?"

From the seat next to them I watch Sarita's eyes and see something angry and growing there. They stifle it and calmly explain in the fifth way I've heard them explain

³⁵ Genderqueer is a sort of umbrella term used to describe those who do not choose to adhere to conventional associations of gender.

³⁶ Hence the a- prefix.

to this panel audience that they are agender, a part of the trans community, but not a binary aspect. Not a boy. Not a girl. Agender.

A commonality between the experiences of several transgender college students is the delicate task of navigating student organizations, even organizations that are supposed to exist for the safety and community of queer identified people. Sarita has this shit show³⁷ down to a true art form. There's a small group of queer organizations on the Texas State campus, and Sarita has been a member of most of them with varied experiences. Despite the safety that is meant to exist in queer spaces, that safety frankly doesn't exist if you don't pass well and it sure as hell doesn't exist if you don't fit into the gender binary. Sarita has been a member of panels where, despite being there to talk about their gender identity and how they are non-binary, they have been repeatedly referred to with the wrong pronouns. They've described the experience as a whole slew of synonyms for catastrophe.³⁸

Sarita did find comfort in the organization Trans*cend, an organization started for and by transgender people on campus and their allies. During meetings, it was always Sarita who took the most care to make sure pronouns weren't misused, that language was always open to everyone, and that people always felt welcome and comfortable. This stems, in many ways, from their own discomfort in other organizations. You can only hear that your identity is invalid and hear people call you the wrong pronouns so many times before it just gets to be exhausting. Sarita, like so many other transgender people, is just tired. Tired of feeling isolated even in the presence of others, and tired of being treated like they have to pass for something they aren't to be taken seriously.

³⁷ My own experiences with organizations can be summarized by a shit show so that's the term getting used.

³⁸ "Cluster fuck" being my personal favorite expression of this.

Sarita doesn't have what a lot of people in the trans community call passing privilege. The result of this is that they constantly get misgendered in every day conversations, but some of the harshest times for this to happen are in classes, especially classes where Sarita has already told the professors that they have a deadname on the roster, that they use they/them/their pronouns. Often times it happens in classes where people who may be class acquaintances have never heard their deadname before. Whether or not those people go on to use their deadname or make otherwise unnecessary comments³⁹ is only a part of the issue – now people who have no right or reason to know a deadname know it. And they will never unhear it any more than Sarita will unlive the moment of hearing a professor call that name out. Regardless of what comes from that moment, the dynamic of relationships changes.

A professor uses the wrong pronouns for Sarita in front of an organizational meeting. Their chest heaves and I do not see anger in their eyes, but sadness. Fear. Anxiety. They just want to leave, and I can see it.

Sarita and I share a unique memory of our time at Texas State that is in some ways common of transgender students, but in our case and context was further daunting. Sarita and I both spent parts of our freshman year living in an “all-girls” dorm. I was relocated there after an altercation with an ex-girlfriend and roommate turned violent⁴⁰, but Sarita had the delectable misfortune of living there the entire year. We both bit our tongues and dug our hands into our palms at resident meetings.

“Now ladies...”

³⁹ A pretty regular part of being transgender and non-passing. I know people who even now will call me my deadname because they can't physically assault me with a knife on campus and get away with it so readily.

⁴⁰ She hit me, she cried, we went our separate ways, but I was asked to leave for “my safety.”

“Girls, you all know...”

“We’re all Lantana ladies here...”

Sarita and I both leave the meetings itching to hide in our rooms or just get out of the building. It feels like everything is on fire and neither of us looks like we could escape if we wanted to.

I had my own issues with living in Lantana. Until I directly confronted the residence director, I constantly avoided my dorms at any time that I knew an RA would be working the desk. I avoided events, kept to myself, only talked to my roommate – one of 4 people in the entire building who got my pronouns right on a regular basis. For Sarita though, that wasn’t much of an option. I was lucky in that I had a car and could escape campus more often than not. I also have a loud mouth and would only rarely hesitate to use said mouth to prove a point. Sarita was more “polite.” They had a quieter way about them that didn’t deign to engage in conflict, and so they stomached people constantly pushing them to just “be a girl.” Once they came out as being a member of trans community, then it was just pressure to be “one or the other.” I don’t know what sort of comments Sarita has had to directly deal with, but I know the comments I’ve heard from cisgender “allies” and even some binary transgender people – all of them oriented around non-binary people needing to start fitting into a female or male category. They need to bind more. They need to wear more or less make up. They need to stop being themselves. As Ely Doyle puts it, “people are more comfortable taking you from one box they’ve already made for you, and putting you in a box they’ve made for other people. They don’t know what to do when you shouldn’t be in that box.”

The Nature of Questions Comes from Boxes

*Do not leave, fall, curl, and dry. Instead bark, hold fast, protect and comfort me with fire. I can be that unbridled wilderness you remember.*⁴¹

Ely came to Texas State University from Los Angeles.⁴² Despite growing up in a bustling urban environment,⁴³ they also weren't able to really grasp their gender identity until they were in college. And again, it wasn't because of the college, but the availability of information on the internet – a never halting expanse of experience and connection.⁴⁴ Ely is aporogender, which means that their gender is an experience for which there is currently no adequate term. To simplify this, in a manner of speaking, Ely identifies as non-binary and femme. And that's where people like to start picking them apart.

Because Ely is femme, people assume they're female.⁴⁵ Their experience with passing doesn't quite follow the same progression as more androgynous non-binary people. Unlike androgynous people, Ely doesn't get questioned about their gender until it is brought out and put on display. People just assume from the jump that they are female. This action is commonly referred to as a kind of erasure, or the willing dismissal of someone's identity.⁴⁶ Erasure is a hugely complex issue and its extent of influence is also an issue among members of the transgender community. It can provide safety in some ways – it's just not safe to be a transgender person sometimes. But most of the

⁴¹ "24 Through 7" by Ely Doyle

⁴² Ely is fascinated by houses on more than one acre of land. I am fascinated by their fascination.

⁴³ I can't believe I just used the phrase "bustling urban environment" so I'm keeping it.

⁴⁴ Affectionately referred to by "older generations" as what's "ruining" this generation. I think I've got at least 4 people to argue that sentiment, but that's a different thesis in and of itself.

⁴⁵ You could say they're female passing, but what good does that do someone who isn't female?

⁴⁶ If you need another example of this, you can think of how almost every time a bisexual person is mentioned in media they're written off as "experimenting" or "confused" because they're "really gay and they just don't know it yet."

time, this sort of erasure is just to silence transgender people no matter how “safe” the space is. Once the erasure has been set aside, people make it their business to put an awful lot of effort into trying to put Ely into a box. Boy or girl, man or woman, zero or one, rarely do people really put effort into understanding that Ely doesn’t fit the box in the slightest.

*For I am the first and last frontier to tread.*⁴⁷

A public university should be a pretty damn safe place, and most people think it is – until they realize that the professors who are paid to teach them don’t actually tend to care if their students are safe in the learning process.⁴⁸ Ely’s no exception to the trend of “trans identified students who get outed by professors in some way, shape, or form.” One particularly unique thing I did hear from them was about how indignantly their professors responded when they, the professor, would say Ely’s deadname or incorrect pronouns in class. I can only speculate, obviously, but I find it rather striking that only a femme non-binary person has been actively yelled at by a professor for correcting their misgendering. When professors perpetuate this sort of behavior, it’s only perpetuating and feeding into the myth that transgender people exist only when it is convenient for the people around them. This sort of violence doesn’t have to be committed loudly either – the moment that you put someone who doesn’t understand or make an attempt to be inclusive toward a minority, you immediately put that minority in a position of danger. They then have a choice – allow their identity to be erased and suffer in silence, or risk their safety and security as a human being. The most disgusting thing about all of this is that there’s no

⁴⁷ “Afternoon” by Ely Doyle

⁴⁸ Who needs someone coming in late as a distraction when you could have a panic attack in the middle of the room when a professor who swore they didn’t pass a roster around passes a roster around with your deadname on it? Much more distracting for me, personally.

safe way to remove yourself from these situations that should be prevented easily by education for professors. There are Ally training sessions⁴⁹ that should, in theory, eliminate this from even needing to be a conversation.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the faculty, staff, and students who strive to make the Ally program an effective tool for educating people on how to be decent human beings, a lot of professors don't seem to be taking the right messages away. They get a badge to put outside their door, but it has come to mean practically nothing to the members of the student transgender community because of the inability of professors to hold themselves accountable for micro-aggressions committed against students in the classroom. Calling roll with deadnames on it, using gendered language to refer to every single student who walks in the door, refusing to use a student's true name because it doesn't correspond to some arbitrary piece of paper sent out by the registrar's office.

This is my body

*It is no one's but mine.*⁵⁰

Beyond the scope of dealing with academics who think that "they" can't be a singular pronoun⁵¹, Ely also has to deal with people in queer or critical spaces doubting their gender identity because of their femme identity.⁵² They may not get deadnamed so often, but having to get misgendered constantly by self-proclaimed feminists who can't put forth the effort to understand a non-binary identity is still exhausting. Then again,

⁴⁹ Ally training sessions are seminars offered every semester on how to be a better ally to the LGBTQ+ community at Texas State University.

⁵⁰ "I Sing The Body Electric, Especially When My Power's Out" by Andrea Gibson

⁵¹ "He has a pencil, she has a pencil, they have a pencil. The boys run, the girls run, they run." It can be both. That's from kindergarten, y'all.

⁵² Because why would a safe space ever really be safe?

groups that are traditionally liberal don't necessarily provide the support that transgender people need. In Aiden Diaz's case, that support came from a very traditionally conservative place – the Christian faith.

What's Their Safety Going to Look Like?

Then the angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, "Get up and head south on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, the desert route." So he got up and set out. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, that is, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury, who had come to Jerusalem to worship, and was returning home. Seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit said to Philip, "Go and join up with that chariot." Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and said, "Do you understand what you're reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone instructs me?" So he invited Philip to get in and sit with him. This was the scripture passage he was reading:

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
And as a lamb before its shearer is silent
So he opened not his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who will tell of his posterity?
For his life was taken from the earth."⁵³*

Aiden is a rare bird. He is one of the few people who I know personally who identifies as transgender (specifically a transgender man) and as an active Christian. As you can imagine,⁵⁴ this can make Aiden's life a little complex at the intersection of gender and faith. Aiden generally identifies in the same way that I do, as a trans man, but our experiences around faith are wildly different. While my own experience led me to a place of fear, Aiden's has led him to a place of safety.

Before he came to college, Aiden identified as female but never felt comfortable in the identity that was placed on him at birth. Slowly as college revealed itself to him, he sat in the back of the class rooms and took on assignments that kept him involved, but

⁵³ Acts 8:26 – 34, New American Bible

⁵⁴ Or maybe you can't, what the hell do I know about what you can imagine?

just enough out of the spot-light.⁵⁵ As semesters trickled by, he realized there was something from the outside holding back something on the inside. He realized that he wasn't female at all, but a man. Like so many others⁵⁶, he learned about his identity through digging around in social media. He learned all the run of the mill⁵⁷ LGBTQ+ terms, and pieced himself together one letter at a time. This was something that the ministry he was a part of would eventually have to come to terms with. Luckily for everyone, that particular ministry wasn't too slow at catching up.

*I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me.*⁵⁸

Unfortunately, not every ministry was so quick to catch on. While Aiden has been on hormone replacement therapy for a while, he said that there were still ministries he was afraid of going into because he was afraid of “getting caught.”⁵⁹ This sort of fear is a really unfortunate aspect of being a member of the queer community at all and trying to incorporate yourself into spaces that are traditionally more “conservative” places to be.⁶⁰ What's interesting about Aiden is that despite his own fear of the pressure to pass, what he was most seemingly concerned with was how the pressure to pass would affect the safety of his friends.

As Aiden grew in his identity, he did so in every aspect of his life at Texas State University. He became more actively involved – he started working for the University Star, for Texas State Athletics, and was the founding Vice President of Trans*cend.

⁵⁵ “Being a team player,” he calls it.

⁵⁶ As you can tell by the corresponding discovery from all of the people, myself included, who have shared their stories here.

⁵⁷ Run of the mill meaning the ones that non-self-identified people are least likely to openly mock or dismiss as unreal. A good metric for run of the mill is how likely you are to hear the name of the identity on television without it being the source of a joke. Seriously, try it sometime.

⁵⁸ Philippians 4:13, New American Bible

⁵⁹ Which he also very adamantly put air quotes around.

⁶⁰ This didn't surprise me one bit. When I came out my freshman year to the ministry I intended to be a part of, I was asked not to come back. I never set foot in a church of my own volition again.

During all of this, Aiden also grew to be a leader in his ministry. In many ways, I consider Aiden to be a trail-blazer in the realm of faith on this campus for members of the queer community, specifically for people who identify as transgender. Aiden's growth allowed for an intersection that had never really been discussed openly.

*And I saw God cry in the reflection of my enemies
And all the lovers with no time for me
And all of the mothers raise their babies
To stay away from me⁶¹*

Unfortunately, even in all the growth he's inspired, Aiden still had to deal with micro-aggressions⁶² from people who he considered to be friends. All too common is the conversation that trans men will have with cis male friends involving their inability to pee standing up without some sort of aid.⁶³ In his case, Aiden's friends told him that he could "have [his] man-card when [he could] pee standing up." While his friends may not have intended outright harm, the reduction of transgender people to their genitals is inherently harmful. The reduction of *anyone* to their genitals is harmful, and transgender people deal with this all the time. From every front, even the people we trust with our friendship and our safety, transgender people's identities are constantly under attack. Even when we pass, we're told it isn't good enough.

After graduating Texas State University, Aiden has been faced with an even bigger challenge in terms of the intersection of his faith. He will be leaving the country soon on a mission to spread the faith which he holds so dear to him. He is, to his knowledge, the first open transgender participant in this mission – new waters, new

⁶¹ *Golden* by Fall Out Boy

⁶² In which the application of the prefix "micro" is pretty subjective depending on who you ask. Anything that doesn't involve an outright slur or physical assault lands itself on my list of micros, but again – subjective.

⁶³ Although, a fictional character did it in *The L Word* once pretty convincingly with no assistance so that's something to strive for. I suppose.

challenges. The pressure to pass is no longer passively involved in Aiden's transactions in classrooms, but it will actively affect his quality of life and safety over the year that he'll be gone. A normal saying with transgender people is that being trans is both the best and worst thing to ever happen to them. I know that Aiden has already impacted transgender youth around the country,⁶⁴ and I can only hope that as we move forward as a society that those very people will not have to face the same violence that this generation before them has. Or, at very least⁶⁵, that they'll know they don't have to face it alone.

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ For a while Aiden was a partner with FLAVNT, a trans and queer owned clothing company that donates portions of its profits to the life-changing surgeries its partners need.

⁶⁵ Very, absolute, and utter least. Bare minimum level of acceptable things progressing in our country.

⁶⁶ Revelation 21: 3 – 4, New American Bible.