

**Reclaiming Desire in Trans Narratives: From Erasure to Empowerment**

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## Introduction

The erasure of desire from trans narratives has deeply shaped how trans identities are represented in cultural, medical, and literary contexts. This erasure often reduces trans identities to their experiences of struggle and dysphoria (Beischel et al., 2022). Desire, which encompasses not only sexual desire but the broader spectrum of intimate, emotional, and relational connections, represents more than longing; it is central to identity formation, creating community, and pursuing joy (Beischel et al., 2022). However, trans narratives have historically excluded desire, a consequence of the historical, societal, and medical frameworks that continue to dehumanize trans people (Beischel et al., 2022). This is done by framing trans people as either desexualized or hypersexualized and erases the diversity and richness of trans experiences, creating one-dimensional portrayals of their lives (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). This omission not only perpetuates stereotypes but also reflects society's broader discomfort with trans bodies and their desires, which is rooted in cisnormativity and heteronormativity (GenderGP, 2022).

Scholars and writers have highlighted the transformative potential of reclaiming desire in trans and queer narratives. Cheryl Clarke's *Living as a Lesbian* (1986) provides a framework for understanding how marginalized communities reclaim desire as a site of resistance and empowerment. Vivek Shraya's *I'm Afraid of Men* (2018) highlights the importance of desire in self-discovery, resilience, and challenging societal norms. While Lavery's *Is Flesh a Problem or An Opportunity in The Eyes of God: An Excerpt* (2020) extends this discussion by critiquing how societal discomfort with trans desires reflects the broader cultural anxieties and discomfort about trans bodies and joy. These works collectively show that centering desire in trans narratives is not only a necessary act of reclamation but also a means of disrupting oppressive systems and celebrating the diversity of trans lives.

This essay argues that centering desire in trans narratives is essential for reclaiming agency, challenging reductive stereotypes, and fostering collective empowerment. Drawing from my personal experience being trans and queer, I approach this analysis with both academic and lived insights. Through an exploration of three interconnected themes: the historical erasure of trans narratives, the importance of embracing desire, and the role of desire for social change, this essay bridges the gap between the portrayals of trans experiences and desire.

### **The Historical Erasure of Desire in Trans Narratives**

The erasure of desire from trans narratives is deeply rooted in historical, medical, and cultural frameworks that have sought to regulate and pathologize trans identities. These systems have not only marginalized trans individuals but also framed their experiences in ways that omit the richness and diversity of their lives (Austin et al., 2022). By narrowly focusing on the dysphoria and struggles of their experiences, these frameworks erase the empowering and affirming aspects of trans existence such as the expression of desire (Austin et al., 2022). Understanding how and why desire has been historically excluded from trans narratives is essential to challenging these incomplete portrayals and reclaiming trans agency.

Medical discourses have played a central role in the erasure of desire from trans narratives. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), particularly through its classification of gender dysphoria, emphasizes the distress associated with the ‘incongruence’ between their assigned gender at birth and their lived experiences (GenderGP, 2024). While it is important to understand, this hyperfocus on pathology has framed trans identities as medical conditions requiring treatment, reducing trans people to patients in need of correction rather than people capable of euphoria, desire, and connection (GenderGP, 2024;

Austin et al., 2022). By prioritizing diagnosis and treatment over holistic understandings of trans lives, these frameworks have systematically excluded discussions of desire.

Jacobsen and Devor (2022) argue that medical frameworks have contributed to a dual dynamic of desexualisation and hypersexualization in trans representations. On the one hand, trans individuals are often portrayed as desexualized figures, confused people stripped of agency and desire. This is especially seen in clinical settings where they are viewed primarily through the lens of their dysphoria (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). On the other hand, societal narratives frequently hypersexualize trans bodies, casting these desires as excessive or deviant (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). This paradox reinforces society's discomfort with trans desire, framing it as either non-existent or out of control.

Vivek Shraya critiques the ways in which societal and medical discourses diminish trans joy. Shraya (2018) recounts moments of desire and euphoria, such as wearing her mother's jacket, a simple yet transformative act that affirmed her femininity and sense of self. However, this joy was violently interrupted when a man spat on her, perceiving her expression of femininity as a threat (Shraya, 2018). This experience highlights how societal discomfort with trans desire is deeply rooted in a system that seeks to control and police gender expression.

David Lavery's excerpt critiques this cultural tendency to prioritize abstract concerns over the lived realities of trans individuals. He recounts how conversations about his transition were often redirected to discussions about "irreversible decisions" or hypothetical fears about trans children (Lavery, 2020, para. 8). These deflections reveal a societal discomfort with trans joy and desire, as well as a preoccupation with controlling trans bodies. Lavery (2020) argues that this discomfort reflects broader cultural anxieties about trans existence, which manifest as

efforts to erase or minimize their experiences with desire and euphoria. By centering external fears rather than lived experiences, these narratives perpetuate the erasure of trans desire.

In relation to this argument, Cheryl Clarke (1986) provides a compelling framework for understanding how marginalized communities navigate the erasure of desire. Clarke (1986) discusses the challenges of expressing queer desire in heteronormative spaces, highlighting the external barriers and internalized fears that suppress authentic connections. In one example, Clarke (1986) writes in the poem how she hesitates to act on her attraction to a visibly queer woman in a straight bar, constrained by the risks of societal judgement and rejection. This experience mirrors the barriers faced by trans people, who often navigate these similar dynamics of societal discomfort and potential danger when expressing intimacy or connection.

The erasure of desire from trans narratives has far-reaching consequences, both for individuals and for broader societal understandings of trans lives. At an individual level, this erasure perpetuates feelings of isolation, alienation, and invisibility, as trans people are denied the opportunity to see their experiences reflected in affirming and diverse ways (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). As Austin et al. (2022) argue, affirming relationships and representations are crucial for fostering self-acceptance and resilience. When desire is excluded from these narratives, it reinforces the notion that trans people are defined solely by their struggles, denying them the authenticity of their experiences.

### **The Importance of Embracing Desire**

Including desire in trans narratives is essential for reclaiming one's agency, challenging harmful stereotypes, and fostering a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of trans experiences. Desire in trans narratives captures the pursuit of affirming spaces, self-expression,

and the joy of being fully seen and accepted. When desire is reclaimed and centered, it reframes trans lives as sites of agency and euphoria, challenging societal frameworks that focus solely on hardships.

One of the most profound ways that desire reshapes trans narratives is through the concept of gender euphoria. Gender euphoria is defined as moments of alignment between one's gender identity and lived experience, often tied to acts of self-expression or connection (Beischel et al., 2022). These moments of joy disrupt the dominance of dysphoria-focused narratives, framing trans identities through following happiness rather than struggle. For instance, participants described experiencing euphoria when engaging in creative expression, dressing in affirming ways, or connecting with supportive communities (Beischel et al., 2022). These experiences highlight how desire, whether that is self-expression, community, or intimacy, plays a central role in shaping trans identities.

Additionally, desire manifests in the pursuit of affirming self-image and bodily autonomy. For example, the joy of embracing one's body after top surgery can represent a moment of alignment between physical self and gender identity; however, societal narratives quickly overshadowed this euphoria, as seen in online debates about "rapid-onset gender dysphoria" shortly after surgery (Lavery, 2020, para. 4). These societal projections dismiss the deeply personal and affirming aspects of these experiences. These external narratives erase trans joy, highlighting how moments of euphoria and desire are crucial to understanding the complexity of trans lives (Lavery, 2020).

Desire also plays a critical role in fostering self-compassion and promoting greater well-being among trans people (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). The process of embracing desire often involves unlearning internalized shame and stigma, which are reinforced by these societal

narratives. Centering positive experiences, such as gender euphoria and desire, can counteract the negative mental health impacts of stigma. For example, trans people who transcend the restrictions of cisnormativity and heteronormativity often report higher levels of self-acceptance and satisfaction (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). By including these moments in trans narratives, it becomes clear how desire functions as a tool for promoting the well-being of trans people.

In addition to supporting self-love, embracing desire is a key component of developing resilience. Trans people frequently navigate environments that invalidate or stigmatize their identities, making the pursuit of euphoria and desire an act of resistance against marginalization (Austin et al., 2022). Moments of desire, whether through pursuing affirming clothing or simply feeling comfortable with oneself, build a sense of resilience by fostering a meaningful connection to identity. For example, one participant in a study described styling their hair in a specific way as a daily ritual that affirms their gender identity and promotes euphoria and self-empowerment (Beischel et al., 2022). This simple act illustrates how embracing desire provides strength and helps promote resilience within the community.

Cheryl Clarke (1986) shows how desire plays a critical role in forging connections and creating community. In her piece, *Journal Entry: Sisters*, Clarke (1986) observes the subtle intimacy between them, and these interactions suggest that connections do not need to rely on overt expressions but instead are rooted in a shared understanding and mutual presence. She writes, “It’s their way, to be with one another in whatever they want to be. And all that’s good to be is not necessarily good to talk” (Clarke, 1986, p. 26). This portrayal of unstated desire challenges conventional notions of romantic or physical attraction, emphasizing the richness of connection that exists in subtle, meaningful ways. It highlights the importance of embracing desire as a multifaceted experience that encompasses more than actions or declarations. For trans

people, this depiction of desire reflects the ways in which intimacy and connection can exist outside of societal expectations.

Including these examples of desire in trans narratives allows for a broader understanding of what it means to desire and to be desired. It moves beyond the binary frameworks that constrain trans experiences, celebrating the ways desire can foster a sense of belonging, affirmation, and humanity.

### **Desire as a Catalyst for Social Change**

Desire plays an essential role not only in one's identity formation but also in driving collective action and transforming societal standards. By centering desire in trans narratives, these accurate representations transcend personal experiences and challenge the societal structures that have historically marginalized trans identities (Austin et al., 2022). Through acts of reclamation and resistance, desire becomes a political force that redefines the boundaries of inclusion and affirms trans experiences.

One way desire fosters social change is by challenging the frameworks of cisnormativity and heteronormativity that dictate whose identities are considered valid (Austin et al., 2022). GenderGP (2024) highlights how moments of gender euphoria disrupt these systems by promoting joy and desire rather than shame and hardship. When trans people embrace their desires, they directly confront the societal discomfort with trans joy and assert their agency (GenderGP, 2024). For example, attending public events like Pride parades and celebrating trans visibility not only celebrates individual experiences but also reshapes public perceptions of trans identities. These acts of visibility are driven by the desire to exist freely and authentically, challenging the erasure of trans lives and inspiring collective resistance against oppression.



Vivek Shraya provides an example of how centering desire can challenge societal norms and advocate for change. Shraya (2018) discusses embracing her femininity and how that stands as a direct challenge to the societal expectation of conformity to cisnormative standards. This reclamation of desire not only affirms her identity but also exposes the cultural biases that marginalize those who deviate from binary gender norms.

Cheryl Clarke's *Journal Entry: Qualification* explores the complexities of desire as a longing for comfort, connection, and self-fulfilment which can be used as a tool for social change. While the poem focuses on personal experiences, it implicitly critiques societal structures that marginalize and fragment identities. She writes about seeking comfort "on the run, quick, as much as I could stuff into me at once," in this context she is talking about overeating, but this also reflects how unmet desires manifest especially when societal norms deny their expression (Clarke, 1986, p. 60). This shows how when you are forced to hide a part of yourself, such as your identity, this frustration can manifest in ways such as overeating. In the context of trans narratives, Clarke's depiction of longing shows how systemic oppression forces individuals to navigate their desires in fragmented ways. By articulating these experiences, narratives like Clarke's challenge the structures that perpetuated invisibility and marginalization. For example, when trans people reclaim and center their desires in public and community spaces, they transform this longing into acts of resilience and solidarity. This reclamation directly counters societal standards and pathologizes these desires, making their inclusion in trans narratives an act of resistance.

Desire also plays a transformative role in fostering belonging across communities, creating opportunities for advocacy and empowerment. In the poem, *V.*, Clarke (1986) writes about the shared experiences of Black queer women navigating a society that diminishes their

identities. She states “not to let them come between us” shows the political and communal power of staying united against external forces that seek to divide and erase marginalized voices (Clarke, 1986, p. 59). This also relates to trans narratives as they tend to seek connection with others who share their struggles and aspirations, finding strength in the shared pursuit of visibility. Clarke’s emphasis on community and solidarity highlights how desire transcends individual longing to become a tool for collective empowerment. She writes “We are everywhere” and this serves as both a declaration of visibility and a demand for unity, showing that shared experiences can be a foundation for strength and community (Clarke, 1986, p. 59).

By integrating these examples of desire and unity into trans narratives, desire is reframed as a force that unites individuals in their shared humanity and experiences. These narratives emphasize the importance of communal resilience and solidarity, demonstrating how desire can bridge divides, challenge oppressive systems, and inspire collective action for a more equitable and inclusive society.

## **Conclusion**

The inclusion of desire in trans narratives is not only an act of representation but a reclamation of agency, authenticity, and joy. Historically, desire has been excluded from these stories, overshadowed by narratives of struggle and dysphoria that fail to capture the complexity and joy of trans lives. By centering desire, trans narratives challenge societal norms that pathologize or hypersexualize trans identities, offering a more comprehensive and affirming portrayal of their experiences. Desire becomes a lens in which trans people can assert their agency, celebrate their identities, and resist the systems that have sought to erase them.

The exploration of gender euphoria, as highlighted by Beischel et al. (2022), demonstrates how centering affirming experiences disrupts the dominance of dysphoria-focused narratives. Moments of euphoria tied to self-expression, community, and connection illustrate the transformative power of desire in shaping trans identities. Similarly, Lavery's reflections on reclaiming his body after top surgery and the debates that followed show the importance of using desire as an act of defiance against societal narratives that seek to overshadow trans joy.

Clarke's work provides a critical framework for understanding how desire operates as both a personal and political force. Whether through subtle connections in *Sisters*, or collective resilience in *V.*, Clarke shows how desire fosters solidarity builds community and drives collective resistance. For trans narratives, these examples highlight how shared desires for belonging can unite individuals across experiences and identities, transforming desire into a catalyst for social change.

Ultimately, centering desire in trans narratives reshapes these stories from depictions of hardships to celebrations of resilience, agency, and joy. By including these portrayals of longing and fulfilment, trans narratives reclaim the humanity and diversity of the trans experience, challenging oppressive systems and stereotypes.

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