

BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE

Three Conversations
on Movement, Communication
and Identity

TARA FATEHI IRANI, JOE MORAN
RAJU RAGE

LAURA PURSEGLOVE

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on Movement, Communication
and Identity

Artists TARA FATEHI IRANI, JOE MORAN
and RAJU RAGE, in conversation with their
collaborators, explore embodied forms
of knowledge

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WHAT MAKES THIS IMAGE TRANS?

ISAAC BRIGGS, DR JENNIFER COOKE, RAJU RAGE and NAT THORNE discuss RAJU RAGE's workshop programme exploring self-representation and identity through film and photography.

This conversation addresses two creative workshops devised by artist Raju Rage for members of Nottingham-based transgender support and campaign group Notts Trans Hub. The first took place at Primary contemporary art space in Nottingham, and was facilitated by journalist and filmmaker Faizan Fiaz. Following an introduction to the principles of making short films using a smartphone, participants each produced a short film exploring themes of embodiment and identity, making use of Primary's former school premises as a setting. In this session, participants were guided through the process of producing a professional, short film on a smartphone, which the group experimented with in and around Primary's former school premises. Following feedback that members of Notts Trans Hub were interested in the project but were, for various reasons, unable to attend sessions in person, disposable cameras were distributed to a wider group with the broad invitation to explore what it means to be transgender 'in your world'. A second workshop was later held at Attenborough Arts Centre in Leicester, bringing participants back together to reflect on their photographs and to produce short, audio-recorded narratives which could be exhibited alongside them.

ISAAC BRIGGS first started to attend Trans Hub to connect to a local community and reach out to other trans people. Their work uses analogue collage and text to explore bodies and genders in online spaces to the alienation of both. Briggs reflects on the project: "Working with Raju and other trans artists was amazing and a chance to stretch my practice into other mediums."

JENNIFER COOKE is Senior Lecturer in English at Loughborough University. She's author of *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* (CUP, 2020) and *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory, and Film* (Palgrave, 2009). She's editor of *The New Feminist Literary Studies* (CUP, 2020) and *Scenes of Intimacy: Reading, Writing and Theorizing Contemporary Literature* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). She is also a poet who has published *Apocalypse Dreams* (Sad Press, 2015) and **Not Suitable for Domestic Sublimation* (Contraband Books, 2010).

LAURA PURSEGLOVE is a contemporary art curator/producer, and producer of Loughborough University's Radar programme which commissions collaborative projects with artists and researchers. She also works as a freelance writer and curator specialising in off-site and collaborative projects, most recently leading a participatory project for Modern Art Oxford.

RAJU RAGE is an interdisciplinary artist. They explore the spaces and relationships between dis/connected bodies, theory and practice, text and the body and aesthetics and the political substance. They work in performance, sculpture, print, soundscapes and moving image. They are also an educator using radical teaching methods.

Raju has a theirstory in activism, self and collective organised queer/ transgender/ people of colour movements and creative projects in London and beyond from which their politics and works draw on and from. Nat Thorne (They/Them) spent 16 years as an LGBT journalist before leaving to pursue a career in academic research. After completing an MSc in Psychological Research Methods, they started a Ph.D at the University of Nottingham which is due to be completed in early 2021. Their research focuses on the mental health symptomatology of those who identify outside of binary gender identities and their work also has close links with the Nottingham Centre for Transgender Health. Nat identifies as non-binary and is heavily involved in volunteer work with the local trans community, notably with Notts Trans Hub. Nat also enjoys running and 35mm photography.

WORKSHOP 1

Primary contemporary arts space in Nottingham

Jennifer Cooke

Can I ask, was it a constriction of the camera that meant the images are in black and white, or were those choices of the participants?

Raju Rage

We provided the black and white camera for them. We wanted something in contrast to the first workshop, in which we worked with video in colour, and something that was film-based rather than digital. And also something that would bring some sort of universality, to have that kind of continuum in black and white.

Jennifer Cooke

Okay. This is a question about medium, but I guess the disposable black and white camera does not have filter options, does it?

Raju Rage

No

Jennifer Cooke

So loses the contemporary Insta polish.

Raju Rage

Exactly.

Jennifer Cooke

Which makes it a really different medium and perhaps one that people are not so used to using these days. I think that's really interesting.

Raju Rage

Yes, it was great to give the disposable cameras out. In the workshops we were constricted by the space and what was in that space, whereas taking the cameras away people could really share their own lives, their own lived experience over time. It opened it up in terms of access, as some people were not able to attend sessions in person, for various reasons.

Photograph by Daniel Wright



Photograph by Daniel Wright

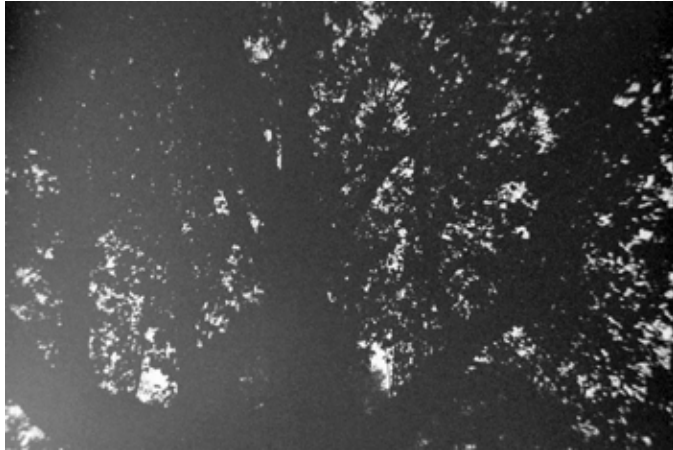


Isaac Briggs

I think it works like a video diary when you just give out the camera and expect something to come back.

Raju Rage

And it moves you away from the aesthetic as well. Whereas with a camera phone, you're thinking about how things are framed. We talked about that in the first workshop, how we're framing things, light,



colour. It was more experimental and spontaneous. There was a good contrast between the two workshops I think.

Laura

It makes it more about the act of taking the photograph than the result.

Jennifer Cooke

Boots used to have a moral regime for processing photographs. If there was nudity they would remove those photographs from your pack before you picked them up and they might say something, too, or they could put a sticker on them saying that they'd removed material.

So, it wasn't a completely anonymous process. You felt that you'd been seen by the people developing the photographs and you were very conscious that there might be a moral sensor involved.

Isaac Briggs

I actually used to know someone who developed photos for Jessop's and they do see every photo that's produced as it comes through. They didn't have any moralistic obligation to remove anything, but there was a scrutiny involved as they picked out the ones they don't think had developed properly, which is somebody else's eye and hand involved. It's extra mediated.

Nat Thorne

And intimidating in some ways.

Raju Rage

They didn't seem to do that this time. Was there anyone who developed them on their own or did we develop them all?

Nat Thorne

Laurie Crow did, we do photography together anyway. We've got a developer down in Bournemouth. I don't think mine went via that developer, I would've got more successful images out of it because as it was I had about four that were pretty rubbish. Whereas Laurie, I think, did hers independently with our normal dark room and they came out really well. That was actually part of the process and was an annoyance for me, that we weren't involved in the developing.

I regret not sending the camera to a different developer because I think whichever one we went to was probably one of the ones that had hundreds of cameras and was doing them quickly. Whereas it's nice to have a proper darkroom to alter the images, particularly with black and white because as we saw, with black and white, you do really need a lot of control over the light and the speed. I don't think it lends itself brilliantly to a point press, does it?

I really like developing with other people, particularly if you've been in a project together because then you're discovering what you've got together and you're giving people advice on changing the depths of it and things like that. There's something very special about it. The only difficulty is, of course, is that it requires extra money, extra time, and a lot of commitment to learn how to do it. You can go in within a day and tell someone what to do and that's it, but to really get some great images, it's nice to get quite involved.

I also think it's the smells of developing are fascinating. It's a very, very unique smell when you're developing, a pickled onion-y smell,

Raju Rage

Yeah. I think conceptually it would have worked really well with the themes of the project to develop together. There were limitations in terms of attendance and so on, and as we were looking at

self representation and empowerment through self representation of imagery, and we wanted to make that as accessible as possible. That's why we used the disposable cameras, so that you didn't need have the knowledge of certain kind of mediums, but then to think through: "how could we take that further in terms of actually producing the images ourselves as trans people?" I think that would have taken it to another level, which I think would be super interesting, but maybe would have to happen at another time.

Jennifer Cooke

It would fit within the project though because of the ideas of emerging and becoming and the lack of fixity. My dad was a photographer so one of my early memories is sitting in the red light of the development room and watching the images come up and listening to them drip, and the smell is really evocative. I don't know what it's like now, but there was this massive machine that you looked through the top of, with the image below, and then you played with the light and other properties and you realised that what you think is a fixed image when you click that camera isn't at all. It's a very mobile thing.

I suppose Instagram filters do something similar in that you've got the image and then you work on it afterwards. But in a really different way it feels like to me. Much speedier, much hastier, and far less about coaxing an image into life.

Isaac Briggs

There's almost a whole other body of work you could have gotten, as well, from the experience of developing your own film - perhaps going away and making audio or film about that process. Just having that as an extra step in the process, a journey in self development and embodiment through image, would have been cool.

Jennifer Cooke

I think that kind of process, such as the workshops and then perhaps the developing, is a kind of learning through doing, through doing embodied activities, and that's part of that idea of embodied knowledge, isn't it? We learn by doing and that's such a corrective to so much critical thinking and philosophy that we've had for so long, which

Photograph by Laurie Crow



prioritises the mind, makes of it an ascendant point which commands the body, producing a metaphor we use for so many other structures, like heads of state and the body politic.

I think that's one of the things from an academic point of view that's interesting about the move away from just thinking about the abstract or the intellectual as the source of knowledge, and instead thinking about the provision of knowledge through making. There's the middle class cliché, during COVID-19, of everyone baking bread but it is a sign of people making more. We're all learning through doing. The workshops obviously were oriented towards that.

Isaac Briggs

I think there's something about slowing down, which we're experiencing in COVID-19 as well. We're having to pace ourselves differently and to cope with the new very limited way of life we have. And there was a little bit of slowing down and accepting the moment, particularly with the disposable cameras in the workshop: you had to really be present within that moment before you captured it to understand how you wanted to represent what you were looking at or feeling or doing at the time. I think is a huge part of the artistic process in a lot of ways, just slowing down the pace of life and being able to appreciate and then analyse what you're trying to capture.

Nat Thorne

Definitely. I think I'd agree with that. I think there was definitely an almost 'mindful' quality to it because when I had the camera in my hand, I was actually looking at things and thinking, "Well, what angle do I want to look at that?" It made you re-examine your world in, like you say, in a much slower way and I think we're all having that at the moment.

The workshop definitely reignited my love of taking pictures with film. I dug out my old 1960s camera and it's made me focus on the world in terms of pictures, in terms of what could that say, not only to other people, but to me in the future? And I think with this project, certainly the photos that we produced, that's captured in my mind now. Certainly the picture of my legs sat by a swimming pool, I was really learning something about myself through one kind of image. I think it embodies the 'doing' nature of it.

Isaac Briggs

I still have one of the disposable cameras left and I feel like there's a whole project you could make about embodiment within quarantine. I'm doing yoga as a body awareness thing, which is helping a lot. And I know there are people who are struggling with eating disorders and there's a lot around bodies and our sense of self that's being thrown up with this increased awareness of illness. That might be a piece of work in itself.

Laura Purseglove

Yeah, for sure. We started with video and in some ways video, in which you're capturing movement in real time, has a different relationship with embodiment than that of the photograph. The photograph is obviously a still representation that you might think in some ways is less able to capture a sense of embodiment, but actually it didn't feel that way with this project. Is that right?

Nat Thorne

I think you need to work at it more with a still image. Because of the way that video media has developed, we're used to sitting there going: "Right, you entertain me. You do it for me." There's that hypodermic needle effect where you're supposed to sit there and it's supposed to come into you. With a photo, you have to do your own work. You have

to look at it and think: "Well, why is that there?" And you spend a lot more time over it. I think the actual mental work of dealing with a photo is heavier. And I think it says more in a way, because you're left to your own devices with it. Whereas with a video you're expecting it to do the work for you.

Raju Rage

And on the other side of that, the images being read by someone else opened things up in terms of interpretation of that embodiment as well. I mean the video did too, because we also accompanied that with audio quite immediately in the first workshop. That worked in relationship to the video, where what was being said maybe didn't quite match with what was happening with the embodiment of the movement, requiring viewers to think and reflect further on what they think is happening. So I think both, they just worked very differently, but I think they both had their own potentials for thinking through embodiment in interesting ways.

Laura Purseglove

In a lot of the photographs, you're talking about the body in the world; a lot of the photographs actually don't show the body.

Raju Rage

Yeah, we talked a lot about that. We had really interesting conversations around visibility, invisibility and what that means. Isaac I don't know if you remember any of that?

Isaac Briggs

I think at the time I was kind of struggling with the photos that we were looking at before we began making our own work, the works we were exploring from other artists, and what is shown and what isn't shown. Because I think again, with trans people, because of cis people's fascination with our bodies, the temptation to show a trans person's body in photographs invites that voyeurism again. Whereas I think there's a lot of power in denying that and only allowing very small glimpses to be seen; you're kind of exploring bodily autonomy in that sense as well.

Raju Rage

So having more agency and ownership around gaze, but also using that as a tool?



1 Cooke, Jennifer, *Contemporary Feminist Life-Writing: The New Audacity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Isaac Briggs
Absolutely, yeah.

Jennifer Cooke

I think that's a feature of trans creativity in all sorts of ways that became apparent in some of the research I did for my book¹, which has a chapter



2 Prosser, Jay, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia Press, 1998)

about trans life writing and how people write about trans lives. In Jay Prosser's book, *Second Skins*² (1999), he recounts how when the medicalised tick-box system came in as part of allowing trans people to access certain medical procedures, through being interviewed, people quickly figured out that if you told the right narrative, you could more easily get the procedure you wanted. The tick-box created the circumference of the narrative to which the medical establishment wanted trans people to conform. And

obviously, that's medical gate-keeping and the medical system exacting control over trans people's lives. But eventually the medics recognised, "Well, hang on, everyone's telling the same kind of story and maybe they're telling the story that we've outlined in the pathology so that everyone can get what they want."

And that's the creativity of how you get around gate-keeping, isn't it? And so, whatever rules are there in place, whether they're unspoken cultural rules, or cis gaze conventions, I think trans people have had to work against those or worked within them, sometimes playfully and creatively, to be able to get what they want. That's been an important part of the history in relation to trans people trying to get autonomy out of a system that constantly wants to represent them in a particular way.

Raju Rage

I think that's very true, but I also think there's another side to it: what does that do to the trans image, or how we are represented, and how we then internalise how we represent ourselves as well? So I think there's a double edged sword with that. Yes, we have to negotiate and strategise, and feed into some of those narratives, but at what point do we lose our sense of selves or perform? We talked about this, performing a certain kind of aesthetic or image, and I think it feeds into what we were saying around social media culture, Instagram culture as well, where it just gets perpetuated, the same thing, again and again. So I think this is what we wanted to do in these workshops, to undo that or come at it from a different angle, in a different way.

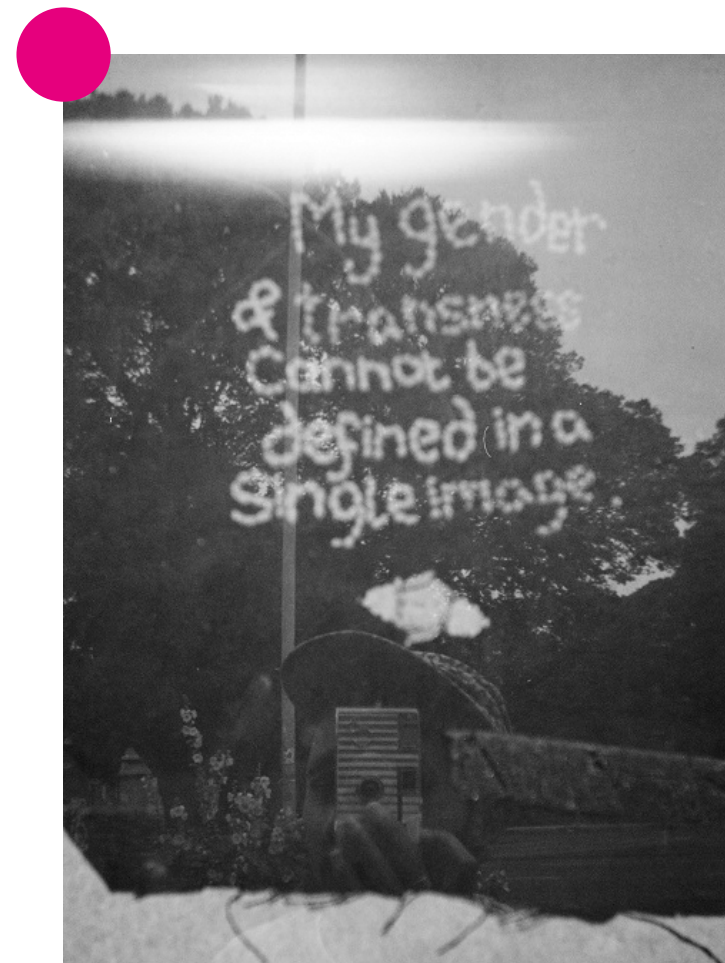
Jennifer Cooke

The embodied workshop as a sort of a corrective to the contemporary Insta gaze?

Raju Rage

Also, I don't think there's enough discussion for me personally within trans communities around what these kinds of new medias are doing to our representation, or how we use them for our own purposes or advantages. I think it's so big, it feeds into a kind of capitalism; there are careerist opportunities. But I do feel that we perpetuate those kind of...they're not necessarily

Photograph by Raju Rage



pathologising, but stereotypes in general to be able to access opportunities, to be authentic, to be seen on the same level as other people; and this relates to the celebritization of trans bodies and so on. So I think, for this, we just really wanted to ask what actually are trans people's lives, including that which they might not share on social media.

There's a lack of coherence in the images we produced that you need for social media platforms like Instagram, in a way. Although there are many artists who use Instagram to create more obscure

imagery. But I feel like within trans communities, there's always this pull to be coherent. And that feeds into desire, as well, as Isaac was saying; what is it with people's desire to see our bodies?

Laura Purseglove

Speaking of coherence, maybe this would be a good opportunity to talk about the writing of the narratives, how those related to the images and what the purpose of the narrative was. Was it to create a kind of coherence, or even to reject that?

Nat Thorne

I think for me the narrative was important. We spoke about the interpretation of images, and I took each image with a purpose. If you look at it in the broad range of trans imagery, including those representations of trans people through social media, as has been said, you come across very obviously 'trans things': a photo taken of somebody who's trans of their body, for example. But just a picture of my legs, you wouldn't look at that and think it relates to being transgender, whatsoever. It's just a pair of legs. They don't look like male legs, they don't look like female legs; they just look like legs. So the narrative for me was to explain my thinking behind that shot, and how it relates to my gender identity, because I think a lot of the pictures are really obviously going to be trans related, but equally, many of them were just pictures that could have been of anything.

So for me, the narrative was to pull it all together and to be able to say "this is why this particular body part is important to me in terms of my gender identity", and "that's why I took this photo." I think it was about the legible coherence.

We all seemed to do quite a bit of that: we took very similar photos, or of very similar subjects, almost stereotypical 'trans images' that we wanted as aspects of our storyline. But then there were others that were a little bit more powerful in a way, little snapshots of people's daily lived experiences. In the second workshop some of these had a deep narrative constructed around them all, like a thread going through maybe several images, telling a story that was far more about the conversation we would have afterwards, about those images. And I think in a lot of ways, we resisted putting our full selves, these entire stories in the photos, themselves.

Raju Rage

Yeah, I think they were done really well in that they didn't necessarily fix, like you said, but rather connected images to each other, which maybe did or didn't connect when they were taken. It allowed that narrative process to happen, but not in a way that fixed it. And again, it allowed more agency to tell your own story; you could give as little as or as much as you wanted.

Jennifer Cooke

Listening to you all talking about this, I'm just really interested in how any story we tell has gaps, right? Has ellipses, has holes in it, has untruths perhaps, or elaborations. The phrase I was thinking of as you were talking was 'intentional photography', where there's a sense in which a shot is taken because of the structure of the workshop, with a view to what sort of story it might tell or how it might relate to a conversation later. And that's quite interesting to me. That's not how a lot of people use social media. With social media, the framing happens, you've got your Instagram post that goes with the photograph, and then there's another photograph with its framing explanation or whatever, it's all very immediate. So this idea of a time-lag between the photograph and the conversation creates something different, doesn't it? Creates space. But like you were saying, it also creates opportunity—you don't have to link those things if you don't want to. There's a lot of agency in how you tell that story, depending on which day it is, which space you're in, who you're talking to, even whether you put the image this way round or upside down or how far away it is from the person who's viewing it.

Raju Rage

And it was really nice because we laid them out. We could play with them, shift them around. It might have been interesting to also share images between participants, which we didn't quite get to.

Nat Thorne

Even though we wrote our individual narratives, it did kind of feel collaborative. There were times when we would just be sat doing our own thing, but because we went off into break-out rooms to practice record and things together it felt like we were working collaboratively, even though we came

up with something which directly related just to us. I thought that was a really interesting spin on it, which was very enjoyable. And certainly, as somebody who prefers discursive psychology, I think for me that really intentional elaboration of certain details, and the use of the words as a tool, was really interesting; the way we fitted the images together as something to promote thinking. We were discussing things between one another as well, and that affected what we were saying.

Laura Purseglove

Perhaps because of the slight surprise element that you get with the disposable camera, where you don't quite know what images you're going to get, you're more aware of that process of construction? Creating something from a set of images which were a bit of a surprise, rather than 'this is exactly what I was expecting and this is the narrative that I've already come up with'?

Nat Thorne

Yeah, I think I had three photos to work with and that really made me think about it more. I think that was the interesting thing for all of us—we hadn't really thought about the small details of our life much before. I remember one of the photos that didn't come out was of my digital watch. And just that tiny aspect of my life is actually gendered, because I choose to wear a watch that would stereotypically be known as a man's watch. Having that kind of focus on detail was really interesting for me, that tiny awareness. And forcing us to think quite a lot and to come up with words related to one of those images was a really good task because it's something you wouldn't normally bother to examine or talk about.

Jennifer Cooke

It strikes me that even the photos that don't come out as you expect still have stories, right?

Nat Thorne

Definitely.

Jennifer Cooke

It's an interesting by-product; they're not wasted in this context. There's still something to say

about them—both why it didn't work, but also what they were intending to do where, again, there's something about the process of the disposable camera and the black and white and not being able to see it on a screen as you're taking it that facilitates something new.

Raju Rage

I mean, I've got a couple of disposable cameras now that I think are from that time that I still haven't developed. And even during COVID-19 I was like, "Oh, I wish I could develop them now." But there's also something about sitting on them. That would have been interesting to explore after a longer duration, to see what would come up and be similar or different. What would change, what would shift? Because I can't remember what's on them now.

Jennifer Cooke

And I think that speaks to something else, doesn't it? That what's significant in our stories isn't always significant forever, and always at the same time. So it could be that if you left it for six months and then developed them, you could be like: "Well, I have no idea why I took that photograph. It must've been significant in Nottingham sometime before COVID-19, but now I've got no idea why I took that." That again tells us something about how we experience our lives and what's significant in a particular timeframe.

Raju Rage

Exactly. When I was taking the camera around, I'd been doing a lot of traveling for work, and so a lot of mine were landscape-based and situational. This meant my narratives became very much about my environment and where I was, rather than my body. My embodiment was more around being connected to the environment and the landscape. And that probably isn't relevant now when I'm stuck in one place, right?

Isaac Briggs

Yeah. I feel like the narrative I'd write for the same photos now would be very, very different, having lost the original reasons I'd had for taking the photo. But then we'd have a retrospective take on them that would change how we read them, as well.

Raju Rage

Isaac, did you take pictures of the empty billboard?
Can you speak more on that?

Isaac Briggs

So there's this blank billboard that lives quite close to my house that I walk past on a frequent basis. It was filled once during Brexit, which was terrible. But other than that, it's just this weird blind eye, almost, where there should be advertising or capitalism, but which is kind of denying that, and it refuses to sell anything. And I really fucking enjoy just this emptiness that is represented by that billboard. And when I was doing the photos, I was thinking about reflections, and what's in frame or not, and that denial of making something consumable that I felt was really well represented by that empty billboard. So it became a huge focal point in a way, for the rest of the photos.

Raju Rage

Yeah, I remember there was a lot there around absence, but then it became very present to notice that absence by looking at the image. You were drawn into asking "what's the narrative of this", or "what's happening?" I think in the first video that you made, you were thinking a lot about reflections as well, right? I think you were in the bathroom at Primary and thinking through glass. Maybe you can talk more about the video that you made, as well, in terms of reflections or what you were telling us?

Isaac Briggs

Yeah, the video is weird because it's very photographic in the stillness of it, I think mostly because I'd been working with the camera beforehand. The video looks at reflections, with these slow pans through spaces - it was again, this noticeable absence, because you could kind of make something out through the glass or in the reflection of the mirror, or in the weird way the light moved, but you weren't necessarily allowed to see it directly. And then talking about trans bodies and the ownership of trans bodies over that. So it's kind of an obvious narrative that's laid on top of it. But I think it was just this frustration when thinking about how you talk about trans bodies in a way that doesn't become a consumable object for a cis gaze. I just felt stymied by the way that, however we approach

Photograph by Isaac Briggs



self-portraiture in photography or film as trans people, it becomes voyeuristic, whether we intend to or not. I mean, that's not also not true, but it was an idea I was struggling with at the time.

Raju Rage

I just think that's really important to bring up because with the photography it was experimental, spontaneous and responsive. But in that situation, you really took ownership and control over this identification, or this refusal, or this direct exploration that you wanted to look at. There was a lot of thought behind the image of the billboard, and the video, in terms what tools you were using to produce the image, which we haven't mentioned. So I think it's important to say that.

Isaac Briggs

A lot of my work I felt, in some ways, was a little bit staged because I did really consider how I positioned things and what I wanted to be able to capture within frame, as well as what was out of frame, the time of day, that I felt maybe wasn't quite in the spirit of candid that we were trying to work with. But at the same time [I had a lot of] thoughts around how we frame ourselves that I wanted to be able to capture and it was all very resistant, I think. In a lot of ways it was almost hostile because it was a lot of blank spaces and the gating



of gaze. But I don't know, some of the photographs that were less considered were quite powerful; even some that didn't quite come out. But again, as Nat said, that's probably a good thing because it gave me much more limited scope to work with. The one with the mirror in the bathroom where it's chest and then the bottles of tea and other things surrounding

Photograph by Raju Rage

it, was one that I actually very deliberately set up and had a lot of control over how I positioned everything. I don't feel great about that honestly because it's not necessarily in the spirit of using the disposable cameras where you can't quite control what's going on. I think it was me trying to wrestle back some degree of control from the process itself.

Raju Rage

But there's many ways to approach it and I think those images were very powerful because of this intentional politics of refusal. It's very clear in the image when you look at it that there's that intention, so I think that made them very powerful. There wasn't a set way of approaching these workshops in that sense, it was just to get a sense of how we can represent the image of trans people. I found that really interesting, your way of working.

Laura Purseglove

It's interesting that idea of the 'candid' photo being seen as freer and less controlled. In some ways I'm sure that's true, but it's also about different languages of representation. I'm sure plenty of seemingly candid photos are actually very contrived, which takes us back to social media. But it's interesting to think about how we represent something like freedom, or embodiment, through existing visual languages, some of which may be associated with the representation of freedom but may not be any more or less 'free'. We're always talking about a representation which is to some degree mediated.

Jennifer Cooke

Yeah. That phrase you used, Isaac, in describing the billboard really fascinated me, that it became a blind eye. Because, of course, the billboard is the thing that we're supposed to look at, that's supposed to draw our attention and make us buy car insurance or whatever it is that's being advertised. But you talked about it as a blind eye, and that is a kind of refusal of the gaze, that it has been stripped a way.

The blind eye is quite an interesting metaphor. And brings us back that point about capitalism, as well, and its inescapable relation to identity. And



also in some ways, for lots of people, it's also a route to money, isn't it? Self representation...

Raju Rage
Exactly.

Jennifer Cooke
It is part of your job if you are an influencer or an artist.

Raju Rage
Yeah.

Jennifer Cooke
But it's a really complicated relationship. It's not an easy one just to immediately and continually refuse. It's one you have to negotiate.

Laura Purseglove
I was just thinking in terms of that refusal and whether it was in some way connected to being in an institution or how it felt to be doing the workshop in Primary or Attenborough or within the context of a university arts project? Whether that fed into some of your feelings, that frame?



Isaac Briggs

It was very different at Attenborough Arts Centre simply because there was the arts and crafts fair going, so we had a lot to negotiate with.

Nat Thorne

The building was so busy. But, in some ways that lent to something quite nice because we were trying to work against the odds and I think we pulled together as a team quite well. And that was when we went into the little break-off rooms that we were not expecting to be in, the staff offices with piles of paper everywhere. I'm not sure which I preferred. I did like Primary, I liked the space, but I think the fact it was so empty was quite daunting in a way. A really big empty space. I suppose it depends on what kind of environment you prefer. I certainly liked both of them, but I think creativity wise, Attenborough actually was better for me because it was so busy.

Raju Rage

What about that in contrast to having the cameras in your own space that you could have more a decision on?

Nat Thorne

It's bit different, I think. It was a much more intimate experience, having the camera in your own home. But then there was that mixture of intimacy [with the] public as well because I was thinking of which shot to take and then suddenly remembering that these photos could be projected quite big onto a wall. So, for me, there were personal items which I thought spoke much more about my gender identity, but which I probably wouldn't have taken a photo of because I had that awareness I wouldn't have had if it was just me and my own home. So I felt comfortable enough to take the photos, but then I had to think, "But actually, I've got to remember that there's this public sphere to it as well." I did some shots where I felt like I'd thought about it and decided to set something up and then some were just snaps where I was just like, "I'm at my friend's house by a swimming pool on a lovely day and I'll take a photo."

I think that dynamic was interesting, that when you have the camera at home, you can use it in several different ways instead of being constrained by other people. Because you all have to be on the same page to a certain extent when you're doing something in a group, but when you're on your own you can freestyle it. And I quite liked that ability to be able to choose my level of what I wanted to do.

Photograph by Isaac Briggs



Isaac Briggs

Yes, in Primary it was a huge space we were given and there weren't many of us and it felt really intimidating. You are very aware of yourself as a physical figure surrounded by this history in the huge space, and these echos. I feel like the work that I made from there was quite small and muted and frail, it felt in a way, very delicate.

We'd negotiate with Nat about who used the bathroom at what time and it was very entertaining because we had to be very aware of not including each other in the shots that we took and then finding a way to use our own voice within that space whilst also having the same locations that made it a weird, distanced collaboration I guess. That I didn't have to do that when taking the disposable cameras away felt much more intimate as a small little personal thing that I could also use as a diary in a sense.

The spaces that we made the work in definitely affected it. At Attenborough we were almost trying to avoid letting the environment affect what we were trying to make because we already had these photos, these bodies of work we wanted to play with and add audio to. It was trying to find a good way to make the audios, right? And that was much more mechanical. So, it was like, how the space affects the process and the process affect the space. Which was a negotiation we had to do as well.

Raju Rage

I mean, negotiation definitely comes up as a big thing. Constant negotiation of trans bodies in space.

Nat Thorne

Yeah. I think that's why we both gravitated towards the toilet area. It was a bit like, "Yep, we're going to talk about being trans, let's go to the toilets because that's the area of biggest negotiation with so many different people."

Isaac Briggs

Well, especially as at the time there were still the bathroom wars happening in Trump's America. So, we did some work about bathrooms.

Nat Thorne

I think it's unavoidable. Definitely with trans people.

Raju Rage

You wouldn't have done that in your own home because your bathroom in your home is probably...

Nat Thorne

No, I don't have a gendered bathroom at home funnily enough!

Jennifer Cooke

Listening to you all I was thinking about how the institution often wants to curate affectively how we feel when we enter it. And universities do that a lot. When you were talking about going into a big space and feeling small, Isaac, pretty much every theatre I lecture in is set up to make the person who goes in there first feel like that.

There's something to do with the size of the space that really affectively sets up how we inhabit it, without Trump's bathroom wars or whatever politics are swirling around us as well. Often, institutions like universities and art galleries are particularly designed, they've got architects involved to curate particular experiences, often of awe and impressiveness and actually the kinds of things I don't necessarily want students to feel. I don't think feeling awed and impressed in a space generates amazingly productive learning experiences, but that's often the default design plan for an institution.

Photograph by Laurie Crow



Raju Rage

I agree. I also think that institutional feel can derive from how things are organised as well as spaces. And I did wonder at certain points, considering the attendance and accessibility to the project, whether that was an issue. I remember when we were at Attenborough and Kajal dropped in, a friend of mine who's a photographer and

happens to live in Leicester. She mentioned that there were many people who could have attended as a part of different community groups and so on. And I know Notts Trans Hub don't have a premises, but you are very much a community network, and I did wonder whether this being an institutional project, connected to arts and an art gallery—we had this conversation, Laura—whether that affected or impacted people being involved.

Nat Thorne

Notts Trans Hub doesn't have a base, but we do always meet in at the Friends Meeting House. So there was that question in my mind of whether, actually, if we had used that space, would that have changed people's feeling about coming: it's an environment they're in an awful lot. But then, maybe that would've changed the nature of the project because we're in a place that we're always in and we know it intimately. Yeah, it's something I've been toying around with in my head as to whether that would have been better or not. Attendance wise might've been better, but I think for the actual project, I'm not completely sure it would've been.

Raju Rage

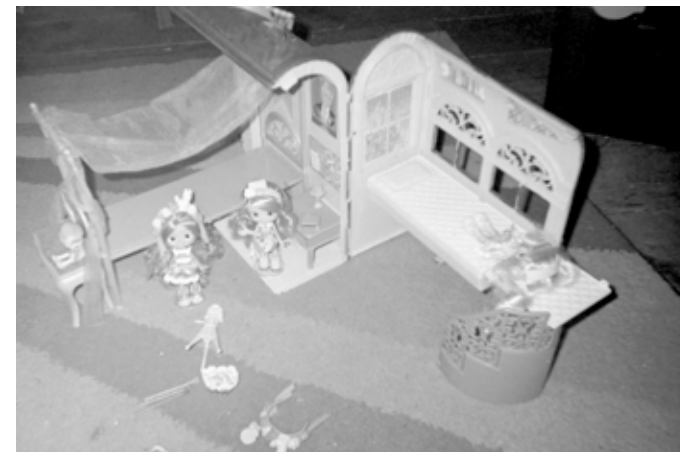
It's really hard to know. We thought a lot about it in terms of how do we describe the project? How do we talk about it? How do we put it out there? There was a lot to think through. And then also this idea of process and outcome. Like you said, you were aware of the outcome—a public exhibition, a publication—so you made decisions on how to approach your process. Would that affect participation?

There was a lot to think through in terms of the institutionalised aspect of it that kind of transcended physical space as well, that I think became very apparent and also challenged me in terms of my approach and my ethics. There's practicalities because, like you said, we had to find a space and we made use of what we had, but it did impact, I think, considerations for the content. I'm not sure how we resolve those. They're there, they're present, and it's important to acknowledge them, I think.

Jennifer Cooke

Can I ask? Nat and Isaac, do you think if you had been in the Friends Meeting House you'd have gravitated to the toilet?

Photograph by Daniel Wright



Nat Thorne

It's difficult, that one. I think in that space, it's interesting, because obviously we're used to using the toilets that we want to use in our space, so it's not a battleground by any means. Also, in Primary there was, for me, that reminiscence of a primary school as they were tiny low-down toilets, because the building was formerly a primary school. So, for me it evoked something from years ago where I had uncomfortable feelings in a toilet in primary school. So yeah, it might've been that we actually didn't. I wonder if we'd have taken more photos of each other, rather than the actual space. Particularly if there were more people there. It might have been that we'd have used each other as 'actors' more. I don't know if we would have gone to the toilets. It might have been something we'd been very proud of because, as I say, it's not a battleground for us there, whereas it is in other places.

Isaac Briggs

Absolutely, the low-down, small toilets at Primary were evocative of childhood, which also reminded me of very old battlegrounds where you were forced into toilets you didn't necessarily want to be in. Whereas that's not the experience at the Meeting House, which is also a space where we spend 90% of our time in a circle facing other people, which may have been reflected in the work that we made.

So, I think it was nice to be in a space that we're not necessarily comfortable with. At Attenborough, there was a large craft fair happening while we were trying to make work, and I was wearing a skirt at the time so I was visibly gender nonconforming in a way that I'm not used to, since I pass a lot more these days. It meant having to be aware of how my presence is read in public spaces and being aware of that whilst trying to make the work, which would not have been present when I was in the Meeting House. So, I think it absolutely affected the work, but probably for the better. It brought more things to work with than it would have done had we been in a trans friendly space, I guess.

Nat Thorne

It was also interesting for me because it was a Christmas craft market. It was all very heterosexual, cisgendered. The absolute middle of the bell curve was what we were going into. You had this little gathering of trans people and then outside was just this massive wave of normativity and you'd have to go through the normativity in order for us to get upstairs to do stuff. So I found that a really interesting contrast. Almost a representation of our lives, really. We have these tiny little spaces, this tiny little capsule, this little submarine in a massive ocean of normativity.

And I think that made everything much sharper for me. And I think we probably came up with stuff because we perhaps had raised anxiety and stress levels, for various reasons. And for me that was a good thing. It's just a question of whether that affects other people in different ways and whether that was off putting in some ways.

Raju Rage

I think that's why bringing in the disposable camera element was a really good strategy in the end because it meant that lots more other people contributed then, didn't they? I think we tried to try different strategies, didn't we? To find the best way.

Jennifer Cooke

I think this is happening a lot with COVID-19, actually more activity being made accessible online, so people can access it within their homes. That sense of giving people options and providing easier

routes that are more accessible, that's something that's happening a lot at the moment, across all sorts of spheres.

Raju Rage

It's funny how COVID-19 has brought up a lot of access issues that people have been pushing for. It's come up now. Interesting that what was 'not possible' may become so, I think that's going to shift things. But I have to say that, also, there were a lot of amazing conversations within the workshops. From the personal to the political or whatever. That wouldn't have happened, and it didn't happen with some of the participants who I still don't know to this day, really.

I think it was great that we took all these different approaches rather than just having one instead of the other, allowing that access, although having the physical space and coming together also was really important.

Laura Purseglove

And even though, I mean, we were clear that if participation in the workshops didn't necessarily mean exhibiting work publicly, that that was a choice that everyone would make. If that wasn't an option, would you have maybe taken different photographs or did that play into how you approached it?

Nat Thorne

Yes and no. I might've taken slightly more intimate shots. But probably not too much more, because there's still an element of gaze that I can't control because there's certain people who might be at the workshop session that I wouldn't want to see particular photos relating to me. I don't know what it was like for the anonymous people because obviously for them they didn't know what was happening or where it was going a lot of the time. I don't know if that affected what they took or not.

Isaac Briggs

I think that the knowledge that the photos would be commercially developed may have limited what I took photos of a little bit more than the people in the space. Because I think, going into a creative space there's an acceptance, especially I think among a smaller group, that you would be taking photos that maybe showed vulnerability. But when you're handing

all that control to a stranger, I think that just maybe closed down some of the things that might have taken photos of. I feel like I'd have done more intimate stuff had I not have had the chance to develop it myself rather than hand it off to some unknown entity.

Jennifer Cooke

I think there's a lesson in there. That even if the cis gaze isn't visible, it's there in the process, in this case the commercialised process of sending material off to be developed. The cis gaze is the expectation and most likely it's a cis person who's doing the developing. There's no escaping it unless you do it entirely yourself; and that involves money, time, resources, all of those things that come into it. Because although we've painted a lovely picture of how it would be great for everyone to learn how to develop photographs and do it themselves, the actual physical time and effort that would be required—we'd have to teach everyone how to do it. And then if you want to develop your own very intimate photos, maybe you don't want anyone in the room with you. That's a time consideration, that's people's money, that's time out of people's lives. And so all of that actually comes into consideration, too. To avoid the cis gaze is expensive.

Raju Rage

Yeah, it is. And it's this question of being inside or outside of the institution. And realising there is no inside or outside. We're all impacted by it. But I think that's why it's great that we're going to publish a discussion around this because I think it's important to make that public and reach further afield. It's just constant negotiation. And that's why I really liked this approach of refusal, this subversion or dis-identification becoming of the work or the narrative, to really highlight that. And this idea of 'safer space'. Is there a safer space? What does that mean?

Laura Purseglove

Can we address ways in which language was important to the project? We've talked already about the significance of writing narratives, but perhaps language was important in other ways?

Photograph by Isaac Briggs



Raju Rage

I mean, it became clear when Faizan gave that presentation [during the first workshop], especially when we looked at the party political campaigning videos. I think one was from the Labour party and one was from the Conservative party, and we were talking about them in relation to how we then think through our body language and framing and things like that. And I became very aware of myself, I felt: do I now have to do this? Am I measuring up? But in watching those campaign videos, it became really clear that the Conservatives are really quite rigid and stiff in how they were relating in the space.

So I think Faizan's workshop really highlighted this question of language, or how we then communicate our narratives, who are we trying to connect with and why and how do we do that?

Nat Thorne

I think the onus we normally place is on cis people understanding us without us explaining. But I think the one thing that came out of the workshops for me is that there has to be a realisation that they're not going to instantly know things, that in order for the world to change we probably do have to speak, and we probably do have to tell our stories, but we have to tell them in a way that is very understandable and digestible. I think that does include very small details about our lives.

Particularly when you're non-binary and trying to explain to somebody who has got it in their head that there's only male and female: "how could there be anything other than that?" I think you can talk about the highfalutin theoretical stuff, but you do also need to get into the tiny details, about how the trousers that I wore when I was five were really integral to my gender identity. Explaining things in that kind of language.

What was interesting about the project for me is I wasn't explaining a big theory about gender identity in relation to biological states. I was taking a photo of a watch and saying I prefer that watch to another watch. Or taking photos of your legs and saying I feel good about myself because my legs don't look feminine. I think that kind of language for me was really interesting in this, and that's something which actually, as a community, we might have to be better at doing. I think we might have to be better at rather than saying accept me in that's it, it might be that there are people with whom you do have to talk and you do have to explain it. And you need the tools to do that. So for me it was really interesting workshopping that as well.

Isaac Briggs

Yeah, for sure. I mean, how do you humanise something other than through little mundane everyday moments like that, and just be a little bit vulnerable in a sense even when it's scary and you're in a position that might not necessarily be inviting vulnerability. Just to be able to expose that, in fact, you are a person. It helps build that story, doesn't it?

Nat Thorne

Yeah. And the fact that our existence as trans people isn't a big political, theoretical ball of stuff. It genuinely is where you buy your underwear and what style you choose, these little details. We focus a lot on the actual physical body, but I think for a lot of us the body's...certainly with my own it's like, well I haven't changed that whatsoever. It's actually other little details that are the things I'd prefer my family and friends to focus on and to be able to say that, for me, gender identity is in stuff external to the body. That kind of language, it was really interesting to use in this project, to develop my tool set linguistically.

Photograph by Daniel Wright



Photograph by Daniel Wright



To be able to talk a bit more about my identity in terms of those sorts of things, rather than complicated big theoretical questions that most people don't want to bother with in their day-to-day life if they're not trans.

Raju Rage

I think we did have this conversation at points in the workshop: what makes this image trans? Like you said with the leg, there's nothing readily

identifiable to say that this is an image that relates to being transgender. And we talked about that. Does it need to? What becomes important in that situation of communicating that or not? How do we communicate that? This relationship between explaining and not having to explain is a very interesting one.

And I think, yeah, different people who are participating might have different ideas about that and how much they do or don't want to explain and who we're invested in. There's an abstract, vague audience and then there's people in our lives that we're invested in. I think that relationship to explaining or clarity, it's not always fixed in itself.

Jennifer Cooke

It changes over time and content. I'm interested in the legs by the pool. If it marks us as anyone, or in any way, it marks you as a 21st century person. The photo of my legs in some place where you should envy me: I'm by a pool.

Nat Thorne

Yeah, in a private pool at my friend's house. You know what I mean? How middle class and Insta.

Jennifer Cooke

Isn't it? It's a recognisable trope; a shorthand for 'you should envy me'.

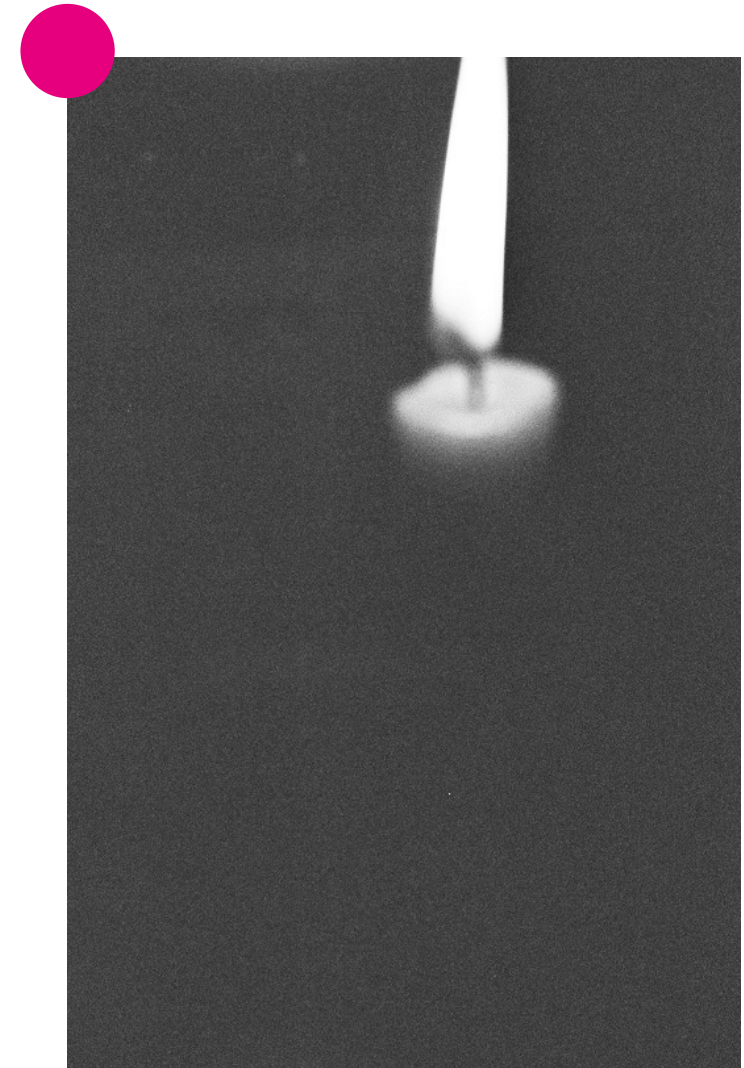
Nat

It literally is. It was one of the hottest days of the year and I had all of my friends and we had beer and we had a pool. Yeah, it spoke very much to the Instagram generation thing of "look how amazing my life is."

Raju Rage

We were playing with visual language, but we were also playing with text. We used poetry, we tried various different ways to use text and words, which was playful. It was nice to think through text, as text is often something that makes something fact or fixes it, but actually we could also be playful and loose with that as well. So I think communication was a big aspect of this project. It's one of the essences of this.

Photograph by Raju Rage



Isaac Briggs

What you choose to share, what language do you use to build on that? I think we built across the participants, and we seemed to build a very simple visual language as well. And there were themes that we found that were shared. Balls, pills and medication, and pets, weirdly enough, were shared



Photograph by Laurie Crow

Photograph by Laurie Crow



across the group. We had these little shortcuts as to how to talk about our lives, for which we used these little cultural touchstones.

Photograph by Daniel Wright

LAURIE CROW

Dogs have an amazing ability to be grounded and present and to model a profound disinclination to be anything other than dog. In this way, my little dog has helped show me the way to find my path to self discovery, to being nothing more or less than my honest, congruent self.



Like all intersex people I was assigned a binary gender at birth. A decision was made for me and the weight of all those gendered expectations came crushing down.



I have now rescued myself from the gender decisions of other people. I choose womanhood for this androgynous form. My gender dysphoria has transitioned to gender euphoria. I have seized ownership of my embodied self and I revel in the shameless joy of my femininity. I am reborn as a whole person.



NAT THORNE

My dad often said I could ride a bike before I could walk, which I know is untrue. I remember the hours we spent together, how he would run alongside, promising he still had hold of me. As wobbling along the drives turned into competitions on open roads, my father was still ever present, waiting at what seemed like every corner, waving his arms like a human windmill.



is this black stripe intentional/part of photo?
or should I crop it?



Now the medals all lie in long forgotten dusty boxes, while the middle aged me sits in trunks by the swimming pool, sipping beer. The legacy of every pedal push lays out in front of me. That teenager on a bike passed onto me a present they did not know they were gifting. When I look down, I see the masculine legs I once saw in my father running along beside me, and I remember the boyhood he encouraged in me, rather than stifled.

RAJU RAGE

Piece of cake, but there's more than one slice, won't tell you how the whole cake tastes. Each piece is different. I always feel self conscious to cross my legs. I notice them watching my body language. I'm not conscious of my body language until I notice them staring at my body parts as if to say...



I feel like this cacti all bent out of shape but not a care. Come close and you'll get a spike on you, but I know you want closeness. Proximity to me, or your impression of me, projection I'm trying to not try to live up to.



It's been a rocky terrain to figure this out. This, not my gender, but how to survive in it. When I look back at how far I've traveled, what would be called transitioned, I see immensity, a landscape, like when you climb that cliff and look back in awe. Did you really just do it?



You can tell by your shadow. Maybe my shadow says more about me than anyone could ever know. What's in the knowing? What could you possibly know about me that you could see in my gender? Like leaves I fall to the ground, like passing and rebirth, but trans people aren't allowed to change even though change is constantly happening around me.



I watch the leaves turn colour, fall and get crunchy. I look up to my favourite flowers, Bougainvillia, and imagine what it's like to be so beautiful. The beauty is in the bud of imagining, even if my lovers tell me I'm handsome and I can't hear it. These flowers remind me of childhood tomboy days in Kenya, rough and tumble, scratches and scars set amongst flashes of bright pink or orange, flowers and memories.

I tattoo myself to remember what I want to sometimes forget, the happy, temporary moments, because when things get so hard it feels like crushing apart and I'm not sure if it hurts more or less to hang on. It's been bumpy on the way I can tell you, but the bumps let me know what my boundaries are, what I'm willing to endure and what I'm not. I've been on and coming off and on and off and here and there, and she and he and they, and I'm still uncertain where I'll end up, on T or off of it. I reach out to my community in the darkness to shed some light, a prayer of hope.

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