

“I Am Not My Bodies”: Transgender Embodiment in Nina Arsenault’s *The Silicone Diaries*

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Abstract

This article examines transgender embodiment through analysis of Canadian transgender performance artist Nina Arsenault and her autobiographical play *The Silicone Diaries* (2012b). I discuss Arsenault’s life writing, plays, and self-portraiture to explore how her pursuit of an exaggerated ideal of beauty simultaneously subverts essentialist notions of what it means to be a woman.

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Résumé

Cet article examine l’intégration transgenre au moyen de l’analyse de l’artiste de performance canadienne transgenre Nina Arsenault et de sa pièce autobiographique *The Silicone Diaries* (2012b). Je parle de la vie, de l’écriture, des pièces et de l’autoportrait d’Arsenault pour explorer comment sa poursuite d’un idéal exagéré de la beauté subvertit simultanément les notions essentialistes de ce que signifie être une femme.

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Canadian transgender writer, performer, and artist Nina Arsenault has described herself as an aesthete, an art object, a cyborg, a faery, and a Barbie. This list is not exhaustive; Arsenault fosters spiritual and artistic identifications with a myriad of concepts and figures through her gender transition. Her performance is not restricted to formal productions; she continually enacts her evolving persona and *body* of work. To talk about Arsenault is to engage with her artistic canvas—her body—and thus her physical form as object and image. Her autobiographical one-woman play *The Silicone Diaries* (2012b), a series of seven monologues depicting various points in her life during her extensive body modification and the development of her art, is not the story of a makeover, but of a metamorphosis. Rather than suppress her past experiences presenting as male and her complex subjectivities, Arsenault recuperates the maligned position of “fake”—part of the history of the marginalization of trans people—as fodder for her art practice.

The Silicone Diaries (2012b) spans thirty years of Arsenault’s life, beginning in 1979 when she was five years old (206) and ending in 2009, overlapping with the time she started performing the work (224). The play also chronicles the period during which she began her transition, circa 1996 (Halferty 2012, 33). The play was first workshopped and performed in Saint John, New Brunswick in August 2008, but premiered at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto in November 2009. The full text of the play was first published in the anthology *TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work*, edited by Judith Rudakoff, in 2012. In addition to this play, and another one-woman autobiographical play *I was Barbie* (Handley 2010), Arsenault has created many collaborative self-portraits, which have been showcased in galleries, journals, magazines, and on websites. She has also published a “Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture (Identity, Transformation, and Performance)” (2012a), containing her artistic work-

ing principles and autobiographical reflections on her transition as a quest.

This article will employ feminist, queer, and transgender studies theories, particularly as they pertain to gender performance and transgender subjectivities, to explore Nina Arsenault, both as a self-fashioned, hyperfeminized woman and as an art practitioner. Specifically, I will demonstrate how Arsenault's embodied experience of gender further unsettles ideas within a transgender context in which the social construction of gender is a foundational concept. Although transgender theories posit gender as distinct from the anatomically sexed body, some trans people decide to undertake gender reassignment to align the physical body with their internal gender identity, what trans theorist Julia Serano (2007) refers to as "subconscious sex" (78). Arsenault, meanwhile, has undergone extensive body modification and has crafted a hyperfeminine appearance through hair, makeup, and clothing, but has not undertaken gender reassignment surgery. By feminizing her body through the pursuit of an excessive ideal of beauty while deciding that gender reassignment is, for her, unnecessary and undesired, Arsenault (2012a) participates in what she calls the "aestheticization of the female form" (65) while simultaneously subverting essentialist or naturalized notions of what it means to be a woman.

I argue that Arsenault documents her gender transition as a quest, negotiating gender change and the pursuit of normative femininity in relation to societal expectations and her own sense of authentic selfhood while, seemingly paradoxically, evoking artificiality. Of particular relevance is Arsenault's engagement with concepts of beauty and hegemonic femininity as a trans woman struggling to "pass" and then deciding to pass at a hyper level, which initially inspired her art practice. My analysis of *The Silicone Diaries* and her other artistic work suggests that Arsenault reveals transgender embodiment, for her, as a process of becoming and ongoing assemblage, rather than a linear or straightforward change from one gender to the other. In the play, she also situates gender as both a psychic and embodied experience that, all the while, can be completely detached from sexed anatomy. Arsenault thus explores and challenges what it means to be a woman and what it means to be *real*, refusing to pass, blend, or disappear and instead pursuing femininity as

a conceptual experience that exceeds the limits of the "natural" body.

Starting with Judith Butler's (1990) notion of performativity and the social construction of gender as a series of repeated acts, I examine Arsenault's self-conscious creation of a feminine gender expression through extensive cosmetic surgery and body modification. I will then discuss the foundational essays of Sandy Stone (2006) and Susan Stryker (2006b), first published in 1991 and 1994 respectively, on theories of transgender embodiment and experience, re-reading these texts through a focus on Arsenault as a contemporary trans person who represents and enacts several arguments Stone and Stryker offer. Finally, I will turn to Donna Haraway's (2006) "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," first published in 1991, to examine Arsenault as, in the words of one scholar, "the apotheosis of Haraway's 'image of the cyborg'" (Halferty 2012, 30). As Haraway (2006) theorizes, "[t]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world...In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense" (104-105). Although Arsenault has undergone over sixty cosmetic surgeries and procedures, costing approximately \$200,000, she made the decision to retain her penis, a point she chooses to emphasize in her work. As a cyborg figure, Arsenault embodies seeming contradictions: as a hyperfeminine woman in appearance, dress, and physical movement, she demonstrates how anatomical femaleness is peripheral and unimportant to the experience and performance of femininity.

Nina Arsenault's hyperfeminine embodiment pushes the boundaries of how gender is imagined. Susan Stryker's (2006a) introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader* examines how trans identities problematize feminist and queer ideologies and studies by further complicating categories and signifiers once thought stable. She writes that "[t]ransgender phenomena challenge the unifying potential of the category 'woman'" (7) and "call into question both the stability of the material reference 'sex' and the relationship of that unstable category to the linguistic, social, and psychical categories of 'gender'" (9). If the perceived category of "woman" has been integral to the plight of feminism, trans identities unsettle this category. If one of the aims of feminism has been to fight the construction of women as essentially different (and inferior) to men, transgender theories

usefully emphasize and further elucidate the disconnection between birth-assigned sex and social gender.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990) posits that identity is constructed or made manifest through performance; that is, the repetition of embodied acts. She writes: “That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (185). Thus, gender does not exist apart from how a body performs it and how others interpret that body. In other words, the body writes and is read by others. Butler goes on to explain that “[g]ender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (191; emphasis in original).

Throughout *The Silicone Diaries*, in interviews, and in writings, Arsenault represents her womanhood in such a way—self-consciously aware of its constructed nature and its existence through performance. While Arsenault is, in the traditional sense, a performer, a theatre artist who performs before an audience and uses websites and social media to share her ongoing artistic work, both formal and informal, she is a performer of gender at all times, on stage and off, in public and in private. As a transgender woman, her gender may not be correctly interpreted if she is not thought to pass. Rather, her projected identity as feminine must be continually reinforced and reenacted in order for her to be read as female. Still, I argue that all women engage in the performance, or communication, of their gender, including those assigned female at birth. Thus, a cisgender woman’s femininity isn’t more “natural” or less performed. In her discussion of the butch/femme dynamic within lesbian couples, Butler (1990) denaturalizes the assumption that gay is a derivative of straight, with straight being the perceived “original” by arguing that,

The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of ‘the original’...reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original. (43; emphasis in original)

Arsenault’s gender performance, then, can be viewed not as a copy of the “original”—perceivably posited as the cisgender woman, but as a copy of a copy—an imitation of a woman, which is an imitation of the *idea* of a woman.

Butler’s theory of the original as “nothing other than a parody of the *idea*,” as it applies to heterosexuality and homosexuality, could be rewritten to apply directly in a trans context. I suggest that, similarly, trans woman is to woman not as copy is to original, but rather as copy is to copy. This analogy plays out in *The Silicone Diaries* in the diary “Me ‘n’ Tommy Lee (2006)” (Arsenault 2012b). In this diary, Arsenault recounts meeting Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee and ex-husband of Pamela Anderson. This experience resonates as a momentous occasion in Arsenault’s life in which she passes for a (cisgender) woman. Solicited to meet Tommy by one of his lackeys, she thinks that “it’s a huge ego boost to be hand-picked out of a pack of posing, real women” (218). “Mistaken” as a “real” woman by Tommy Lee, Arsenault invokes Butler’s idea of parody while describing “the ultimate silicone sex symbol of all time” (218), Pamela Anderson: “She is a caricature of a woman. Tonight I am a caricature of her. An imitation of an imitation of an idea of a woman” (219). Arsenault acknowledges gender as imitative and understands the performance of femininity by woman as the representation of a concept, not a stable, Platonic truth.

Through the encounter with Tommy Lee—who is not only a straight, cisgender man, but also hyper-masculine and, as Arsenault (2012b) claims, “the biggest dicked rocker in the world” (219)—Arsenault reveals the effects of gender performance. Due to her feminine attractiveness and passing as having been assigned female at birth during their meeting, Tommy Lee becomes sexually aroused; Arsenault’s performance of sexy, heterosexual femininity is convincing, genuine, and has palpable effects in the real world. While theoretically Tommy Lee *might* not as readily admit to being attracted to a transsexual woman, he is attracted to Arsenault. She monologues that “[e]verything that attracted you to me in the first place, Tommy Lee—synthetic hair, make-up, silicone, attitude, radiance—I don’t have to be born a biological woman to have these things, and I want you to get that it is these things that give you the physiological feeling of a hard on” (221). Interestingly, Arsenault and Pamela Anderson are two Canadian

women who have both undergone surgery to achieve a certain appearance—one was assigned female at birth, the other male. While each woman's decision to pursue surgery to achieve a sexualized ideal arose for different reasons, the similarities show hegemonic femininity as achievable unrelated to the gender assigned at birth.

In her examination of gender performance, imitation, and parody, Butler (1990) employs the concept of drag to illustrate how performative gender can operate distinctly from the culturally constructed notion of anatomical sex. She explains how drag, cross-dressing, and even butch/femme identities are a form of parody of a (falsely perceived and exalted) "original or primary gender identity" (187). Butler understands drag as productively informing and reframing how we might understand the relationship between the imitation and what is being imitated (the so-called original). She argues that, "[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency" (187). Thus, part of the experience of viewing a performance as drag is recognizing the distinction between the (presumed) sex of the performer and the gender they are portraying. In fact, for a performance to be "drag" hinges on a perceived disjunction between the sex of the performer and the gender they perform, all the while presuming that their sex and gender match. A man performing as a drag queen is able to communicate the signifiers of femaleness, revealing how gender can be communicated—or performed—separate from the "true" gender of the performer. Similarly, for a woman to perform as a drag king, she must communicate maleness while also conveying her (primary) gender identity as a woman. Thus, in drag, two concepts are simultaneously conveyed—the *performance* of one gender and the underlying "truth" of another.

The Silicone Diaries evokes Butler's theories of drag and parody as Arsenault negotiates performing femininity in a way that can be seen as resembling drag due to her transgender status. Her representation of femaleness is exaggerated—long, big hair, thick eyelashes, full lips, large breasts—in the same way that (male) drag performers may typically portray women. The difference, of course, is that she identifies as a woman so she constantly performs femininity, rather than for limited periods of time. In the play, Arsenault (2012b) reflects on the unsolicited advice she has received from people on how to look "real" and "nat-

ural": "People say, 'Don't do that. Don't do that. You won't look like a real woman if you do that. You'll look like a drag queen'" (216). Using Butler's understanding of drag, we can read this passage as indicating that drag is viewed as inherently parodic; it is always understood in terms of a person of one gender imitating the so called "opposite" gender. The drag queen signals femaleness, but is also understood as actually male. Arsenault is not being warned to avoid looking like a *man*, but a drag queen; in other words, a man performing as a woman.

As I have shown, Arsenault demonstrates the ritualized performance of gender as a series of repeated acts in *The Silicone Diaries*. Due to the fact that she was told she was too masculine to ever transition successfully and live as a woman (Halferty 2012, 33), Arsenault approaches the projection of her femininity with artistic alacrity. The feminine appearance she desires to present is effortful, but its deliberateness does not make it any less authentic. In the diary "I am my own self-portrait (2004)," Arsenault (2012b) describes sitting at her "hypermodern, see-through, plastic vanity table" (215) overlooked by a large print of Botticelli's painting of the goddess Aphrodite:

I'm just looking at myself in the mirror, like I do every day. Different angles. Inspections. This is the most my face will ever look like a natural woman...I'm reaching for my professional aesthetics tweezers. I've had them imported from Iceland. They are capable of getting even the tiniest, finest, white, invisible hairs. I'm not only interested in the perfect shape of the perfect brow. I'm interested in the annihilation of the presence of even the most invisible hairs...Next on my face is a layer of moisture...Next on my face, foundation in little dabs...I draw a dark line where my red lip meets white skin. Inside that line, I like to do another paler line. Inside that, I put lots of lip gloss. (215-216)

Although the careful effort Arsenault describes of creating a feminine image can be seen as arising, in part, from an over compensatory effort because she is transgender, her play describes a socialized, ritualized performance of femininity that is undertaken by many, non-trans women. The application of make-up and the preening of physical appearance are obvious examples of how gender is prepared and performed, but this is only one element of Arsenault's overall mediation of

self and one manifestation of how gender, generally, is enacted in society. Just as her worshipfully displayed Aphrodite print that overlooks her vanity table is, as she describes it, an imitation of a Renaissance masterwork, which is the representation of an idea of the goddess, Arsenault posits “woman” as a concept to be imitated and re-imitated, de-essentializing any notion of what *woman* is or has to be. But as Sandy Stone (2006) explains, performative gender is even more complicated in the case of trans people. She writes that “the varieties of performative gender, seen against a culturally intelligible gendered body *which is itself a medically constituted textual violence*, generate new and unpredictable dissonances” (231; emphasis in original). Arsenault’s ability to perform as a social woman, even while retaining anatomy that seems counterintuitive to essential ideas of femaleness, highlights “woman” as a set of tenuous characteristics socially agreed upon to *signify* woman.

How we understand the performance of gender, particularly around how transgender people communicate their gender identities, links to Sandy Stone’s idea of “passing.” Stone’s (2006) essay “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” is a foundational work in the development of the field of transgender studies. Stone charts the development of transsexualism in the medical arena of sex-reassignment surgery, examining how transsexual experience has been represented autobiographically and speaking to the erasure of transsexual identity through the culturally reinforced goal of passing, as appearing to have been born into one’s new (perhaps surgically) constructed gender. Stone (2006) writes of the difficulty making transsexual/transgender voices heard (and bodies seen): “it is difficult to generate a counterdiscourse if one is programmed to disappear. The highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase him/herself, to fade into the ‘normal’ population as soon as possible” (230). Thus, Stone calls for reclaiming the transsexual’s “erased history” and including that past as a relevant, meaningful, and productive element that informs the transsexual subject’s “now” (230). For the male-to-female transsexual, such as Stone, to discredit and discount the complexity of experience that comes from making a transition is to pretend that she was always socially and physically female – to erase a personal story that disrupts cisnormativity or the assumption that biological sex and gender identity always match. As Stone asserts, while passing

is posited as “the most critical thing a transsexual can do...to be accepted as a ‘natural’ member of that gender,” passing also “means the denial of mixture” (231). It is this recuperation of mixture, ambiguity, and erased history that Stone imagines as contributing to transsexual theory. Stone’s advocacy for a transsexual/transgender politics that moves beyond the desire to pass, to be erased and invisible, is reflected in Arsenault’s identity as a hyperfeminine, hypervisible trans woman. Feeling that she would never pass as a “normal” woman, Arsenault (2012b) decided to go beyond normal, to fashion herself into an ideal, inspired by concepts of “supernatural beauty” (215).

Stone critiques the socially enforced mandate for transsexuals to pass as having always expressed their true gender, which results in the erasure of a transsexual’s pre-transition past. Arsenault, on the other hand, undermines the politics of passing by continually acknowledging and even reasserting her origins in a male body. She continues to signal her transgender status through engaging in the reality of that status artistically and through developing an appearance that is “unnatural” and hyperfeminine. Thus, Arsenault’s stylized repetition of acts (Butler 1990, 191) includes not only the performance of a female identity, but the performance of a trans woman identity and embodiment—something that occupies its own conceptual space.

I read Arsenault’s artistic politics/political art as a response to the call for action by Stone, whether or not Arsenault considers her refusal to try to pass as a deliberate political action. While Arsenault is a woman, she does not deny her past or experiences with masculine physical embodiment. The process of transformation, rather, has brought about a series of significations and resignifications in which Arsenault finds meaning. As Stone (2006) writes, “[t]o deconstruct the necessity for passing implies that transsexuals must take responsibility for all of their history, to begin to rearticulate their lives not as a series of erasures in the service of a species of feminism conceived from within a traditional frame, but as a political action begun by reappropriating difference and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinscribed body” (232). Arsenault (2012a) seems to assert a similar belief in the intertextual, layered possibilities of her understanding of her body. She explains in her “Manifesto:”

My body was profoundly changed with each surgical shape-shift. I would have about six operations at a time and, therefore, the transformations book-ended distinct phases of my life. Each new version of my body and the societal meanings that were inscribed upon it were destroyed and reinscribed again and again. With every incarnation, I was compelled to create a HIEROGLYPH of who I was in the Now—each new social role, sexual manifestation, gradation of femininity, shade of beauty, layer of artificiality. (66; emphasis in original)

While Arsenault marks the distinct phases of her life, she does not conceptualize her gender transition as a complete rebirth, or, one (male) body dies and a new (female) one is created. For Arsenault to view herself in such a way would be part of the politics of passing, to discount the validity of pre-transition experiences. Rather, she describes the transformation process as one of layering, adding new physical elements to her body while keeping some of the old. Her surgeries and aesthetic modifications are instead perceived as “layer[s] of artificiality” that coincide with the emerging and evolving significations of her socially inscribed body (66). Haraway (2006) contends that “bodies are maps of power and identity” (115), which are read and interpreted socially. However, as Arsenault (2012a) proclaims: “I am not my bodies, which are constantly disappearing” (68). Her sense of psychic embodiment follows the flux and multiplicity of her dramatic physical transformation.

Arsenault’s provocative work proposes a re-visioning of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be *real*, unabashedly reclaiming fakeness and plasticity as well as the long denied and avoided associations of woman as sexual art object. In *The Silicone Diaries* (2012b) she recounts, as a young boy, looking at “girlie magazines” for the first time: “The pictures are not of women. They are Goddesses. They have the biggest hair I have ever seen. They have smouldering darkness around their eyes. Fingers rest on exposed round breasts” (207). This monologue ends with her recollection “...I know this is exactly what I will be when I grow up” (207). In the narrative of the play, this episode demonstrates the starting point of Arsenault’s quest, the point at which a little boy became enthralled and enamoured with images he would later aspire to resemble. It also evokes a consideration of authenticity.

If the pictures are not of “women,” what are they? It is not a flesh-and-blood woman walking down the street, or a photo of a woman whose gender expression is less explicit, that Arsenault (2012a) chooses to highlight in her autobiography. Rather, it is images that engage with “the aestheticization of the female form,” (65), which are connected to, and yet distinct from, any notion of the “real woman.” “Goddess” becomes Arsenault’s name for femininity that exceeds the real, entering the realm of icon and fantasy.

Arsenault has appropriated and sculpted her femininity to the point of exaggeration and unapologetic reverence for an ideal. Her body provokes a re-consideration of the concepts of authenticity and realness as related to feminine embodiment. As Arsenault responded in an interview,

I certainly never walk around thinking, ‘I’ve got a dick,’ like that means anything...when I first started to transition, I thought, ‘I want to be a woman. I’m going to have a sex-change operation. I’m going to have a vagina.’ And then, as I did the surgical procedures, I began to reevaluate what a woman can be...Once you start loosening those rules, you start reevaluating everything. (Thomas 2012, n.p.)

Arsenault’s autobiographical and artistic work powerfully contributes to the body of knowledge that argues for a wide variety of ways that transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming people understand gendered embodiment in related to the sexed body. While Arsenault desired extensive body modification to assist her feminine embodiment, she does not comply with the mainstream expectations for gender reassignment that focus on genitals. Considering that Arsenault funded her own surgeries through sex work and was able to spend at least \$200,000 on procedures, including an orchidectomy, breast implants, silicone hip and buttocks injections, a tracheal shave, and various facial feminization surgeries such as a jaw shave, brow-lift, and nose job, she could have had a vagina constructed had she so desired.

In Susan Stryker’s (2006b) essay “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” she invokes Mary Shelley’s classic gothic-science fiction novel *Frankenstein* to use the monster as a metaphor for transgender em-

bodiment. The title alludes to a scene during which the monster speaks to its maker, Victor Frankenstein, for the first time. Stryker (2006b) writes: “The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born” (245). She locates a powerful and empowering affinity between herself, as a transsexual, and Frankenstein’s monster. She theorizes the medical and surgical intervention in the creation of the transsexual body—indeed, the necessity of these interventions for gender reassignment—as similar to Frankenstein’s monster, able to exist because of its creator, but exceeding what its maker imagined. She writes: “As we rise up from the operating table of our rebirth, we transsexuals are something more, and something other, than the creatures our makers intended us to be... Transsexual embodiment, like the embodiment of the monster, places its subject in an unassimilable, antagonistic, queer relationship to a Nature in which it must nevertheless exist” (248). Here, Stryker indicates what the transsexual or transgender subject may experience in the world having, through medical science, become “unnatural” or a freak of nature.

Stryker links transgender embodiment to feeling like a monster or a creature, pointing to the potential constructed *unnature* of the transsexual body. By linking the narrative of Frankenstein’s monster to transgender experience, Stryker implies that there is a journey that takes place. Just as the monster is created, lives as an vilified outcast, and then finally confronts his maker and tells the story of his creation in his own words, so too, in Stryker’s personal history, there are stages of becoming and growing awareness that cultivate “transgender rage.” Stryker’s essay is an adaptation of a performance piece—an autobiographically informed performance similar to the format of Arsenault’s *Diaries*—and both use metaphor and extraordinary identifications to convey their experiences of transgender quests. Similar to Stryker (2006b), who states that “I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity” (246), Arsenault is inspired by spells, magic, and myth. Stryker writes that “words like ‘creature,’ ‘monster,’ and ‘unnatural,’ need to be reclaimed by transgender people. By embracing and accepting them, even piling them on top of another, we may dispel their ability to harm us” (246). Here, she articulates a reclaiming of potentially

pejorative identities, a theme which is certainly picked up in Arsenault’s work. Instead of shying away from icons of fakeness, such as mannequins and Barbie, Arsenault invites the comparison, and incorporates these icons into her work. A transgender theory of monstrosity, as articulated by Stryker, fits with Arsenault’s (2012a) self-portraiture, as she explores identification with various creatures and personae:

In my life, I have been a boy, a girl, a man, a woman, an academic, a drag queen, a theatre director, a teacher, a reality TV star, a stripper, a whore, a nightlife hostess, a mistress, a storyteller, an aesthete, an art object, a cyborg, an icon, Barbie, an actress, a faery, a witch, and an ascetic. I have also noted that often it is the identities that society despises and degrades that give me the most pleasure and excite my sexuality—the phallic woman, the transsexual, the whore, the woman as object, the woman as property, the woman as art. (68)

The trans person who does not pass may not be able to reconcile themselves neatly into the socially mandated binary labels of man or woman. Just as Stryker advocates for a reclaiming of certain words, the aforementioned litany exemplifies Arsenault’s multifaceted identity. The length and diversity of the list illustrates not only a history of transformation as part of her changing genders, but a comfort with multiplicity and ambiguity. Reading them through the lens of Stryker’s idea of identifications with the monstrous and unnatural, these identifications can be seen as productive strategies—practical and political—in terms of claiming a transgender identity that is based on identifying with more figures, rather than fewer, and with identities that are often maligned. Trans theorist and performance artist Micha Cárdenas’s (2012) notion of the “transreal,” a way of understanding multiple and simultaneous realities as a political and artistic medium, is a useful lens for thinking about how Arsenault embodies different personae and embraces different notions of reality. Cárdenas explains that

the transreal emerged as a response to the daily experience, with varying degrees of violence or banality, of being told that as a queer femme transgender woman my gender was not real, my sexuality was not real and even my body was not real... The transreal is the embracing of an identi-

ty that is a combination of my 'real' body that I was born with and my personal history with another identity that I have written in flesh, in words, in pixels, in 3-dimensional models and across multiple strata of communications technologies. (29-30)

Arsenault's identification with many personae, comfort with embracing artificiality, and invitation for readers/viewers to understand her as a cyborg figure relates to this notion of the transreal. In a world where trans bodies—particularly trans women's bodies—are frequently subjected to transmisogyny and denigrated as fake, Arsenault has welcomed and thus subverted this kind of attack. This fluid, manifold self-concept is not only a source of artistic inspiration, but it is also a strategy of survival, a means to endure the inherently painful process of change and growth, generally, and changing gender in society, specifically.

Arsenault's identification with Barbie, explored in her writing and self-portraiture, is particularly full of complexities. A mascot for literal plasticity, Barbie is a universal symbol of the commoditization of white femininity and proliferation of idealized beauty. As Mary F. Rogers (1999) points out, Barbie is "[a] fantastic icon [which] contributes to a culture by exaggerating what is actual, possible, or conceivable" (3). The "unattainable" beauty posited by the Barbie doll is undermined by Arsenault's attainment of these unrealistic proportions. Her other solo show, *I was Barbie* (cited in Handley 2010) emphasizes the already visible resemblance to the doll in terms of hyperfeminine beauty and plasticity. Another motif of feminine fakeness or unrealness that she employs is the mannequin, present in *The Silicone Diaries* and in much of her portraiture. In several self-portraits, some of which are featured in *TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault* (Rudakoff 2012), she poses lifeless and doll-like among mannequins. The effect of this is to highlight her own uncanny resemblance, in terms of physical proportions and styling, to a female mannequin. Arsenault's surgically altered, enhanced, and unnatural face and body have served to inspire further art practice, portraiture, and costuming, such as when she is styled to resemble highly constructed or unusually embodied figures.

Arsenault's use of plastic surgery and deep incorporation of her own body into art is completely intertwined with her gender transition and pursuit of hyperfemininity. I read Stryker's monster, Haraway's cy-

borg, and Stone's call to reclaim erased history through Arsenault's surgical shape-shifting. Like Arsenault's art through surgery, French artist ORLAN's work grapples with beauty, femininity, and the female body and has involved plastic surgery as performance art. Alistair Newton (2012) examines Arsenault's use of her body as the medium through a comparison to ORLAN. He writes: "By way of surgical interventions, both Arsenault and ORLAN interrogate and blaspheme against the Western beauty myth by ironically engaging with its purpose, but also by acknowledging its impossibility as an ideal state in a natural world" (111). Both artists have used surgery to change their appearances for different reasons, but neither has tried to hide their surgical constructedness or appear "natural."

Among many notable performances and installations that engage with themes of femininity, beauty, and female icons, ORLAN did a series of surgical performances in which her face was reconstructed to resemble aspects of different beautiful women from art history such as DaVinci's the Mona Lisa and Botticelli's Venus (Prosser 1998, 61). As Peg Zeglin Brand (2013) argues, ORLAN was not attempting to become more beautiful by transposing these supposedly beautiful features from mythology and art onto her face (311). Kathy Davis (1997) concurs. She explains that, "[a]lthough she draws upon mythical beauties for inspiration, she does not want to resemble them. Nor is she particularly concerned with being beautiful. Her operations have left her considerably less beautiful than she was before" (29). While, ostensibly, aspects of Arsenault's self-portraiture and art practice arose as a result of an initial engagement with cosmetic surgery to facilitate her physical feminization, ORLAN's deployment of surgery emerged through experimental art practice and a focus on the female body and non-conformity. As Jay Prosser (1998) documents, ORLAN responded to a question about the nature of her transformation, stating "that she felt like 'une transsexual femme-à-femme'" (62). Clearly, ORLAN offers a view of cross-body feminine transformation that is not about changing core gender, from one binary to the other, but about changing the representation of gendered embodiment. Arsenault's cosmetic surgery exceeds the basic aspects of gender re-assignment. Like ORLAN, her conscious use of extreme or excessive cosmetic surgery explores the relationship of feminine embodiment with legacies of beauty.

As a result of Arsenault's frequent association with cyborgs, a particularly fruitful theoretical text for understanding Arsenault is Donna Haraway's (2006) "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." I read Arsenault as a cyborg, due to the intervention of surgery, silicone, and hormones into the creation of her body and self. But beyond the superficial connections between Arsenault and cyborgs, insofar as she, in her own mind, has fake, plastic parts, Arsenault corresponds with Haraway's cyborg because she traverses and transgresses boundaries and binaries: male-female, real-fake. Haraway claims that "there is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices" (591). Stryker (2006a) adds to this idea and, using Butler's language, states that "[a] woman, performatively speaking, is one who says she is—and who then does what woman means" (10). Now, as a social and material woman, Arsenault's (2012a) surgeries have "created an external feminine gender to match [her] own internal sense of being" (65). Arsenault was assigned the gender male, but is a woman insofar as she *does* what woman *means*.

There is overlap between transgender and cyborg theories and Arsenault's art practice can be read through both lenses. Just as the trans person traverses boundaries of gender and sex identifications, the cyborg transverses boundaries of human and machine, flesh and silicone. Additionally, the cyborg person is mediated by technology, perhaps surgically, and the trans person who is surgically altered through gender reassignment is also mediated by technology. The cyborg is a crucial identification, as Arsenault exploits, rather than conceals, scenes and poses that illuminate the role of technology in shaping her body and gender change.

Arsenault's work meets at a complex ideological intersection; it works within the ancient narrative of aestheticization and objectification of the female form as well as, simultaneously, the narrative that vilifies the human impulse to be recognized as beautiful and attractive in society. Accepting and embracing this desire, Arsenault's work finds meaning and profundity in the "shallow"—in appearances, skin, and "fake" cosmetic additions to the "real" body—hair extensions/wigs, fake

eyelashes, make-up, clothing, collagen and silicone implants and injections. Arsenault has never minimized or downplayed her surgical and hormonal constructedness; rather, she emphasizes her unreal and "plastic" beauty in her art and portraiture. Her play *The Silicone Diaries*, specifically, highlights the centrality of silicone as a ubiquitous signifier of plastic surgery in its title. Her striving for an idealized beauty can be judged as narcissistic, yet Arsenault is comfortable and confident in this self-focus. A mythological narrative finds its way into Arsenault's (2012a) understanding of the inherent narcissism of her work, as she explains: "The work is narcissistic in that I stare at my reflection and an artistic work blossoms within this gaze. In this way, the Narcissus myth is rewritten as productive and communicative" (65). Just as superficiality is reworked and reclaimed for the generation of meaning and self-awareness, narcissism is reconstituted as having creative and dynamic potential.

While Arsenault has stated that her work is not necessarily designed to be inspirational or empowering to others, I see Arsenault's art practice as opening up new and radical ways of finding meaning and profundity in that which has been viewed as shallow, meaningless, or apolitical. In her "Manifesto" (2012a), she writes of her art as "the creation and recreation of the Self understood and presented without shame...not through the minimizing gaze of...a society that attempts to convince marginalized people that they are weak, sick, freaks, victims, unworthy" (69). Here especially, Arsenault's work can be read as an activist's response to Sandy Stone and Susan Stryker's calls to action and the development of a transgender politics.

While transgender experience can sometimes be viewed in a limiting manner, Arsenault shows how there are many different ways being transgender intersects with gender performance. Not all trans people desire to gain access to gender reassignment or to live in society unrecognized as trans. Arsenault's particular experience involves pursuing femininity beyond a typical gender transition, beyond what many assigned-female-at-birth women ever seek to achieve. While her pursuit of feminine beauty is queered because of her transgender status and self-conscious, embodied art practice, her attraction to a certain appearance, and how that appearance would affect one's experience in the world, may not be that different than what brought Pamela Anderson, a

cisgender woman, to plastic surgery and the curation of a certain image.

In this examination of Nina Arsenault's stage play *The Silicone Diaries*, her "Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture," and the use of her corporeal body as a medium for art, I have shown how Arsenault pursues her authentic self—a hyperfeminine gender identity and expression—through, seemingly paradoxically, invoking artificiality. I argue that Arsenault has worked not only to become a woman, but has also created a conceptual space for a transgender identity—not just "passing," but instead going far beyond looking "normal." As Judith Butler posits parody, such as drag, as revealing how gender performance is imitative of socially sanctioned ideas, rather than an original truth, so Arsenault can be read, to paraphrase her own words, as a caricature of a caricature of a woman. Sandy Stone's call for transsexuals to reclaim erased history is foregrounded in *The Silicone Diaries* and Arsenault's life—the play rests on the value of communicating and sharing the transgender quest. This quest can also be read through Susan Stryker's invocation of Frankenstein's monster as a metaphor for transgender rage, as Arsenault recuperates maligned and monstrous identities as part of her layers of self. One such identity, frequently examined in relation to Arsenault, is Donna Haraway's (2006) cyborg, "a condensed image of both imagination and material reality" (104). But while Haraway famously ends her essay with the statement, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (116), Arsenault combines these figures, showing cyborg and goddess to not be either/or identities, but perhaps mutually constituted facets of a transgender odyssey.

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