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DIY identities in a DIY scene: trans music events in the UK

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The past three decades have seen the emergence of an increasingly vigorous and outspoken trans movement in the United Kingdom. Resulting political and social changes have been accompanied by an increasing number of individuals willing to disclose their trans status and be publicly trans. With the development of ‘new modes’ and ‘different codes’ of trans identity and political activism (Whittle, 1998: 393), and an increasingly visible trans population, the stand-alone *trans* has also come to operate as an organising category for cultural forms. Whereas previous terminologies such as ‘transsexual’, ‘transvestite’ (and perhaps even ‘transgender’) provided more distinct categorical accounts of gender-variant possibility, ‘trans’ is intentionally open and – like ‘queer’ – refuses any clear or coherent definition (Pearce, Steinberg and Moon, 2019). In this chapter, we reflect on what it might mean to ‘do’ trans in a contemporary cultural context, in the tradition of recent accounts of trans music, theatre and performance (see, for instance Halberstam, 2005; Kumpf, 2016; Gossett, Stanley and Burton, 2017; Jaime, 2017; Landry, 2018).

While there have always been trans performers, opportunities for their involvement in somewhat regular *trans events* have historically been limited. However, by the early 2010s there was a growing music scene in the United Kingdom. This was an exciting time to be involved in

the creation of 'trans' arts and culture as new networks of trans activists, musicians and promoters emerged for the first time, linking semi-regular events across the country. Events such as Awkward Turtle, Bar Wotever, Transpose (London), Moulin Rage (Brighton, Cambridge and London), Cachín Cachán Cachunga (Edinburgh and Glasgow) and the Nottinghamshire Pride Trans Tent (Nottingham) effectively created temporary trans spaces within pubs, bars, small clubs and community centres, or as part of wider LGBT Pride programs.

Prior to this time, there was no pre-existing trans-oriented music scene for *new* performers to get involved with. High profile figures were few and far between, either distanced by time (for instance, pioneering trans punk Jayne County predominantly released music in the 1970s and 80s), or place (in the case of 2000s North American bands such as The Cliks and Coyote Grace, who never toured the UK). The so-called 'transgender tipping point' – the moment of heightened international media interest heralded by Laverne Cox's appearance on the cover of Time magazine in May 2014 – was yet to come.

This chapter offers insights into the emergence of a trans music scene at a key point in time (2010-2013) influenced by the emergence of 'trans' as a standalone identity. The events that this chapter discusses tended to draw small but enthusiastic crowds of 'underground' music fans, with typical audiences ranging between 20 and 100 people. They drew heavily upon a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos most typically associated with underground scenes based around the genres of indie, punk or folk; however, the musical forms present at any given trans music event typically drew upon a far wider pool of genres. Efforts were often made by promoters (with mixed success) to ensure diversity in terms of age, class, dis/ability and race. Rather than being defined wholly by musical style or participants' cultural backgrounds, therefore, this scene coalesced largely through the notable presence of *trans* people as promoters, performers and audience members.

The starting point for the research project that forms the basis of this chapter was a process of critical reflection upon the authors' own involvement as performers and event promoters within a loose network of trans-oriented events. The scene we discovered through

this network worked actively to *not* define itself, and was populated by individuals whose own identities were similarly complex. Our findings describe a scene in which flexible ‘trans’ approaches to gender are reflected in the *spaces* that participants created in order to share and experience music and performance. We argue that this is a de/constructive process by which participants draw upon practices of ‘genre evasion’ (Steinholt, 2012) and/or ‘cut-and-paste’ (Bornstein, 1994) in order to engage with complexity and possibility in a deeply personal – but nevertheless *social* – manner.

Entering the field

This paper is based on a small-scale ethnographic research project conducted in 2012-3. Our findings draw on materials associated with events, including gig posters, promotional websites, Youtube videos and blogs; four interviews with individuals deeply involved with the scene as musicians and/or promoters; and participant observation at number of events that we attended as audience members, musicians and/or promoters. Both researchers are white, middle class women who have long been involved in alternative music subcultures. Ruth is a trans woman; Kirsty considers herself to be a gender-nonconforming cis woman and was less involved with trans community events at the beginning of this research.

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

Our entry to the field was through ‘Wotever Rock’, a gig hosted by Bar Wotever at London’s Royal Vauxhall Tavern in May 2012. At this event we recognized for the first time that we were interacting with a wider community of trans artists, activists and promoters. The invitation to play at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern came after a member of the Bar Wotever team

attended a fundraiser at the band's hometown of Leamington Spa for Godiva Young Gays & Lesbians (GYGL), a Midlands LGBTQ youth group; this was another event which, we noted on reflection was organized by a trans promoter and featured a substantial number of trans performers from a range of artistic and demographic backgrounds.

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

The design of our project was informed by grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990): the findings presented in this paper were generated and refined in an ongoing, back-and-forth process of data collection, analysis, and theory generation. Our aim was to inductively and reflexively produce theory that prioritized participant voices. This was important for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, we wanted to look empirically at how the events we were interested in were understood by those who participated in them, and construct the conceptual categories at the centre of our analysis accordingly. Secondly, trans people's cultural histories are all too often subject to erasure or appropriation (through theoretical abstraction) by cis academics who have had no direct involvement in them (Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2007). By focusing our research on trans people's activities and understandings, we work to actively resist these tendencies through constructing new narratives and offering alternative cultural accounts. We further wish to move beyond tropes of trans victimhood in order to refocus on the rich cultural realities and possibilities of trans lives.

Through an initial process of analysis we quickly answered our original research question: the proliferation of events and the network of performers and promoters who linked these events indicated that there *was* 'trans' music scene. We therefore shifted our focus towards understanding how the scene operated, and how it was understood by participants.

During the research process we drew upon a range of qualitative data, including cultural artefacts¹ produced by individuals who participated in and/or organized events, as well as a small number of semi-structured interviews. We later coded our data using a thematic analytic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We recognized our *own* participation in this scene as relevant for our analysis, and therefore draw on participant observation as well as analytic autoethnographic reflection (Anderson, 2006). Both researchers kept notes on our (trans-oriented) cultural participation, detailing (for instance) the atmosphere at events we attended, the nature of the performances, and the purpose of the events. These were informed by participant observation at ten events, plus a critical reappraisal of four events we had attended in the past. The autoethnographic element of this project was therefore retrospective as well as continuous: this enabled us to draw critically on our past experiences in the same way that we would ask our interviewees to do.

Our contacts from the events we attended formed a basis from which to recruit interviewees. We interviewed four individuals who had, like us, been involved in performing at and/or organizing trans-oriented events across the country. These individuals came from a range of quite different social backgrounds, but were all in their 20s or 30s and shared a thoughtful and reflective approach to gender that is common within the activist networks from which the trans music scene emerged. In order to ensure the anonymity of interview participants we have used pseudonyms in this chapter, and do not share explicit demographic information on these individuals².

Coming to terms with ‘trans’

Whilst ‘trans’ is sometimes used as a shorthand for individuals who undergo a medically supervised transition from male to female or vice-versa, in this paper we use the term in a broader sense. Whittle (2006) argues that: ‘[a] trans identity is now accessible [...] to anyone who does not feel comfortable in the gender role they were attributed with at birth, or has a

gender identity at odds with the labels “man” or “woman” credited to them by formal authorities’ (xi). In this sense ‘trans’ is oppositional: individuals move through the world as trans do so because their behavior and/or bodies do not conform to normative ideas of binary sex and/or gender. Thus, while ‘trans’ does operate as a ‘politicised identity category’ it can also be understood more widely as something that people *do* (Enke, 2012: 236; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

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

An alternative engagement with trans politics and possibility could be seen in acts such as The Mechanisms and Dr Carmilla. These performers drew upon iconography of science fiction and fantasy in order to deconstruct gender norms. For instance, the character of Dr Carmilla (played by singer-songwriter Maki Yamazaki) is a lesbian vampire from outer space; in songs such as ‘Exhumed’, she describes being awoken from the dead and experimented on in a laboratory, before escaping and joyously embracing her monstrosity. In this way, Yamazaki’s storytelling reflects a celebration of disruptive ‘cyborg’ possibilities within the literatures of feminist and trans theory, with technologically enhanced bodies posing a threat to the patriarchal divide between ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (Haraway, 1991; Stryker, 1994).

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

Pat, Robin and Ruth's various understandings of themselves as 'trans' demonstrates the innate ambivalence of an oppositional trans identity. Within a different social world, they (like Dr Carmilla, and some of The Mechanism's non-gendered characters) might not be trans: they therefore recognize the conditional nature of this identity. However, this also imbues the term with a queer fluidity: Pat, Robin and Ruth use the term trans to describe the way in which their gender/sex does not mesh with (cis)normative understandings of body/behaviour.

Like Pat, and also Enke (2012), we regard trans identities as socially and historically contingent. That is to say: we believe that categorical distinctions between 'trans' and 'cis' are inherently problematic because they result in an artificial binary that is insensitive to the complexities of gendered diversity. A trans identity does not, therefore, *necessarily* follow from a flouting of (cis)normative sex/gender standards. Other terminologies of gendered dissent that

exist alongside and can intersect or diverge complexly from 'trans' include (but are not limited to) butch, femme, dyke, fairy, drag kings and queens (Halberstam, 1998; Nestle, Howell and Wilchins, 2002; MacKay, 2019). What trans offers is a specific organising principle for people whose gendered identity and/or experience differs from that they were assigned at birth, grounded in the social circumstances of the here and now.

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

'Trans' as de/construction

'Trans' does not, therefore, have a single, fixed meaning; it instead incorporates a multiplicity of meanings that vary according to both individual and social context, and might shift over time. Drawing upon the interviews undertaken for this project as well as wider observations within the trans music scene, we argue that these meanings are negotiated through a process of simultaneous deconstruction (through 'genre evasion'), and construction (through 'cut-and-paste') with trans identity existing in the space between the two. Like our wider observations of the music scene itself these are snapshots from a particular point in time and space, capturing individuals and communities amidst ongoing processes of identity formation.

In describing their gendered identities, we saw performers and interview participants employing similar discursive practices of 'genre evasion' to those noted by Steinholt (2012) in his research with Russian punks. Steinholt's participants tended to either avoid genre labels or choose their own ways to define themselves. In this way they sought to avoid being pigeonholed or judged alongside others: '[g]enre evasion becomes necessary in order to protect the notion of

an authentic voice that is not ensured by reference to generic convention' (Steinholt, 2012: 282).

In a similar manner, participants in the trans music scene frequently sought to evade generic conventions of gendered possibility:

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

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

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

In the process we describe as 'construction', our participants drew on a range of pre-existing ideas regarding gendered possibility in order to build understandings of their (trans)gendered selves. This typically took place even as participants *also* engaged in genre

evasion. Robin describes their aforementioned list of descriptive terms as: 'picking up loads of different words and smushing them together until they reach an approximation of what I'm looking for'. Similarly, Maki Yamazaki's Facebook artist page describes her as 'queer, trans, grey asexual, genderqueer and thoroughly nerdy'. In this regard, we see parallels with Bornstein's (1994) conceptualization of transgender identity 'based on collage. You know [... sort] of a cut-and-paste thing' (3). A complex identity that reflects the specific experiences and feelings of the individual can therefore be discursively *constructed* in a DIY fashion from whatever language is available. 'Trans' can be understood in this context not as a fixed identity, but as an oppositional movement away from rigidity and towards the creation of new possibilities through the acknowledgement of gendered (and sexual, and social) complexity and fluidity. This offers an alternative to the limited possibility of normative (cis)gendered language, whilst utilizing discursive tools that are already available. Our participants sought to redefine language, rather than be defined by it.

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

Interviewers: what pronouns would you prefer us to use?

Riley: male if you please

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

Riley: yes

actually wait, no

[...]

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

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

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

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

Riley: transgender, transmasculine, male, female

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

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

defined in terms of their being visibly (gender)queer, in a similar manner to performers such as CN Lester.

For our research participants, being 'trans' can be understood as an outcome of *simultaneously* evading gendered definition, and constructing new gendered possibilities in a 'cut-and-paste' manner. Trans identities come to be in the space between these processes. Gender pluralism is hence not simply an interpersonal phenomenon, but also a means by which *individual* engagements with gender might draw upon a great range of possibilities for being. These strategies work to create space in which trans people might express and understand themselves and communicate with others in a more authentic way.

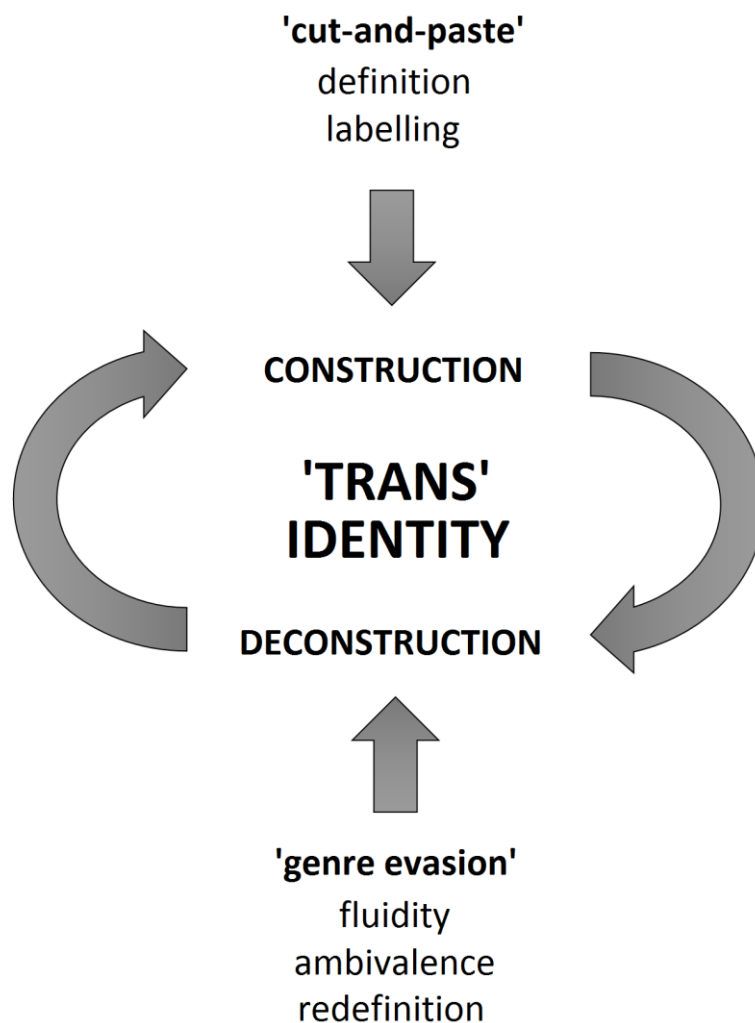


Figure 6.1: De/construction theory of trans.

A trans music scene

In his seminal account of the emergence of new forms of trans identity in the context of Internet communities, Whittle (1998) describes how a ‘reconstructive project of “new modes” and “different codes”’ came to shape innovative and ‘exceptionally influential’ forms of activism (393). In a similar manner, our findings show that the de/constructive, gender pluralist approaches to ‘trans’ employed by trans music scene participants came to shape their *cultural* engagement. As we examined scene participants’ de/constructive approaches to (trans)gendered identity, we began to observe parallels with the manner in which they approached their involvement in cultural events.

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

We observed that trans music scene events shared the following elements:

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

For example, the July 2011 Cutlery Drawer event *Moulin Rage* was organised by a trans promoter, and featured a line-up consisting primarily of trans solo performers (CN Lester and Ruth Pearce) or groups prominently featuring trans members and themes (Lashings of Ginger Beer Time and The Mechanisms). These acts represented a range of genres: Lashings of Ginger

Beer Time put on a musical burlesque show, CN Lester performed a number of piano ballads rooted in alternative rock, and The Mechanisms were a space opera/fairytale-themed folk band. A great many trans people were present at the event, at which the promoter had (intentionally) created a 'safe space' in which attendees felt comfortable expressing gender diversity. However, this was not a trans-only event: indeed, it was not even advertised as a trans-oriented event, with promotional materials instead focusing on the night's role as fundraiser for Rape Crisis South London (the 'overarching theme' of the night). Instead, the presence of so many trans performers communicated the nature of the night to those 'in the know', even as a cis audience was explicitly invited and welcomed into the space. Finally, this was not a 'professional', for-profit event, with the promoter and all of the acts contributing in a DIY, non-profit capacity for the sake of both the music and the cause.



Figure 6.2: 'Moulin Rage' poster by the Cutlery Drawer. London, July 2011.

De/construction in and through the scene

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

The majority of individuals who performed in the Trans Tent were trans. In this way, Recreation Nottingham ensured that trans people and their creative projects were prioritised and given a specific platform within a wider LGBT event. The Trans Tent was therefore a space constructed *by* and *for* trans people. Importantly, this afforded the organisers an opportunity to define the parameters of 'trans' for the purposes of the event. The trans people who were invited to perform in the Trans Tent represented a great range of (female, male, genderqueer and non-binary) gendered identity and expression, in addition to a considerable variety of intersecting identities in terms of age, class, dis/ability, race and sexuality. The organisers therefore took an intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991), gender pluralist approach, rejecting more prescriptive approaches to 'trans'.³ Moreover, the line-up was not exclusively trans. A number of cis people performed alongside trans bandmates, or were booked as solo acts. This was a trans event where you didn't have to be trans: the boundaries of identity were not strictly policed. The 'trans' label for the event was thereby simultaneously constructed (in an intersectional, gender pluralist manner) *and* deliberately destabilised by the organisers, through practices akin to genre evasion. This was a strategy we'd similarly seen employed at Bar Wotever, where the emphasis at Wotever Rock was on trans-fronted bands The Makeshifts and Not Right, in a line-up organised by a trans promoter. However, there were also acts on stage who played with the possibilities of gender from a 'cis' perspective, including anti-macho male singer-songwriter Killer's Riches, as well as Battle Of You, fronted by two queer women and also known as 'B.O.Y.'.

Echoing the way in which individuals might de/construct their 'trans' identities, events such as the Trans Tent and Wotever Rock de/constructed the very notion of what a 'trans' space might look like.

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

Both the organising committee for the wider Nottinghamshire Pride event and the organisers of the Trans Tent claimed a commitment to community 'safety'. For Pride, this involved hiring private security services. Recreation Nottingham, however, took a different approach to providing a 'safe space' in their tent. The tent *itself* was seen as an investment in

'safety', a response to transphobic incidents at previous Pride events in the city. It was, nevertheless, open to all attendees of Nottinghamshire Pride, with a whole 'wall' of the tent removed in order to make the space literally open. Instead of closing down the space, a number of strategies were employed by the organisers in order to create and maintain 'safety' for the exploration of trans issues. Firstly, there was the aforementioned commitment to inclusivity and intersectional diversity. Kat Gupta was a member of the organising team; they explain in Chapter 5 that, 'I wanted such a space to acknowledge the different and complex ways people identify, to encourage exploration of intersectional identities and recognise that there is No One True Way of being trans'. Moreover, the safety afforded by this approach extended beyond trans identity: as Gupta describes, 'we were determined to [...] offer a space to our *allies* to perform in a friendly place where the complexities of *their* identities were welcome' (emphases added). Secondly, a range of informative materials were made available, with resources and contacts for trans people and their families and friends, as well as facts about a diverse range of historical figures who might be understood as trans. Finally, a code of conduct for the space was prominently displayed, with basic guidelines for behaviour. The Trans Tent at Nottinghamshire Pride therefore operated to construct a trans-specific safe space, even as it deconstructed the very notion of 'trans space' by being open to the general public and not being exclusively 'trans'. In this way, the de/construction of 'trans' spaces within the scene was very much about *extending* the liberatory potential of gender pluralist trans discourse beyond the boundaries of personal identity and particular trans communities, and into the wider material world.

Approaches to the space in which events were run varied according to the availability of suitable venues across the country. Some events were held in 'trans-friendly' venues: for instance, Queer We Go was located in Leeds' Wharf Chambers, which has a trans-inclusive 'safer space' policy on its website, and non-gendered toilets within the building itself. However, we consistently saw that in spaces which were not *already* set up in a specifically trans-safe way, promoters would often seek to *trans* the spaces they occupied. For example, Transpose was often (and increasingly) held within 'mainstream' venues such as Hackney Attic. At these events

temporary toilet signs were created to 'neutralise' the toilets. A similar measure was undertaken at the authors' feminist punk event Revolt in Coventry, with both trans-inclusive women's toilets and gender-neutral toilets created, and signs prominently displayed in order to explain to cis attendees why this was happening. In this way, the politics of trans diversity, inclusion and visibility can be brought into wider public spaces as part of a commitment to trans attendees' safety.

A 'trans' approach was therefore very explicitly drawn upon as an organising principle of trans scene events, with the promotion of a diverse range of trans performers and the creation of a safe trans space being the *purpose* of the scene. However, just as we saw in our interview participants' reflections upon their gendered identities, there was a simultaneous process of deconstructing what it means to 'be' trans, and – by extension – what it means to create and participate in a 'trans space' or 'trans event'. This was done by ensuring that 'trans' was communicated in the broadest possible way, and in making the space not solely 'about' or 'for' trans. This both provided space to individuals who might have a 'trans' experience without identifying explicitly as such, and – as Gupta notes in Chapter 4 – meant that a trans recognition of *complexity* could be extended to cis allies. To promoters within the scene, trans discourse was seen to be of benefit to the wider world, not just to trans audiences; and in turn, it was beneficial for trans people to engage with wider communities and socio-political issues. For this reason, it made sense to organise the Trans Tent under the wider umbrella of LGBT Pride: 'trans' alone was *not* the overarching theme of the event. Instead, the Trans Tent was just one part of a large celebration of diversity, inclusivity and openness within a community-oriented, 'family-friendly' setting. Similarly, gigs such as the GYGL fundraiser, Queer We Go, Revolt and Cutlery Drawer gigs were organised in a manner that emphasised 'LGBT', 'queer' and/or 'feminism' as wider themes, even as these events are created by trans people and brought together a wide range of trans performers.

Conclusion

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

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

The trans performance community was only a few years old at the time of research, with new events and spaces emerging all the time. Since our research project was conducted, the

scene has grown and diversified, intersecting in particular with pre-existing queer and feminist punk scenes. From 2014 numerous all-day and weekend queer punk events took place across the UK, under the banner of 'Queer Fest' (there have also been 'Bent Fest' events in London, and a 'Glitterfest' in Leicester). These frequently drew upon processes of DIY de/construction in a similar manner to the events examined in our research, and offered a platform to a growing number of punk bands with trans members and lyrical/musical themes, including groups such as Slum of Legs, Jesus and His Judgemental Father, Daskinsey4, Faggot, Twinken Park, T-Bitch, Screaming Toenail, Dispute Settlement Mechanism, Tuck and the Binders, Anatomy, and Kermes. In 2013 the UK's first Trans Pride was held in Brighton; this has become an annual event, with other Trans Prides later organised in cities such as Belfast, Bristol, Glasgow and Leeds. At these events, the cabaret format of Transpose and 'trans tent' approach of Nottinghamshire Pride are increasingly replicated for performance spaces in parks, bars and arts centres.

As we write in 2018, there are now more openly trans people in the UK than ever before, coupled with an increased awareness of trans arts and music among the cis population. There is therefore a far larger audience for trans cultural participation, with more scope for cis audience support. Openly trans celebrity musicians have seen a growing visibility and success, with Laura Jane Grace of US punk band Against Me! receiving critical acclaim for her band's albums *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* (2014) and *Shape Shift With Me* (2016), and UK singer-songwriter Anohni earning an Oscar nomination in 2016 for her song 'Manta Ray' (although she would later boycott the awards ceremony after not being invited to perform). Some events that were 'underground' when our research took place have now gained a far larger audience, with Transpose taking place in more high-profile venues such as London's Tate Modern museum of modern art and Barbican cultural centre in recent years. Queer Fest alumni The Spook School, who explicitly addressed trans themes on their albums *Try To Be Hopeful* (2015) and *Could It Be Different?* (2018), have increasingly had their music played on national radio and featured on popular TV shows such as *The Only Way is Essex*.

Our research provided a snapshot of an emergent scene at a particular moment in time; however, this moment was an important one. The events and processes we describe in this chapter could not have happened much sooner: the scene required recent conceptual shifts and developments within trans theory and social movements and the emergence of the stand-alone 'trans' itself in order to create the kind of space we saw in the Trans Tent at Nottinghamshire Pride, for instance. It is exactly this productive commitment to inclusive, community-oriented diversity and de/construction that reinforces the importance of a non-prescriptive approach to trans possibility.

¹ Including event pages on social media, posters, blog posts, lyrics, band and promoter websites.

² Venue locations and the names of club nights, bands, and solo performers have, however, been preserved in this chapter; we consider them vital for contextualization and capturing the character of the scene.

³ Whilst Recreation Nottingham's intersectional approach was fairly typical in the trans scene, the Trans Tent was arguably more successful in implementing this than some other events. Our interviewees and a handful of bloggers noted that many events featured predominantly youthful, white performers and audiences and/or oppressive behaviours such as 'skeezy class drag'. We observed that the diversity of performers and audiences was often linked to the diversity of music genres at any given event: for instance, predominantly 'indie' line-ups at events such as Coventry's Ditch Your Boyfriend club night tended to attract predominantly white audiences, reflecting a broader lack of diversity within the wider indie rock scene.

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