

Introduction: The New Face of Trans Visual Culture

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Abstract: Transness throws into question how many so-called Western cultures—i.e., those ideologically descended from the colonial project—have sutured “reality” to the “privileging of sight”. At the crux of trans-visual culture is a need to be understood outside current modes of visual apprehension. As a methodology rooted in trans-embodied experiences, trans provides a mode for decolonizing the privileging of sight and moving toward a new understanding of bodies, identity, representation, and visual culture. It is imperative to explore such methods in today’s political climate, and it is advantageous to apply them to trans-visual culture, as exponential innovations can be discerned. In this article, I will deploy a trans visual studies methodology to the work of contemporary trans masculine artist and photographer Wynne Neilly to explore how his work engages a praxis of transing identity. I will discuss how his work shifts the understanding of identity and representation to one decoupled from optical ontology and how he works to unseat White masculinity as the center of Western art and visual culture.

Keywords: identity; representation; hybridity; trans; transgender; photography; masculinity; LGBTQ; critical race studies; disidentification

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2021, *TIME* magazine featured Elliot Page on its cover in a piece by Katy Steinmetz entitled, “‘I’m fully who I am’: Actor Elliot Page and the fight for trans equality.” The feature on Page reflects a groundbreaking moment—a cultural highlighting of trans masculinity. Elliot Page, with his newly released book *Pageboy: A Memoir* (Page 2023), has cemented his position as one of the newest icons of the trans movement. At the least, as Steinmetz puts it, Page is “now one of the most visible trans people in the world” (Steinmetz 2021). Seven years prior, *TIME* magazine ran the now iconic Laverne Cox cover story wherein Steinmetz dubbed the era the “Trans Tipping Point”. I mention this to point out that Steinmetz and *TIME* have been responsible for shaping important cultural discourse around the trans movement and trans representation and to show that even the seemingly recent fight for trans equality has been long and arduous. Even in the recent pop culture arena, the Trans Tipping Point has been less of a critical juncture and more of an ongoing battle that is continuously unfolding. Furthermore, a brief look at the two cover stories highlights that trans masculinity is significantly underrepresented, given that it took seven years after the announcement of the “Trans Tipping Point” for a trans male actor to grace the cover of a major magazine and enter the public spotlight.

The portrait photographs (Steinmetz 2021) accompanying the feature reveal Page looking vulnerably at the camera, posing in T-shirts and long-sleeved thermal undershirts, evocative of the revival of 90s aesthetics donned by many in the early 2020s. The cover image frames the actor within the iconic red border and the prominent title, *TIME*, in grey letters floating behind Page’s somewhat forlorn face, as he looks into the camera with bedroom eyes. He leans gently against a light grey wall, sporting a black sweatshirt, jeans, and white sneakers, flanked by a small dog (Figure 1). His poses suggest he is comfortable with the photographer, which translates into a feeling of openness with the reader. The images depict several intimate photographs which cast the actor as eager yet trepidatious about publicly announcing his transness.



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The quietly contemplative photographs were taken by trans male artist Wynne Neilly. On 16 March 2021, Neilly posted the above cover image on his Instagram feed accompanied by the hashtags #transrights and #protecttranskids and the following caption:

I don't even have the words at this moment to describe my immense gratitude for this experience. This is my dream assignment. I have been wanting this and working towards this for so many years. I'm so proud of Elliot. And I am so grateful to the trans elders who risked everything to make this moment happen. I will probably have to add more to this caption later when I have the ability to form more words but for now I am just grateful, honoured and proud to be trans in this moment of time.

Thank you, Elliot.

The enthusiasm, pride, and respect articulated in the sentiment are likely due to the fact that the actor and the photographer are both transmen and reflective of the state of trans rights in Spring 2021 when the issue launched. The weight of the cultural moment must have been palpable to both the actor and the photographer, and it marked a moment when global culture could no longer ignore the relevance of trans people. In the movement for trans rights, trans masculine people have historically been less visible than trans feminine people and largely occluded from cultural recognition. Laverne Cox appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine in June 2015, and Caitlin Jenner appeared on *Vanity Fair's* cover later that year. While Cox and Jenner may be the most famous trans people to appear on magazine covers, numerous trans feminine people and trans women have appeared in mainstream TV, cinema, and media over the recent decades, including Alexandra Billings, Candis Cayne, Jamie Clayton, Gia Gunn, Dominique Jackson, Janet Mock, Indya Moore, Peppermint, Jen Richards, Michaela Jae Rodriguez, Hunter Schafer, The Wachowski sisters, and many more. Trans masculine visibility has remained scant, however; thus, Page's high-profile transition in mainstream visual culture wields major cultural significance. In recent decades, the field of trans representations has been growing in all sectors of culture globally. Facilitated by the advent of social media, political progress protecting the rights of trans folks, advances in accessibility for trans medical care, and inroads in media, visual culture, and contemporary reflecting LGTQ+ perspectives, trans representation is becoming a diverse field of study, and in many spaces a divisive and contested issue. The complexities and nuances of trans representations continue to unfold and are increasingly discussed in various sectors of cultural studies, cinema, academia, and beyond.¹



Figure 1. Screen grab of Neilly's Instagram feed captured by Ace Lehner on 16 March 2021.

The defining trans representations in the decades preceding the Trans Tipping Point included a handful of tragic stereotypes sensationalizing trans femininity and erasing trans masculinity. While some inroads have been made into thinking about how masculinity has been constructed in visual culture, trans masculinity has yet to be substantially visualized, recognized, or theorized. One of the foremost trans masculine activists and culture producers of the last decades (and founder of the highly influential magazine *Original Plumbing: Trans Male Quarterly*), Rocco Kayiatos, has spoken about how, as a young trans man, it took him many years to realize his trans identity, because he saw no examples of trans masculinity in the world around him, save for a chance encounter with Loren Cameron's book, *Body Alchemy*, in his late teens.² Cameron's influential 1996 book, which portrays numerous trans masculine experiences in photographic form, was a radical intervention into visual culture and has been a touchstone for many transmasculine people in the ensuing years (Cameron 1996). Neilly's image of Page, is significant in that it is a trans masculine photographer imaging a trans masculine actor featured on the cover of a prevalent pop cultural magazine and it will surely resonate far beyond what we can now imagine.

Cover stories such as Page's are vital in that they make clear that knowledge about trans people for trans and cis people alike is not readily available. Seeing trans people in visual culture is often the only way most folks know anything about trans people. For this reason, trans representations carry significant cultural weight. Sam Feder's 2020 feature film *Disclosure* is an apt example. It takes a nuanced look at the deployment of trans stereotypes in mainstream cinema and visual culture. There is a scene in which Laverne Cox discusses how 80% of Americans do not know any trans people, so everything they know about trans people has been gleaned from media (Feder 2020). Bearing this in mind, representations of trans folks can be extremely damaging when the construction of trans characters in media and the rhetoric attached to trans people are bound up with stereotypes and vitriol. Such representations often reinforce the gender binary while also inspiring hate crimes and anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation. Especially when anti-trans sentiment is coupled with racism.

While writing this article, I have anxiously followed the state of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and the escalation of hate crimes globally. In the US in July 2023, for example, there have already been 269 anti-LGBTQ bills introduced in nearly all 50 states. The ACLU has a live map tracking the bills on the home page of their website using increasingly saturated tones to correspond to increasingly aggressive numbers of bills introduced in each state. The map's highlighting of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment across the nation is visually arresting (ACLU 2023). The US is not the only country in the news currently demonstrating increased hostility toward LGBTQ+ people, however. As I write this, Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni is currently considering supporting a bill that will criminalize identifying as gay, lesbian, trans, or queer, with sentences of up to 20 years in prison (Nocholis 2023).

Viewing the ACLU map of the US, one is also viewing the binary, essentializing, and linear ideologies of colonialism applied to land. Such mapping strategies are ever-present in US renderings of this section of North America, a location more aptly known as Turtle Island. Not only does the US outline represent a truncated portion of Turtle Island, but it is also indicative of the racist, colonialist, gender-oppressive history of the genocide of indigenous people, along with which came binary gender paradigms as part and parcel of White supremacy. The essentialized, binarized conception of land into discrete and closed categories (i.e., countries and states) reflects the same colonialist logic that seeks to define and rigidly boundary reductive ideas about gender categories.

Backlash against LGBTQIA+ liberation is often aimed at trans and queer people who visibly disrupt dominant binary, cisgender, and White supremacist paradigms. Trans people who embody aesthetics outside established binary cis-supremacist paradigms are the most frequent targets of violence. Bearing this in mind, it is compelling to consider how drag performance has been a target of much of the recent backlash. Within LGBTQIA+ life and discourse, trans people and drag performances are understood as distinct from one another (albeit often overlapping). To oversimplify, for example, trans is an identity, and

drag is an art. Nevertheless, right-wing attacks on LGBTQIA+ liberation have targeted drag performances and trans identities. From the viewpoints of heteropatriarchy, White supremacy, and cis supremacy, drag performances and trans people are disrupting the dominant world order. Both trans identities and drag performances disrupt the false belief in the essentialized collapsing of binary sex and binary gender and disrupt the pseudo logic that identity is hermetically sealed. Trans identities and drag performances exponentially explode the myriad possible configurations of gender, biological sex, and sexuality and the infinite expressions and configurations thereof. Significantly drag performances and trans identities are often targeted when corporeal presentations visually disrupt dominant aesthetic categories of binary gender.

Visual culture is part of the negotiation of identity formations, and currently, a significant shift is transpiring due to the wave of trans visual culture. While there is an ongoing increase in complex and nuanced trans representations due to growing numbers of trans and queer people across all aspects of culture, media, and art production, the radical transformation is not occurring as one may expect via inroads made by creating positive representations of trans people. Positive representations do not disrupt the problematic and troubling pseudo-logics of White supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Such an approach actually works with the same logic of oppressive schemas, reinforcing the false pretext that visual representation is the key to knowledge or liberation, thus staying invested in binary oppositions and reifying colonialist logic. The methodologic intervention of trans visual culture is a debunking of the pseudo-logic that seeing is indexically related to knowing and that in looking at people, one can know someone's identity. The methodologic break with this outmoded, colonialist pseudo-logic is the transing of identity.

2. Briefly on Identity and Representation

Living in locations where dominant culture seeks to maintain culture as White supremacist, and heteropatriarchal affords Elliot Page what Devon W. Carbado has formulated as "negative identity signification" (Carbado 2005). Carbado has observed that White men live on the "white side of race" and "the male side of gender". "He is, in this sense, the norm: Mankind; the baseline. He is our reference. We are all defined with him in mind." (ibid., pp. 190–212). Yet, as a transmasculine person, Page's relationship to this position of "negative identity signification" and this position of "norm" is not that of a cis man. Page lived decades of his life treated as female, a gender that he was not, while he was wrestling internally with who he was in a world where the examples of trans lives seen in public view demonstrated that to be trans was to live a life unlivable. Arguably one of the most notable public-facing examples of trans masculinity, Page represents a shift in the schema of how White masculine identity is understood. Trans lives and trans methodologies developed from trans lived experiences demonstrate that identity is innate not tied to visual apprehension and malleable not static, thus defying the stoic logic of White supremacy and cis supremacy. As trans visual culture continues to proliferate and trans discourse moves forward, understandings of how visual culture is bound up with the negotiation of identities continue to unfold and shift. Still, the logic of the dominant order persists, positioning Elliot Page as an incorporable example of trans masculinity and affording him a place as "one of the most visible trans people in the word" (Steinmetz 2021).

Via the lens of the pseudo-logic of White supremacist and cis supremacist ideologies, processes of gendering and racializing are part of the dominant order and enmeshed with visual culture. Identities and values are assigned to bodies via visual encounters based on an ideological matrix: a complex system of processes about expectations of how people can look and how identities can acceptably be performed. Cultural representations of identity with regard to who and what are incorporable are proposed via visual culture and the pseudo logic that looking and knowledge are inextricably linked, and stereotypes become part of culturally specific understandings of various groups.

Judith Butler's research investigating regulatory practices that govern gender and culturally intelligible notions of identity is useful here. The intellectual work I am referring

to dates from the 1990s and early 2000s, a time before the so-called Trans Tipping Point, and yet the reductive ideologies Butler observes still hold firm decades later. Butler noted that how people embody norms is often intimately enmeshed with survival. Butler noted that for some, survival is a “burning issue” and how norms are embodied for some folks precisely relates to whether life is livable. Butler describes those who live outside the domain of which she describes as an exclusionary matrix as abject and describes their lives as unlivable (Butler 1993). For the binary gender system to remain intact, those whose identities are viewed as challenging the system must be made examples of as offenders of the system. Butler’s observations are clearly demonstrated in visual culture when we see trans subjects who most fully reflect dominant cultural ideologies such as Elliot Page as being (marginally) accepted, while subjects existing too radically outside sanctioned genders are viewed as not only expendable but necessarily eradicable, as exemplified in particular by the countless acts of violence and aggression perpetrated against working class trans femmes of color.³ Zackary Drucker and Kristen Lovell’s 2023 feature film *The Stroll* for example, gives trans perspective and voice to the lives of trans femmes in New York’s Meatpacking District, exploring topics such as working to survive, gentrification, discrimination, and the trans rights movement (Drucker and Lovell 2023).

To explore how representation is enmeshed with identity formations, it is critical to consider how the ideological matrix that governs gender is the same as the apparatus of racialization. The two are inextricably linked, with countless intersectional mobile and culturally specific points on intersecting schemas. Writing about the problematic centering of White bodies in art history and visual culture in the West, Devon W. Carbado points out that the situating of the specific identity group as invisible or as lacking signifiers inaccurately positions White subjects as the default. As many scholars have observed, there are no neutral positions—not in terms of identity, ideas, or visual culture. Everything is uniquely situated, and any suggestion otherwise needs to be challenged and de-centered. Profound discourses on identity and representations that challenge the exclusionary practices of art history perpetrated under the guise of the neutrality veil can be found in Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray’s *Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Murray and Murray 2006), and Alpesh Kantilal’s *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories* (Patel 2017). The powerful work accomplished by scholars such as these who deploy methods that bring together critical methods of exploring identity, representations, and the exclusionary practices of academia, the art world, art history, and visual culture, is a model for the work that may be conducted via deploying trans visual studies and the study of trans visual culture.

White supremacist, cis supremacist ideologies are rooted in the legacy of the pseudologic of colonialism and rely on visual culture to attach systems of beliefs to various groups of people through visible differences. The Black, queer feminist insights of bell hooks reveal that, “From slavery on, White supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination.” (Hooks 1992). This notion is then tied to photography, as photography emerged during a period deeply bound to colonialism and the rationalist belief that seeing was the highest of all the senses. Via visual assessment, colonialist logic emboldens the ascribing of identity and value to others. For Preciado, the emergence of photography marked an essential stage in producing a new sexual subject via “visual truth” (Preciado 2013). Preciado has observed that the discursive framing of photography as indexical and the suturing of beliefs about photography’s “technical production” endowed it with “the merit of visual realism” (Preciado 2013, p. 111), which, in turn, has tied photography to a significant stage in the production of gender via the belief in visual truth. Preciado writes, “The truth of sex takes on the nature of visual discourse, a process in which photography participates like an ontological catalyst, making explicit a reality that would not be able to emerge any other way.” (Preciado 2013, p. 112).

The cultural conception of photographs, gender, and racialization (in locations ideologically descended from the colonial project) remains linked to the notion that via visual

assessment, the truth about who people are may be ascertained. Although photography scholars have noted that we are beyond the digital turn, making the current state of photography “post-photographic”, photographs are often still viewed as a “window into a world”.⁴ However, no assumption about who someone is based on looking at them can be trusted. Moreover, such a practice can be highly inaccurate, and, more to the point, this schema is deeply problematic, for it upholds a belief that looking is equivalent to knowing and disregards both that looking is ideologically informed and that subjects inherently know who they are more intimately than anyone looking at a given subject.

While photography has often been mobilized as an extension of the colonialist project and in the service of reifying essentialized and reductive identities, photography is also an excellent vehicle for challenging the legacy of oppressive conceptions of visibility, identity, and representation. Transing identity provides a new methodology for understanding representations that move beyond the outmoded colonialist logic that prefers to equate ascertaining information from a surface as inherently linked to interior truth or, in this case, identity. Transing identity prioritizes embodied self-knowledge. Transing identity with regard to visual culture and photographic portraiture provides a pivotal intervention into the understanding of representation.

3. Wynne Neilly

Wynne Neilly is a queer, White trans artist who has created trans and queer representations for over a decade. He earned a BFA in Image Arts from Ryerson University in Toronto in 2012 and has gone on to do commissioned work for publications such as *TIME* and creative work that uses portraiture to explore trans and queer identity. Neilly has had solo and group exhibitions throughout the U.S. and Canada at the International Center of Photography, New York; Joseph Gross Gallery, Tucson, Arizona; and Toronto Image Works Gallery, Toronto. His work has been featured in *Aperture*, *Vision Magazine*, *Unbound*, and *Flash Forward*, among others. The artist’s oeuvre can be situated in the legacy of Loren Cameron and in discourse with artists such as Robert Girard, Robert Mapplethorpe, Catherine Opie, Del la Grace Volcano, and Andy Warhol, as well as with younger artists including Chris Berntsen, Cassils, Zackary Drucker, Jess Dugan, Rhys Ernst, Ren Hang, Texas Isaiah, Amos Mac, Tyler Mitchell, Zanele Muholi, Cayote Park, Elle Perez, Lorenzo Triburgo, and others who use portrait photographs to explore the complexities of queer and trans identities.

Nearly a decade before making the cover photo of *Page*, Neilly was beginning his medical transition and photographing his experience via Polaroid every Friday (the day of his testosterone injection). The ongoing self-portrait work *Female to “Male”* images Neilly’s changing corporeality as he undergoes medical transition (Figure 2). In a rich lineage of artists using photography to chronicle transforming their corporeality as durational performance, including Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, Tehching Hsieh, Cassils, and others, Neilly’s project inserted a popular vernacular process of self-documenting one’s medical transition with the use of hormones as a trans person into fine art discourse. The specificity of picturing his medical gender transition lends itself to distinctly different insights than those ascertained from studying any of the above-mentioned similar projects.



Figure 2. Cont.



Figure 2. (a). August 30th, 2013—3rd shot, Polaroid photograph by Wynne Neilly, from Female to “Male”; (b). October 18th 2013—10th shot, Polaroid photograph by Wynne Neilly, from Female to “Male”; (c). January 24th 2014—24th shot, Polaroid photograph by Wynne Neilly, from Female to “Male”; (d). August 8th 2014—52nd shot, Polaroid photograph by Wynne Neilly, from Female to “Male”.

Assigning gender to people in locations ideologically entrenched in the logic of colonialism is currently predominantly achieved via assessing and interpreting corporeal aesthetics, and assigning a gender to the subject being viewed. A deceptively benign and often unconscious occurrence, the process of looking is, as scholar Nicole Archer poignantly described, “ideologically saturated” (Archer 2017). Looking at the self-portrait photographs of *Female to “Male”*, the highly ideological process of interpreting the surface aesthetics of the figure vis-a-vis the photograph comes into focus. The conceptual flattening of Wynne Neilly the photograph and Wynne Neilly the person invites us to recognize the phenotypic judgments we are constantly making about people’s visual morphology. The repeated aesthetics of the photographs of the subject slows the process of making assumptions about the subject. The numerous images of Neilly invite viewers to reflect on who they think the subject is. With each new picture, the subject appears slightly different in body shape, yet the tonality of their skin tone remains, by and large, the same. Based on subtle shifts in body thickness, muscle tone, body hair, face structure, shoulder breadth, chest definition, facial hair, and posture, one may assign a variety of gender assumptions to each image of the subject. Yet based on processes of racializing, the subject remains white, highlighting the consistent racializing of the subject regardless of gender.

Processes of gendering are always racialized. What comes into view with *Female to “Male”* is that gender is always bound by aesthetics, and when gender is assigned to others, it is conducted via an arbitrary and ideological process of fixing expectations to people based on looking at them. Via Neilly’s Polaroids, one is able to see how the color of the subject’s skin relates to this process of gendering. In each image, standing in front of a white wall, Neilly brings into relief the color of his skin, highlighting how interpretations of a given physicality are always necessarily bound up with expectations of gender and processes of racialization. For example, in Figure 2 one may identify the figure in the top left image as a soft butch, in the top right image as a little bit butch, in the bottom left image as a young man, and in the bottom right image as a man. Ascribing gender is contingent on situating a subject within a field of similar-looking bodies and interpretations of them in relation to said field. As such, this process is always culturally and sub-culturally specific. Aesthetic signifiers such as body posture, hairstyle, piercings, jewelry, and tattoos connote specific subcultural affiliations and situate the racialized subject within these locations, suggesting an interpretation of the embodiment of and performance of gender. For example, the bottom right image, where one might assume the figure is male, reflects a specific subset of twenty-something, queer, White masculinity where a subtle mustache coupled with slim upper body musculature connotes masculinity more than the longish hair and slim waist might connote femininity. In differently racialized bodies, the aesthetics of body shape and hair might be interpreted differently, resulting in a variety of disparate assumptions about gender and racialized aesthetics.

Due to the way gender necessarily intersects with corporeality as signifier, as one engages in the process of looking at *Female to "Male"*, the figure's gender embodiment is interpreted within the pre-existing matrix of gendered expectation viewable within visual culture, which, in the "West", is inherently racialized. Repeatedly imaging himself, ostensibly under the guise of making his shifting gender morphology visible, the artist is also bringing his White identity into view. Being careful not to conflate heterosexuality, Whiteness, and cis-normativity, I would like to suggest that *Female to "Male"* as praxis invites a reflection on the unseating of cis-normativity while also working to make Whiteness visible. This intervention is imperative when one recalls the work of queer of color critique, which has compellingly outlined that without attending to racialization and naming Whiteness, one limits and homogenizes queer theory under Whiteness as the default. In addition, continues to center heteropatriarchal White supremacy (Ferguson 2004; Chen 2017; Johnson and Henderson 2005).

4. *Have/Hold* and the Transing of Identity

Wynne Neilly recently showcased an unprecedented body of work, *Have/Hold*, at We Buy Gold, Gallery TPW, Toronto, Canada curated by Michèle Pearson Clarke. A collaboration with fellow artist Kyle Lasky, the project explores the intimate friendship between the two White transmen in photographic form (Figure 3). Playing with the language of marriage vows and bonds of matrimony, the title signals the affection, vulnerability, and love explored in the work. Neilly describes the project as "challenging traditional narratives and stigma around masculine intimacy" (Neilly and Lasky n.d.). Artist friends Neilly and Lasky met in art school at a time when both were beginning to transition and developing a deep friendship. Now that the collaborators are regularly interpreted as male in daily life and find themselves dating women, their relationship with one another strikes the artists as an "anomaly" among representations of male friendship, and they find their closeness is often misinterpreted as that of lovers. Neilly attributes their ability to be so intimate to their friendship being rooted in queerness and not in heteropatriarchal cis masculinity (Neilly and Lasky n.d.). The images in *Have/Hold* transmit these sentiments, intimacies, and complexities, pushing the boundaries of what a masculine friendship can look like, and challenging assumptions viewers may be inclined to make about the work and the artists.



Figure 3. Installation Image of *Have/Hold*, 2021, Work by Wynne Neilly and Kyle Lasky. Courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery. Installation image shot by Toni Hafkenscheid.

In a wall-size installation of collaborative, photographic self-portraits, the artists wallpaper the gallery with two floor-to-ceiling, black and white photobooth images of themselves. In the left image, the two faces look out of the picture plane with bright eyes and broad smiles beneath mustaches, their faces exuding glee and their dark t-shirts blending into one amorphous torso before a rumpled backdrop curtain. In the image on the right, the two subjects have turned their buzzed heads toward each other to engage in a tender kiss. The expression of love between the two close friends is palpable. Functioning as a mural behind the other, smaller pictures, the massive photographs ground the installation in feelings of intimacy, humor, and tenderness. Their matching buzz cuts and facial hair, coupled with the kiss, draw references to various queer subcultures and photographs found in the oeuvres of Wolfgang Tillmans and Cathy Opie, where buzzcuts appear donned by queers of various genders in reclamation and queering of an aesthetic oft deployed to signal white supremacist homophobia. The series of images, hung in a loose but thoughtful composition of overlapping and undulating rectangles, shows a story of two friends who enjoy travel, adventures, leisure, and intimacy. The figures inhabit a world where Neilly and Lasky move from camping to hotel rooms to haircuts by windows, from bathing to embracing in a world populated only by them. It is a portrait of the pair and a love letter to friendship. The configuration includes a smaller, more formal, double portrait of the two, each in a plaid shirt and backward baseball cap in what appears to be a studio setting, where Neilly stands in front and Lasky hangs his arm over Neilly's shoulder. Hanging in the installation is the red plaid shirt worn by Lasky in the photograph, bringing the image into the present through tactility and sentimentality. The plaid flannel shirt creates aesthetic allusions to dyke culture of the 1990s, especially in the US and Canada, cultural touchstones that the trans men who once inhabited queer dyke circles make fond and playful reference to by including an image of the collaborators wearing plaid flannel earlier on in their medical transitions where a viewer might want to categorize Neilly and Lasky's gender presentations as masculine presenting women, or as Neilly describes them, "young, butch women" (Neilly and Lasky n.d.). The inclusion of this image and the shirt as sculptural object highlight the origin of their friendship in queer female assumed identities. This visual point rings as pertinent in that it aestheticizes a transing of identity. One cannot assume who the subjects are based on a visual read of a single given image. Identity is far more complex than that which may be viewed in a singular photograph.

In a framed, central photograph, the two appear nude in what looks to be a hot spring in a rugged landscape (Figure 4). Snowcapped mountains rest in the distance, and grassy marshland dapples the midground of the picture. Centered and gazing directly outward through the picture plane, Neilly sits behind and above Lasky on the edge of the pool, with his legs flanking Lasky's sides, one hand placed gently on Lasky's shoulder and the other on Lasky's chest. Their pale, tattooed bodies blend into one another. At first glance, one might not differentiate between Neilly's leg and Lasky's arm; both sport black and grey tattoos, pale skin and body hair. The positioning of their bodies both conceals and reveals signs of transness. Lasky's body blocks places where one might see markings of Neilly's transness, and Lasky's right hand rests in a gentle fist beneath the water, obscuring any view of his genitals. Nevertheless, on Lasky's hairy chest, appear faint red, uneven lines of top surgery scars, soft markings of his transness, faintly echoing the rugged horizon line.



Figure 4. Our Favourite Spot, 2018, Work by Wynne Neilly and Kyle Lasky. Courtesy of Stephen Bulger Gallery.

The picture of the two friends, nude and bathing close together in the wild landscape, recalls images of Greco-Roman baths, gay cruising grounds, spaghetti westerns, and formal portraiture. The soft and gentle gesture of Neilly resting his limbs on Lasky and Lasky resting his left arm in return over Neilly's knee speaks volumes about the beautiful tenderness of friendship and the ability to be vulnerable—things familiar in queer circles but seldom seen in mainstream depictions of White, heterosexual, cis masculinity.

When the figures are interpreted as cis White men, the two central figures, self-possessed and dominating the image, open questions about their relationship to the landscape that recall histories of colonization, stories of conquest, and colonialist ideologies that painted and pictured Turtle Island as an empty wilderness for the taking.⁵ When viewed as trans, the tender depiction of masculinity references histories of queer and trans people seeking solace in locations populated only by LGBTQ+ community and practices of image-making by and for LGBTQ+ people in landscapes with the intent of freely being oneself and the photographic work of artists such as Tammy Rae Carland, Ryan McGinley, Sofia Cordova, Torrey Cummings, Laura Aguilar, Elle Perez, Tyler Mitchell, and others, work that considers the complex histories of landscapes in relation to colonization and queer and trans utopia and solace.

Strategically deploying and transforming dominant cultural modes of White masculinity, *Have/Hold* reflects Neilly and Lasky's identities and relationship, playfully and skillfully breaking open nuances of White masculinity. The deployment and transformation of White masculinity one encounters in the images that constitute *Have/Hold* can be understood in conversation with José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification. As José Esteban Muñoz puts it,

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded messages of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step

further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics of positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (Muñoz 1999)

Disidentifying with dominant cultural ideas about White masculinity, *Have/Hold* works on and against essentialized notions of heteropatriarchal, cis-supremacist, White-supremacist, binary masculinity. Rather than replicating toxic traits of White masculinity, including machismo, hostility, aggression, homophobia, hyper-independence, emotional repression, and feminist aversion, for example, *Have/Hold* displays images of trans queer White masculine tenderness, vulnerability, intimacy, and platonic love. Neilly's and Lasky's expressions of identity in *Have/Hold* reside not in their overt performance of transness but in their transing of the expectations of White masculinity as ideologically constructed in Anglo-European and North American contemporary culture.

Transing identity in this way can be understood as a methodological intervention and lived maneuver that de-sutures understandings of identity from the surface aesthetics of physical bodies, highlighting the complex and slippery relationship between corporeality and identity. While simultaneously cracking open, disidentifying with, and transforming dominant cultural expectations of identity categories. In other words, the pair's facial hair and flat chests do not equate to any given type of identity. Nevertheless, these aesthetics play with circulating cultural associations about body hair and physiognomy. Flat chests and mustaches are often assumed to signal masculinity or are ascribed masculine gender attributes, and yet this is not necessary or given. Neilly, for example, is more connected with being trans than being male. In Neilly's own words:

I very strongly identify with being trans. My trans identity is not binary in the ways that society probably expects it to be. When heteronormative or mainstream society imagines a female born body transiting to a body that is perceived as masculine, there is an automatic reading of that person being "female to male" or FTM. This FTM experience might be very relatable and true for many trans people, but it is also completely wrong for others. (Neilly 2015)

Identity for trans people is rooted in who we know ourselves to be and who we tell people we are. In articulating one's transness, one often says, "This is who I am" in the face of a dominant cultural paradigm (and often actual people saying), "I know who you are based on what I see and how I assign categories and values to what I see." The trans person rejects the logic of the colonizing gaze. In this way, trans representations create a crisis of Western conceptions of visibility and visibility. As Micha Cárdenas notes,

For trans visibility to be a reality, there would have to be an essential trans identity to make visible, but there is not. How could one make visible an identity that begins with the claim: "I am not what I appear to be; I know this because of a feeling that I have; I am my vision of my future self." (Cárdenas 2017)

Transing identity is a radical shift at odds with dominant Western ideologies about identity and visibility. When Wynne Neilly and Kyle Lasky created their collaborative photographic project, they were visually creating a rejection of the pseudo-logic that a viewer can know who they are by looking at them. Moreover, when a viewer accepts the figures as they articulate themselves to be, even if it seems at odds with how they appear, then the viewer is rethinking the colonial ideologies that undergird how people residing in locations ideologically entrenched in colonial pseudo-logics have been trained to look at people and portraits. As trans scholar B. Preciado notes, male and female exist only because they are continuously produced. Gender is dependent on visibility and tied to photography. Emerging during the era of colonization, photography marked a significant stage in the production of sexed and gendered subjects via the notion of "visual truth" (Preciado 2013). *Have/Hold* disidentifies with White masculinity, breaking with the conceptualized collapsing of index and indexed or photograph and corporeality. *Have/Hold* highlights precisely how meaning and value are assigned to bodies based primarily on

ideological interpretations of visual information. The work also proposes the unfixing of identity and the de-suturing of Whiteness and masculinity as given and neutral positions.

Part of the colonialist project was the formation and deployment of the concept of the stereotype. The stereotype has since endured as an integral component of various identity-based oppressions in locations ideologically descended from colonial projects. The pseudo-logic of the stereotype is dependent on the ocular-centric cultural belief in valuing looking. According to post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha, a stereotype is “a fixed reality” which is at once an “other” and yet knowable in that it is visible. (Bhabha 2012). Bhabha’s observations are invaluable to the discussion at hand. Stereotypes are not factual, but they become endowed with cultural currency when they are anxiously repeated in visual culture to such an extent that the reductive iconic image and the (often damaging) ideas sutured to representations become synonymous with a group of people. Bhabha observes that stereotypes are created about people in an attempt to malign and oppress. Stereotypes produce and cement troubled, problematic, and reductive beliefs about groups of people, essentializing identities and perpetuating ill-treatment of those deemed worthy of mistreatment. However, the deeper issue with stereotypes is that they reinforce and are reinforced by a perpetuated belief in the false equivalence of seeing and knowing. Transing identity makes apparent that this pseudo logic is inaccurate and works on and against such belief systems, mobilizing other ways of engaging visuality and identity.

Have/Hold pushes the limits of White masculinity, making plain that, like all identities, masculinity, in the current colonial schema, is both constructed by and co-constituted by representations. *Have/Hold* reflects what Jack Halberstam has called a “repudiation of the veracity of the visual” (Halberstam 2018, p. 96). The praxis of *transing identity* that Neilly’s work engages highlights that the surface of the picture and the aesthetics of a person in an image and a person’s corporeality in daily life are not necessarily correlative to any assumption one may make based on looking. The rejection of the problematic belief that one may understand how another person identifies based on looking at them is a challenge to a foundational concept of a particular Western colonialist worldview and opens a new way of rethinking visuality, representation, and identity. This suggests that if one unfixes the idea of reality being sutured to the privileging of sight as articulated by C. Riley Snorton new understandings, methodologies, and frameworks for inquiry become possible (Snorton 2017). Recognizing that identity resides within and is transmitted outward via complex embodied, referential, gestural, and performative aesthetics, trans people and trans methodologies shift the discourse on identity to one that originates in self-articulation and embodied feeling and away from an ocular-centric worldview, calling into question the meanings that are made between the gendered subject and those interpreting gender via nuanced ideologically informed processes rooted in colonialist logics. Specifically, *Have/Hold* suggests that binary, heterosexual, White supremacist, cis-supremacist masculinity is a stereotype, a reduced and essentialized fiction, and that masculinity as gender is, in fact, a concept that is contingent on location, temporality, and culture, and is porous, transformable, intersectional, and ever-evolving.

5. Concluding Thoughts

Trans-self-representations such as those found in Wynne Neilly’s oeuvre challenge the dominant cultural logics of White supremacy and cis supremacy, debunking an inaccurate and troubling belief that seeing has an uncomplicated and indexical relationship with the ascertaining of knowledge. Studying trans self-imaging practices such as Neilly’s provides a methodology that moves beyond binary structures, de-essentializes how we think about representation and identity, and encourages continually malleable, self-reflexive methods of knowledge formation. Transing identity intervenes in visual culture theory and, in this instance, discourses on photography and the complex relationship between representations and ideas of truth and authenticity, revealing that the indexicality often associated with photographs is similar to the essentialist ways in which one may assume the exteriority of

a subject matches their identification, thus opening up nuanced and often creative modes of engaging these ideological legacies while undoing their presupposition.

Transing identity as a methodology rejects the belief that by looking at someone, one can know their identity. Transing identity shifts the understanding of identity that privileges that which is embodied and experiential. Identity comes from within, not from someone else looking at us and telling us who we are. Transing identity provides a methodological way out of colonialist and White supremacist logic. This logic dictates that the viewer ascribes one's identity via a process beyond reproach and void of agenda or ideology. Transing identity highlights that identity is malleable, fluctuating, intersectional, and collaborative, created in community, and communicated in a field of visual and performed aesthetics, where we all are both interpellated and disidentifying to varying degrees, with numerous aesthetics and gendered and raced frameworks circulating in given temporal, social, and geopolitical locations. Transing identity underscores the humanity of people, the infinitely complex play of visual interpretation, and opens up nuanced possibilities for further investigation into questions of identity, representation, and visibility.

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Notes

- ¹ For further reading on the growing corpus of research on trans representations, and trans visual culture see: (Bey 2022; Chen 2019; Getsy and Gossett 2021; Halberstam 2018; Lehner 2019; Lehner 2021; Lehner 2022; Ochoa 2014; Stanley and Burton 2017; Jones 2021).
- ² Original Plumbing. Presented at the Original Plumbing Panel, 10th Anniversary Compilation, a panel of contributors to the lauded magazine that celebrates trans male culture, Strand Bookstore, New York, NY, USA, 24 July 2019.
- ³ See: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-nonbinary-community-in-2023> (accessed on 7 July 2023).
- ⁴ See the work of Susan Bright, David Company, and Charlotte Cotton.
- ⁵ Colonialist ideology informed images of Turtle Island during the period of colonization deploying aesthetic strategies that perpetuated the colonialist ideology of manifest destiny. See for example, (Berger 2005) and (Monkman and Gordon 2023).

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