

Against Transnormativity: Approaches to Trans Identity in Literature of the Internet
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Transnormativity, as a theoretical apparatus, has become increasingly prevalent in academic work on transgender identities. Concurrently, researchers are increasingly interested in the ways in which transgender identity is mediated on the internet. I use three works of transgender speculative literature in order to critique the usefulness of transnormativity when discussing trans experience of the internet. Alison Rumfitt’s horror novel *Tell Me I’m Worthless* is about two queer people’s lives, online and in person, as they deal with the aftermath of a traumatic night in a fascist haunted house. Rumfitt contrasts internet and IRL (in real life) experience of transness: transnormativity is a useful concept for the IRL scenes but becomes unhelpful when trying to understand the digitally-mediated moments of trans experience. “No Tiger” by Mika is a collection of experimental literature focusing on imperialist violence, digital identity, and transfeminine life. Mika, through speculative literature, creates an analogue to Jasbir Puar’s *homonationalism* that I tentatively call trans*nationalism. Mika’s writing serves to show the *impossibility* of any theory of trans*nationalism, thereby critiquing the foundational

concept of transnormativity. Lastly, I look at *Foldscape* by Porpentine Charity Heartscape, a work of interactive fiction that consists of a collection of folders and text files that the user explores. *Foldscape* problematizes the relationship between reader, player, and character, creating new possibilities for (trans)gendered identifications divorced from transnormativity as a theory. Together, these works provide an alternative way of thinking through trans identification online by giving voice to alternative norms.

Vargas et al understand transnormativity in terms of a transnormative pattern, “a social construct that decides which trans people are acceptable and which are not, and therefore who should be excluded from the logic of the capitalist, heteronormative system” (Vargas). This is representative of the popular understanding of transnormativity in academic work. In all such understandings of transnormativity, the idea that some trans people are “acceptable” is foundational. Transnormativity, as a concept, proposes itself as an analogue to homonormativity. Johnson’s foundational work defines transnormativity as “regulatory normative ideology, transnormativity should be understood alongside heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 1998; Ingraham 1994; Warner 1991) and homonormativity (Duggan 2003; Seidman 2002)” (Johnson). Johnson argues that “For individuals who do adhere to a medical model of transgender identity, transnormativity simultaneously affirms the legitimacy of their gender identity and restricts their access to gender-affirming medical care” (Johnson). Transnormativity is a double-edged sword, then. Certainly, in the mainstream view of transnormativity, those trans people who properly fit within the proscribed bounds of the medical model *are* rewarded with some level of legitimacy. This legitimacy is fraught, of course, and subject to arbitrary retraction at any time. But there *is* an idea of a [legitimate](#) trans figure. This figure is someone who feels *born in the wrong body* or some similar narrative (Johnson).

The normatively ideal trans person is cis. The ideal trans person does not exist, has stopped existing. The ideal trans person is sitting at a vanity, she is doing her makeup on camera. The ideal trans person keeps quiet about it. The ideal trans person would never transition. The ideal trans person is a digital object, a locus of fetishized violence, stays off the sidewalks.

I do not understand transnormativity as claiming that trans people who are legitimized are rewarded. Though some theorists may treat this as the case, I intend to critique a more conservative formulation of transnormativity. Theories of regulatory ideological systems that rest on the legitimation of a narrow identity are problematic if they suggest that the legitimized identity is protected from censure. In the comparative case of sexism in general, consider the *Double Bind* of patriarchy, as characterized by Susan J. Brison. Those women who do, in fact conform to all standards of femininity are not rewarded for it (Brison). Women who do not wear makeup are slurred as frigid, those who do wear makeup are slurred as attention-seeking. In this case the *image* of perfect femininity is what is required to uphold the regulatory systems of sexism. Analogously, I understand the theoretical apparatus termed *transnormativity* as resting on the assumption that there is a coherent and normative image of transness. It does not rest on

the assumption that those who conform to this normative image are rewarded or protected. I critique the claim that there is *any* coherent transnormative image on the internet.

Tell Me I'm Worthless

In *Tell Me I'm Worthless*, Alison Rumfitt presents a number of perspectives on trans identity. These perspectives, though they contradict each other, internally rely on an image of a normative trans identity. The character Harry, a trans man, starts the novel as a member of a trans-exclusionary radical-feminist (TERF) organization. Harry, for most of the story, is closeted

Throughout the majority of *Tell Me I'm Worthless*, Harry is referred to as a woman by himself, the people, around him and—problematically—the third-person narrative voice. However, the chapters which are about Harry are strongly focalized from his perspective, only departing from his view at specific moments. To preserve the voice of the text, and Harry's voice as the text presents it, I do not edit quoted passages that misgender or deadname the characters of Rumfitt's novel.

even to himself. When attending a meeting, Harry notes that due to the noise of trans women who are protesting, he will have to scream “to get her [\[sic\]](#) point across... and that's what the protestors are doing, too. Maybe that's why they really are women” (Rumfitt 40). In considering screaming as a criterion of validation for womanhood, Harry is working primarily from images of hysterical women; he compares the trans women he sees to that image. On another level, Henry understands femaleness in terms of sound, of sonic character. As he walks past the protestors, he feels that the “chanting is directed straight at her now, stabbing her all over,” the auditory space becomes physically violent (40). Given that the sound of the women around him has been charged with problematically gendered meaning, the solidification of sound into

weapons is a reification of that densely gendered valence. This reification casts trans voices as artificial and constructed, a “tuneless, empty chant” (40). The chant is empty, vacuous, there is nothing behind it. This characterization operates on a cissexist logic “founded on the assumption that the trans person's gender is not authentic because it does not correlate with the sex they were assigned at birth” (Serano 13). The ‘artificiality’ of trans femininity is further critiqued as “tuneless.” This implies that gender ought to be ‘in tune’ with something, it ought to be harmonious. Sonic harmony is taken up again when Harry “laughs, a light nervous laugh” at the chant “non-binary is valid!” “because it doesn't even fit the structure of their chant,” which has followed the rhythm “trans women are real women” and “trans men are real men” (40).

Despite, ostensibly, believing that trans women are not real women, Harry finds the chant “non-binary is valid” to be more worthy of derision because it does not fit into the transnormative schema established by the rhythm of the chant. Harry invests in transnormativity *in spite of himself*. The situation is auditory and particularly experiential. It is a social situation mediated by immediate sound. Hierarchies of gender—transnormativity being just one such hierarchy—serve as guiding lights to Harry's audiation and critique.

In his interactions with internet media, Harry becomes increasingly unable to invest in transnormativity. Ideal images of gendered existence become unstructured and displaced. The putatively normative image of transness is unable to fix itself in Harry's mind. This is most notable when Harry, following a discussion of his research into trans fetish pornography, pays a trans woman for a custom pornographic video in which he "is a man called Harry" (96) who has a fetish for videos that "are all about trying to hypnotize [people] into thinking, or realising, that they're women" (92). Harry believes that "sissy porn," the term for this genre of pornography, "produces transwomen like a factory" (83). This is in line with the common transphobic perspective that trans women are indulging a sexual fetish through their transition. Harry, watching the video, "isn't sure if, to her disgust, she's horny, or feels sick" (96). In an inversion of the ideology that trans women are produced by this pornography, Harry, as a trans man, uses the fetish pornography to experiment with a new name and is problematically ambivalent in his reaction. In the context of digitally mediated identity-experimentation, normative ideas about what constitutes transness, such as being a "real" man or woman, fall away in the context of internet pornography. This pornography is inherently un-real, as it is commissioned by Harry under false pretenses—he intends to use the video for 'research,' an aim that is other than the intended purpose of pornographic content. Further, nameable emotions become confused and meaningless. Harry cannot label the experience he is having because it does not fall either within or without the schema of transnormativity. He is left with action and immediate bodily experience, as "her hand goes between her legs anyway" (96). The autoerotic act occurs "anyway," regardless of ideological suppositions. The somatic experience of transgendered desire is separate from any normative precepts Harry has developed IRL.

No Tiger

No Tiger, by Mika, is a book of trans experimental poetry and short prose focusing primarily on digital mediation, images of contemporary US imperialist war, and "identity fragmentation within forever violence" (Mika, back cover). Throughout the text, *No Tiger* takes up a trans analogue to homonationalism, which I will call trans*nationalism (to distinguish it from the more well-known transnationalism). *No Tiger* shows that trans*nationalism, as mediated through digital means, is an inherently and necessarily incoherent theoretical apparatus. Homonationalism is founded on homonormativity, and the trans*nationalism is similarly founded on transnormativity. If homonationalism were shown to be totally incoherent, then this would cast some doubt on the usefulness of homonormativity as a theoretical tool. This would not single-handedly disprove the validity of homonormativity. However, homonormativity is one of the core concepts of homonationalism, and so the incoherence of homonationalism would cause academics to take, at least, a closer look at homonormativity. The impossibility of trans*nationalism on the internet works to destabilize the possibility of transnormativity online. Through demonstrating the incoherence of a trans*nationalist concept, I show that transnormativity cannot be safely deployed in the development of critical queer theories.

Homonationalism, as defined by Jaspir Puar, "draws on Duggan's version of homonormativity" which itself "designates the sexual politics of neoliberalism – the sexual

politics of the upward distribution of wealth, the privatization of public goods and the sovereignty of the market” (Schotten). Under Schotten’s interpretation, homonormativity is an explicitly neoliberal project, not “an index of [radical queerness](#)” where the more homonormative someone is the more like heterosexual normative ideals they are. The *nationalism* half of homonationalism is similarly specific: Schotten argues that Puar’s nationalism is “ideological modes of belonging to the US nation-state and, in particular, *post-9/11* modes of patriotism and citizenship” (Schotten; emphasis added). Because it is particularly “post-9/11,” the nationalism in question is a nationalism tied up with the war on terror. Homonationalism incorporates a particular Islamophobic orientalism by “queering racialized threats to the nation and national security as (for example) terrorist” (Schotten). The racialized threats to the nation, under homonationalism, are simultaneously queer; “the queer/perverse/racialized nonnational terrorist,” and also regressively opposed to “the (white) gay patriot” (Schotten). Mika imaginatively locates (US American) trans experience on an Orientalized virtual ‘middle eastern’ plane of media-filtered violence. The ‘forever war’ of Islamophobic imperial conflict has seeped into our media, particularly digital media.

Transnormativity, as a theory, intellectualizes a desire to define trans realness and to understand trans desire in terms of the defined ‘realness.’ In the poem “mika eat your heart out bitch!” trans desire is shown to rely on modes of *realness* that are outside the domain of transnormativity’s concerns. The opening stanza exemplifies this complicated relationship between *real* gender and digital/technological experience: “desperate to show the net how real / of a girl i can fucking be / organs wilted & perfumed in copper / i encounter Her” (Mika 7). Being a ‘real’ girl was touched on in *Tell Me I’m Worthless*; however, Mika locates a desire for realness in terms of “the net.” This realness exists in a gaze, as the speaker wants to “show the net,” to find validity [reflected](#) back at her from the internet. The cryptic line “organs wilted & perfumed in copper” calls to the second to last stanza of the poem, “nicotine tossed over lungs death accelerant / day-to-day empty sonic booms / the sirens loose on my senses” (7). The “wilted” organs are lungs, covered with nicotine. The “copper” is the particulate metals inhaled from a vape device. Nicotine vaping is understood as a self-destructive “death accelerant,” where ‘accelerant’ also denotes flammability. This is an image of chemical warfare, inflicted on oneself in the gaze of the net. The images of warfare are reinforced with the daily “sonic booms,” the sound of fighter jets flying overhead. The sonic booms are “empty” in that they are fantastical and imagined. War takes place *somewhere else*, somewhere Orientalized, Other, and

Understanding that homonormativity is not *exactly* a ‘gay version’ of heteronormativity, we can try to expand this nuance into our idea of transnormativity. So, Harry’s investment into transnormativity despite his opposition to trans identity can be understood through Harry’s investment into neoliberal economic schemes. In particular, contemporary media criticism serves as the locus for Harry’s fantasies of upward mobility. It is no coincidence that Harry writes transmisogynist media criticism.

not Here. That a sound can be empty is consonant with Harry's experience of the crowd's chanting. Transfemininity is repeatedly characterized as empty. The artificiality of transfeminine expression is overlaid on the image of othered warfare. The "sirens loose" on the speaker's "senses" signify emotional panic as air-raid sirens. Again, this image has a dual valence—warfare and transness—as "sirens" are also the mythically seductive figures of the Odyssey. The description "loose" refers to being untied from the mast, vulnerable to the destructively feminine power of the sirens.

Having mapped transfeminine experience onto digital images of war, Mika interprets this specific violence as uniquely nationalist. "STANDARD ISSUE M84 STUN GRENADE" understands this mapping as destabilizing and eventually incoherent. The speaker understands trans female bodies in the language of computer pseudo-code, as "the XX defined null" (47). This does more than just describe a lack of XX chromosome pairs. If that were the case, we would expect "the XX defined *false*." Specifically, *null* describes a value which has not yet been defined. The fact of whether the XX is true or false is undetermined and, hence, subject to change. So, in the second stanza, Mika writes "by 27 i'll have fake double X's," projecting an artificial assignment of a value onto the null variable. "Fake double X's" also references a derogatory way of speaking about breast augmentation surgery. Surgical intervention on the body, while "fake," is able to define sexed identity in this pseudo-code language. The intervention of nationalism on this is described as "the USMC eagle slide my tits down its gullet" (47). US imperialism's incorporation of transness into its colonial project is a bestial devouring. At this intersection of sexed interventions, digital understandings, and US militarism, the trans body becomes a site of sexual (imperial) violence. If homonationalism rests on the projected media-image of the normative gay figure, then trans*nationalism rests on the image of the normative trans figure. However, the normative trans figure (subjected to US sanctioned violence) is a "pay-per-view spectacle // violation worth \$\$\$15" (47). The commodification of the trans female body is

i woke up and shambled out of bed i stretched and yawned i went to the full length mirror propped against the wall right next to my crosley record player i looked at myself i saw my straight brown hair cut into a bob i saw ends of my brown hair brush the top of my shoulders i saw my green rectangular glasses i saw my pink buttonup pajama shirt draped over my shoulders i saw the beauty mark on my cheek i saw my uneven teeth i saw my cute blue pajama bottoms i saw lip-gloss in my left hand i saw my hazel eyes

my hazel eyes sometimes look green
catherine said that my eyes sparkled in the light

i saw my messy brown hair i saw long scratches down from temple to jaw i saw an old sickness i saw my cute pink pajama top i saw my purplish irises i saw my long brown hair draped over my shoulders i saw the beauty mark on my cheek i saw the sharp rock in my right hand—in the mirror

i looked at myself in the mirror and i saw—

a man with a gun and a lip-gloss threat and a happy mayor and a female monster and a brooding love interest

i saw an old dog with brown fur i saw a conversation with a deacon i saw a reticule over my forehead i saw a king james bible in my hand i saw my blond hair in a messy bun i saw cheaper drugs i saw a monkey make friends with an old dog i saw mold in the ceiling i saw my face stretched from the floor to the ceiling i saw the mold seeping into my eyes i saw a tennis disaster

after a long day of looking in the mirror i was tired so i took off my dayclothes and put on my sleepclothes and i went under the covers and i pulled the covers over my head and i went to sleep.

understood as “pay-per-view,” and thus mediated through cable. In the second the last stanza, the female figure, victim of the titular flashbang, is “fortuna trapped in overwound cassette” (48). Literally, the divine (ideal) female figure trapped in a medium, the cassette. That it is “overwound,” suggests an impossibility of containment. The bounds of the medium are overstressed, overtightened. *Overwound* also suggests that that the cassette has been recorded over too much. The medium cannot contain all the meaning that is forced on it—the trans body cannot withstand the contradictory forces of imperialism and transnormative ideals.

“Flashland” is a short experimental narrative work from the perspective of someone obsessed with a mysterious videogame, described as a “transient program spectre” (22). Character creation becomes a moment of fraught digital identification, as the narrator wishes to “be able to maximize HER self-esteem maybe,” regarding the digital avatar’s characteristics (23). “HER” is in all-caps, emphasizing the gendered pronouns for the avatar, this reaches an extreme a paragraph later in the line “SHESHESHESHE” (23). There is an anxiously manic repetition and emphasis on the avatar’s gender that functions as a desperate desire to identify with the digital figure, “HER cursed to ME, ME blessed as HER” (26). The digital identification fails with regards to emotional connection, but “really it has the only option that matters the false dichotomy. MALE or FEMALE, a third option necessary in our (falsely) neatly kept reality” (23). Unpacking this sentence a little bit, we can see that the gender binary is not able to encompass the range of experience in reality. Here, reality is not able to be “neatly kept,” divided between normative and non-normative. Binaries of all kinds are false.

Foldscape

Foldscape proposes an alternative theoretical framework to cisnormativity that is not based on transnormativity. *Foldscape* suggests that the point of audience identification for trans literature should be understood as transgender. That is, to understand [trans literature](#) the reader should take the interpretative position that what they read is, in some way, *for* trans people. By understanding trans literature in terms of points of identification, we are able to discard problematic discussion of transnormativity by looking at the actual logic of the text. The text proposes a particular normative point of identification, and this point can be unearthed through close reading.

In Porpentine Charity Heartscape’s electronic work *Foldscape*, the [reader](#) is presented with a digital folder full of folders. One of the folders is called “mansion”. So, let us investigate the mansion. In it, we find five more folders, named “crying spirit in the basement with the power generator,” “crying spirit in the basement with the power

There is something uncomfortable about labelling a work *trans*. What does the term “trans literature” even denote? Is it all literature by trans people? That seems flatly problematic, surely trans writers can make art that isn’t “trans art”. (Although, maybe, we can’t; maybe our work is always tied to the limiting identities that cissexist society places on us.) Is it all literature *about* trans people? Again, this seems wrong, *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman is not typically considered trans literature. What the works selected in this paper have in common, I think, is that they are circulated amongst the trans community and treated like they have *something to say* about trans experience.

generator,” “crying spirit in the hallway,” “crying spirit in the pond,” and lastly “crying spirit in the locked room.zip” (Porpentine; [Foldscape\mansion](#)).

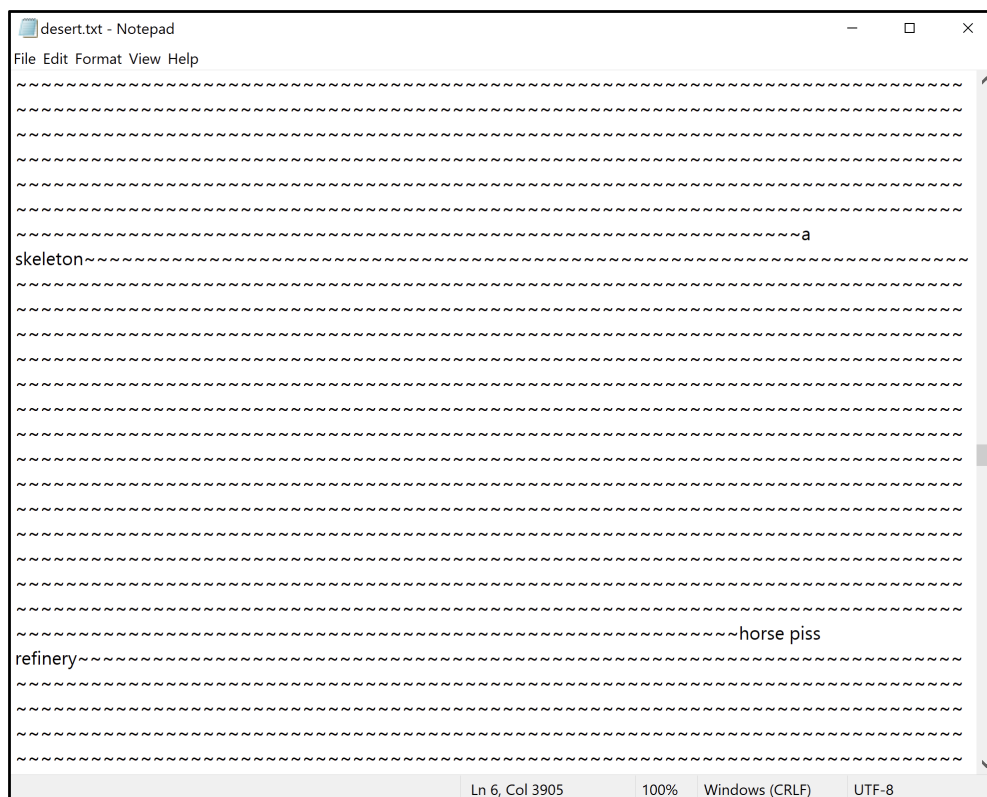
Foldscape complicates the position of ‘reader.’ In experiencing the work, one might also be understood as a *player* or a *user*. Each of these denotations bring out distinct interpretive perspectives. As a reader, my interaction with the work is purely interpretive. I invest my own perspective into the work, and my experience of the work is a mix of text and (personal) context. As a player, I approach the work as something to be progressed through. It is a video game with rooms and secrets and treasures and stats and levels. As a user, *Foldscape* is a computer file. It has a hierarchy of access; it has particular properties like security, file size, and file type.

Type	Size
File folder	
File folder	
File folder	
File folder	
Compressed (zipp...	

All of the folders, except the last, are empty. We are curious, wanting to investigate this apparently haunted mansion, so we investigate this last folder only to find a password protected folder named “the handle would not move, almost as if it were being held on the other side.zip” (Porpentine *Foldscape\mansion\crying spirit in the locked room.zip\crying spirit in the locked room*). Aside from the unique format of writing interactive prose into the titles of various folders, Porpentine’s work captures an investigative mode of interacting with digital artifacts, or with the internet itself. The reader is prompted, not by any overt direction but by the simple existence of a locked file, to scour the rest of the folders for clues, for meanings. In “Fear and the Cisgender Audience,” Lucy J. Miller argues that most cinema about trans identities treats transness as a frightening image. She argues that “Being cisgender is the point of identification, and the narrative conventions and visual codes are constructed in line with this identification,” (Miller) and so, in films such as *Sleepaway Camp*, the reveal of transness is treated as a *reveal*. It is not expected (to the cisgender audience) that the killer is secretly trans. This is not a part of the projected worldview of the, as Miller puts it, author and expected viewer. All of the “emotions elicited by the films reflect an ideology of cisnormativity” (Miller). For Miller, cisnormativity seeps into the texture of a work. The emotions elicited by a cisnormative film will be cisnormative emotions.

Foldscape calls to an emotional register that is particular to my experience of gender, even without explicit reference to trans identity. Miller correctly argues that “the point of identification in transgender films must be shifted away from being cisgender;” however she claims that transgender films should focus on lines of identification that are common to cisgender and transgender people (Miller). Porpentine’s work takes a different view. Rather than attempt to make a trans work of art understandable to all people, Porpentine’s *Foldscape* serves as a work of art that is, in part, about transness—in ways that enter into the emotions of the

piece. So far *Foldscape* does not seem explicitly about transness. When encountering the work for the first time, I nonetheless felt like it was saying *something* about trans experience, although I could not point to what exactly that was. The emotions that the piece evoked as I scanned its folders reminded me of scrolling the internet in middle school, looking for points of identification, things that I can claim as part of myself. In “desert” folder, inside of the “borderlands” folder, I found such points of identification. Before continuing, it is important to remark on the digital location of *desert.txt*, a folder called “borderlands.” So, trans identification exists in the borderlands of art, where I follow Monica Perales’s understanding of borderlands as “a state of being and consciousness, continually being redefined,” asking us to consider “role of racialized gendered violence to the structure and maintenance of colonial power in the borderlands” (Perales 163-164). Considering the role of racialization and colonial power in the text, the use of a “desert” reflects the Orientalized desert of violence depicted in *No Tiger*. The influence of this extends throughout the work, calling to the reader to search it out; in the logic of *Foldscape*, to find the password to unlock the .zip file.



The [desert.txt file](#) is a long txt file of “~” repeated to mimic rolling sand dunes. At various points in the file, strings of words appear, describing structures one encounters as they ‘search’ the desert. Around halfway through the file, the reader encounters a “horse piss refinery.” This is a reference to the idea, circulated in some internet groups, that pre-industrial trans women would

extract estrogen from horse urine. Porpentine juxtaposes this (likely mythologized) pre-industrial image with a “refinery.” The mythologized past is transformed into something life-giving (estrogen) through the process of mechanical refinement. This digital work presents an image of the internet as trans-gendered cultural refinery. Later in the file, the reader encounters an “emergency estrogen cache,” after a long trek through the desert. The implied audience is clarified by this inclusion. It is not water that we find in the desert, but estrogen. The audience is assumed to be people who, after a time in a desert, would need “emergency estrogen” to be deployed in advance. Borrowing from Miller, the point of identification is trans.

Continuing to search *Foldscape* brings us to a folder called “fuck alley” with a .txt file called “orgy,” wherein we find a google docs link and the text “could be dangerous people, but maybe worth checking out. lots of animals there too. was it an orgy? maybe it was a party. maybe it was a forest. the transmission was unclear” (Porpentine; *Foldscape*\fuck alley\orgt.txt). There is an ambiguity here, is it an orgy, a party, or a forest? The text claims that this ambiguity is due to an unclear transmission, but these words sound nothing alike. With some trepidation, I pasted the link into my search bar to find pages of random sentences in various fonts. This google docs has been used as a guest-book by readers of *Foldscape*, signed by many of the people who found it. One can trace out full conversations in the jumble of text. It is in the marks left by other readers that I found the password for the locked file. *Foldscape* reveals that progress exists in digital community. The anonymity of the online space allows for experimentation and confession. I am reluctant to reproduce any screenshots of this file. It somehow feels like a violation of this space. One user notes that the document is occasionally made blank again. Poems are lost, past conversations and connections are deleted. *Foldscape* provides a microcosm of the internet, in this way. A place of ephemerality and anonymity; the feeling at any moment that you are intruding on someone’s personal thoughts.

Each work undermines the validity of transnormativity in the context of the internet. *Tell Me I’m Worthless* depicts the destabilization of a normative trans image when in immediate relationship to the internet. “No Tiger” reveals the impossibility of reconciling transnormativity with imperialist fantasy, rendering any trans*nationalist theory analogous to homonationalism incoherent. Lastly, *Foldscape* provides an alternative to theories of transnormativity by calling attention to the normative point of identification in digital texts. Together, these texts provide a case against transnormativity. I do not argue that transnormativity is always incoherent, or that there are no internet spaces where transnormativity is a useful theoretical tool. Rather, I want to problematize and question academia’s reliance on transnormativity, especially in the context of internet-mediated trans experience.

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