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"I don't just want to look female; I want to be beautiful": theorizing passing as labor in the transition vlogs of Gigi Gorgeous and Natalie Wynn

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ABSTRACT

In September 2018, transgender YouTuber Natalie Wynn (aka ContraPoints) released "The Aesthetic," a video in which she explored the social pressure placed on trans women in the public eye to pass. Taking this video as a starting point, I analyze trans beauty influencer Gigi Gorgeous's early transition vlogs in which she details her experiences with cosmetic surgery. The narrative Gorgeous constructs in these vlogs, I contend, employs transnormative discourses that center an internal struggle with gender dysphoria. However, I complicate this narrative by placing Gorgeous's vlogs in conversation with Wynn's vlog where she recounts her own experience with facial feminization surgery, pointing to the external pressures she faces to conform to beauty norms. I contextualize these narratives within the literatures on aesthetic labor and social media influencers to explore how Gorgeous and Wynn's desires to pass and to be beautiful are informed by their status as highly visible trans women working in the cultural industries. By theorizing passing as labor, I argue that beautification practices such as cosmetic surgery are investments that trans women in the public eye make in the hopes of attaining social and economic capital.

Introduction

Natalie Wynn first gained public attention for her pre-transition videos in which she argued against alt-right ideologies.[1] Since beginning her transition in 2017, however, she has increasingly discussed transgender-related topics in her videos. Wynn has also developed a theatrical style of video production which features a cast of recurring characters, all played by Wynn in costume, who often engage in dialogue. In "The Aesthetic," for example, we see Tabby, a trans, anti-fascist "cat-girl," and Dr. Abigail Cockbane, a trans-exclusionary radical feminist, debating trans politics on a fictional television program called "The Freedom Report" (Natalie Wynn 2018). After Dr. Cockbane calls her "sir," Tabby threatens to "smash your fucking face" with a baseball bat (2018). This segment parodies a real-life confrontation between trans

journalist Zoey Tur and former *Breitbart* editor Ben Shapiro on an episode of *Dr. Drew on Call*: after being consistently referred to as male by Shapiro, Tur threatened, "You cut that out now, or you'll go home in an ambulance" (HLN 2015).

Following her appearance on "The Freedom Report," Tabby converses with Justine, a politically moderate trans woman who "mostly pass[es]" (2018). Although the conversation begins by exploring the role of aesthetics in modern-day politics, it quickly turns to questions about the visibility of trans women and acceptable trans female embodiment. When Tabby argues that she was morally right to defend her womanhood by threatening Dr. Cockbane, Justine counters: "What does that even mean? It was worse than morally wrong. It was aesthetically wrong. It was unfeminine" (2018). Instead, Justine argues, trans women in the public eye must embody "proper" femininity by acting like respectable women, for example, by suppressing any hostility they feel even when they are insulted. Moreover, Justine continues, trans women must also *pass* as proper women; that is, they must *look like* cisgender women (Thomas J Billard 2019). Tabby and Justine's argument over what constitutes acceptable trans womanhood, then, ultimately hinges not just on Tabby's unruly behavior, but also on her refusal to pass.

Using Justine's arguments in "The Aesthetic" as a starting point, in this article I interrogate narratives surrounding passing and beauty in the video blogs (vlogs) of trans social media influencer Gigi Gorgeous.[2] Like Wynn, Gorgeous first began publishing videos on YouTube pre-transition before publicly coming out in 2013, eventually becoming the most followed openly trans beauty influencer until Nikkie de Jager (aka NikkieTutorials) publicly came out as a trans woman in January 2020.[3] Paying attention to Gorgeous's early transition vlogs in which she discusses her experiences with cosmetic surgeries, I explore how Gorgeous characterizes these procedures as both horrific and miraculous. Although Gorgeous does not expressly name her desire to pass in these vlogs, I argue that she employs transnormative tropes in these vlogs, constructing passing as a way to alleviate her gender dysphoria by externalizing her interior femininity. This narrative ultimately understands trans female subjectivity as primarily aesthetic—to *be* a woman is to *pass as* a woman, and in turn, to pass as a woman is *to look like* a respectable (cisgender, white, middle-class) woman.

I then put Gorgeous's surgery vlogs in conversation with Wynn's (2019) vlog, "Beauty," where she discusses her decision to have facial feminization surgery (FFS) and grapples with her desire not just to pass, but to be beautiful as well. This video serves not only as an exploration of Wynn's personal experience, but also in part as a response to other trans women social media influencers, including Gorgeous, whom Wynn in fact names in the video. While Wynn echoes many of the same sentiments as Gorgeous about passing and being beautiful as ways to alleviate gender dysphoria, she complicates this narrative by drawing attention to the pressures she receives as a highly visible trans woman to conform to beauty norms. These pressures come both from her own feelings of inferiority in comparison to other, more beautiful influencers, as well as from her viewers, who constantly dissect her appearance. Thus, she claims, her psychic desire to be beautiful becomes inseparable from both internal and external pressures placed on her to pass and to be beautiful.

Finally, I problematize both women's narratives through the lens of labor, drawing on literature about aesthetic labor in the cultural industries. In this context, how well female social media influencers conform to beauty norms directly impacts their career outcomes.

Thus, I argue, passing for trans women influencers is not solely about a desire to look like a woman or about fitting into narrow ideals of beauty, but is also about their ability to succeed in "an online attention economy in which page views and clicks are synonymous with success and thus online status" (Alice E. Marwick 2015, 157). Read this way, transition-related cosmetic procedures not only require huge investments of time, money, and labor, but are themselves investments that trans women in the cultural industries make to amass both economic capital, such as more lucrative career opportunities, as well as social capital, such greater acceptance in mainstream society (Pierre Bourdieu 1986).

Aesthetic labor, surveillance, and social media

The concept of "aesthetic labor" originates in research on labor and employment, referring to how workers are expected to look a certain way as a job requirement (Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson 2001). Feminist interventions have shown how women are disproportionately expected to maintain their physical attractiveness both in and out of the workplace. Angela McRobbie (2004, 2010), for instance, points to increasingly uneasy distinctions between women's paid and unpaid labor within a neoliberal, post-feminist economy wherein women's empowerment is gained through individual entrepreneurial success, rather than through political struggles for gender equality. Within this neoliberal feminist context, "the 'beauty imperative' has gained ever more traction with arguments that (hetero)sexual attractiveness is the ultimate measure of success for a woman" (Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff 2017, 25–26). If individual economic success is a marker of women's empowerment, then, the attainment of beauty becomes the ultimate indicator of that success. Samantha Kwan and Mary Nell Trautner (2009) use the related term "beauty work" to refer to "work that individuals perform on themselves to elicit certain benefits within a specific social hierarchy" (50). As Kwan and Trautner argue, women are "conditioned to think about their appearance [. . .] in pursuit of achieving the perfection associated with the hegemonic beauty ideal," underscoring how women invest in their physical beauty in the hopes of attaining social, not just economic, capital (2009, 55).

Neoliberal media cultures and digital technologies of surveillance further train women to discipline each other's bodies as well as their own to ensure that they conform to beauty norms. Literature on the usage of body scanners by the US Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has explored how discourses of security and safety have scaffolded technologies that intimately surveil travelers' bodies and police bodies deemed anomalous, including Black, Brown, and trans bodies (Toby Beauchamp 2019; Sasha Costanza-Chock 2020). As Minh-Ha T. Pham (2015) shows, these TSA scanners share technologies with body scanners used in the fashion retail industry, where they ostensibly help shoppers find their correct size but ultimately reproduce a normative "fashionable" body based on white women's proportions. Alison Winch (2015) proposes the term "gynaeopticon," fashioned after the concept of the panopticon, to explore how digital platforms maintained by brands such as Dove encourage women to engage in lateral surveillance of one another. Winch argues that the male gaze has been replaced by a "girlfriend gaze," which trains women to control and discipline each other's bodies (2015, 233). Ana Sofia Elias and Rosalind Gill (2018) use the similar term "surveillant sisterhood" to explore how beauty apps utilize the language of female friendship while

simultaneously teaching women to surveil their own appearance. The "Am I Pretty?" genre of YouTube videos, in which young female vloggers ask their viewers how attractive they are, further demonstrates not only how young girls learn to associate self-worth with physical attractiveness, but also how social media acts as a disciplining technology by allowing anonymous viewers to objectify these girls and criticize their appearance (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2014; Amanda Rossie 2015).

The omnipresence of social media raises further questions about neoliberal labor, digital technologies, and surveillance. Research on social media influencers explores how the distinction between formal workplace and personal life has collapsed even further in the digital sphere: influencers are expected to share intimate details of their private life in order to maintain affective relationships with their followers (Crystal Abidin 2015; Florencia García-Rapp 2017). Female influencers are especially expected to engage in aesthetic and affective labor to attract viewers by portraying themselves as both authentic and relatable to their viewers, all while perfectly maintaining their appearance. These forms of immaterial labor coalesce in what Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) terms "aspirational labor," or "a mode of (mostly) uncompensated, independent work that is propelled by the much-venerated ideal of *getting paid to do what you love*" (4, emphasis original). In short, the success of a few influencers has become aspirational for many young women, who are then willing to invest huge amounts of labor and money into learning video production skills and establishing their online presence, typically for minimal, if any, compensation.

The emergence of what Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2019) call the social media entertainment industry has crystallized the social media influencer as a career. As influencers gain increasing mainstream popularity, rivaling even the popularity of Hollywood stars, structures have been established that simultaneously compensate influencers while also maintaining the economic power of legacy media industries. Female influencers, many of whom are pigeonholed as fashion and beauty influencers, often benefit from brand sponsorships, where they are paid by major fashion and beauty corporations to promote products (Brooke Erin Duffy 2017). Influencers must typically meet a minimum subscriber count to qualify for sponsorship, however, meaning that those who are able to amass large followings are then rewarded with financial earnings as well as greater legitimation in the cultural industries. Other compensation models, such as Google AdSense, which pays YouTube producers based on numbers of views in exchange for placing advertisements on their videos, and Patreon, which allows "patrons" to donate money directly to independent cultural producers, also rely in part on influencers' ability to attract and maintain large audiences (Cunningham and Craig 2019; Lee Hair 2021).

If "managing the body is [. . .] the means by which women acquire and display their cultural capital" (Alison Winch 2015, 233), then beauty can be considered a form of currency that women use to acquire that capital. Social media reinforces these beauty ideals on women, providing technologies that allow women to surveil each other and themselves to ensure that they conform. Moreover, female influencers are especially expected to perform aesthetic and affective labor to build and maintain large subscriber counts, which directly translate into increased economic capital (e.g., wages) and social capital (e.g., entrée into the cultural industries). Female social media influencers are thus incentivized to invest in their beauty and are rewarded for conforming to beauty norms.

However, much of this literature on labor and social media centers on cis female influencers; while trans women are often held up to similar standards, their experiences are impacted by the additional layer of transnormativity.

Passing and transnormativity in the media

As Katrina Roen (2002) notes, much political debate about passing within trans activist circles has focused on the morality of passing and its centrality in trans experience. Roen describes two major political camps that have emerged in these debates: a "liberal transsexual politics" that prioritizes passing insomuch as it grants trans people the right to have gender-confirming surgeries and to be legally recognized as their correct gender, and a more radical "transgender politics" wherein passing is eschewed in favor of destabilizing the gender binary (2002, 502). As an example of this radical rejection of passing, Roen cites trans activist Kate Bornstein (1994), who writes: "Most passing is undertaken in response to the cultural imperative to be one gender or the other" (125), suggesting that trans people only strive to pass because of social pressures placed on them.

These political debates, however, elide the fact that for many trans people, passing helps to ensure their physical safety and emotional wellbeing. Reflecting on his experience of living as a Black trans man in West Philadelphia, C. Riley Snorton (2009) writes that "passing is not simply a question of how one is read but includes an agential power of affirming one's own reading of self" (87). For Snorton, and indeed for many trans people, passing acts as a psychic affirmation of one's identity in a world that is hostile towards him: "Passing, like hope, keeps me sane, or at least helps me cope in an environment that does not produce the identity I psychically inhabit" (2009, 89). On the flip side of passing, Snorton describes the violence of being clocked, that is, being recognized as trans, which represents not just a threat to his psychic sense of self, but also a threat to his physical safety. The 2020 attack on Instagram influencers Eden the Doll, Jaslene Whiterose, and Joslyn Flawless serves as a harrowing reminder that even trans women who conform to hyperfeminine gender presentation online continue to risk being clocked and violently attacked when they fail to pass offline.

While passing certainly helps to ensure trans people's safety, scholars have coined the term "transnormativity" to describe sets of social scripts that structure trans experience, wherein passing becomes central to trans life. Austin H. Johnson (2016) defines transnormativity as a primarily medical model whereby trans people are expected to conform to a predetermined process of legitimation, starting with a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, followed by medical interventions such as hormone replacement therapy and gender-affirming surgeries such as bottom surgery (e.g., vaginoplasty). Passing then works in tandem with gender-affirming surgeries primarily to alleviate gender dysphoria and to gain legal recognition as one's gender. However, Sandy Stone (1992) writes that academic gender dysphoria clinics in the 1960s "took on the additional role of 'grooming school' or 'charm school' because [...] the men who presented as wanting to be women [*sic*] did not always 'behave like' women" (160), demonstrating how medical transnormativity is also concerned with producing socially acceptable trans women.

Julian Kevon Glover (2016) further elucidates how passing relies on raced and classed constructions of respectable womanhood, describing transnormativity as "a process shaped by adherence to respectability politics, heteronormative standards and class privilege" (340). This definition expands on Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1993) articulation of the "politics of respectability," which she uses to describe how Black Baptist women at the turn of the twentieth century decried "disrespectable" aspects of their communities, in part to appeal to white society. Thus, Glover's definition of transnormativity underscores the narrow ideal of respectable womanhood that Black trans women celebrities, such as actor Laverne Cox and writer Janet Mock, must conform to if they are to be legible to cis, white audiences, granting them greater access to economic capital (maintaining their careers) and social capital (being accepted in Hollywood). Emily Skidmore's (2011) study of representations of trans women in the mid-century US press similarly centers the intersections of race, gender, and class. Using Christine Jorgensen, a former marine who made headlines for being one of the first American celebrities to undergo gender reassignment surgery, as the ultimate example, Skidmore argues that trans women's acceptance in mainstream media hinged on how well they conformed to white, heteronormative, middle-class womanhood.

As Eric Plemons (2017) argues, the increasing popularity of FFS over bottom surgery for trans women marks a shift in conceptions of gender that prioritize aesthetic features that are plainly visible, such as facial features, over private parts.[4] Plemons traces how Dr. Douglas Ousterhout, the surgeon credited with pioneering FFS, produced a medicalized standard of how trans women should look. Ousterhout's methods was informed by scientific racism, basing the "model" female face on a "distinctly northern European skull" Plemons (2017, 27). Cressida J. Heyes (2009) argues that cosmetic procedures such as Asian double eyelid surgery are primarily concerned with "correcting" features that deviate from white beauty standards; however, Asian women who have eyelid surgery are also pathologized in Western media under the assumption that they are trying to disavow their race (Sharon Heijin Lee 2016). Similarly, not only are trans women pressured to have FFS so that they can conform to normative white, cis female beauty, they are simultaneously pathologized under the assumption that they have internalized transphobic and sexist beliefs about how women are supposed to look and act.

Note, however, that Glover, Johnson, and Skidmore all discuss transnormativity as it is produced through legacy and mainstream media representations of trans people, such as in film, on television, and in the press. These case studies demonstrate how cis-produced, mainstream media representations homogenize trans experiences to make them more legible to cis-majority audiences. Emerging literature on independent trans media producers complicates this model of production and reception by asking how trans people produce their own self-image when given access to video production tools and sharing platforms such as YouTube (Thomas J Billard and Erique Zhang 2022; Tobias Raun 2016). Jordan F. Miller (2019) argues that some trans vloggers use their platform to present alternative narratives, countering mainstream depictions of transgender experience, while others reproduce transnormative discourses by "overemphasiz[ing] the physical aspects of their medical transition" and by centering gender dysphoria (826). Moreover, it is increasingly through digital platforms that trans people build community and learn about trans experiences (Oliver L. Haimson et al. 2021). Recurring debates in trans social media communities about Wynn's videos demonstrate how public knowledge about

trans identity is chiefly produced online. These debates make clear the stakes of digital representation for trans people, who fear that Wynn's videos reproduce harmful stereotypes about trans identity and normalize a singular trans experience to cis audiences.

Synthesizing the literature on aesthetic labor, social media and surveillance, and transnormativity, I focus on Gorgeous and Wynn's cosmetic surgery vlogs to interrogate how trans women self-produce narratives about beauty, gender dysphoria, and passing. These vlogs exemplify the tension between presenting diverse trans narratives and reproducing transnormative discourses in order to make trans identity legible to cis audiences. Moreover, I contextualize these vlogs within the social media entertainment industry to argue that trans female influencers such as Gorgeous and Wynn are especially incentivized to pass and to conform to narrow ideals of female beauty to succeed in their careers. For these women, then, striving to pass and to be beautiful is not just a way to alleviate their gender dysphoria, but also becomes a form of aesthetic labor that they perform to attain economic and social capital.

Methods

Although she first started posting videos on YouTube in 2008, Gigi Gorgeous's public coming out as a trans woman in 2013 solidified her status as one of the most prominent trans women influencers, making her career a prime case study. To select videos for analysis, I first searched Gorgeous's YouTube channel for vlogs that focused on discussing her trans experience. After selecting an initial set of 24 videos, I pulled YouTube's automatically generated captions and edited them to ensure that I had accurate transcriptions. I then performed thematic analysis to identify emergent themes (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006). After an initial round of open coding, I decided to narrow my analysis on four videos for this article that were uploaded in 2014, detailing her tracheal shave (Gorgeous 2014a), FFS (Gorgeous 2014b), and breast augmentation (Gorgeous 2014c, 2014d). I performed additional coding on these four transcripts to identify recurring themes. Two major themes that emerged included references to the emotional and physical pain caused by surgery and descriptions of surgery as miraculous and spiritual. Additionally, I found that Gorgeous centered her internal struggles with gender dysphoria to justify her decisions to have cosmetic surgery.

I then followed the same steps to select, transcribe, and analyze Wynn's videos. Because Wynn has produced far fewer videos than Gorgeous, and because her videos tend to be longer and written in denser, more complicated language (whereas Gorgeous's vlogs are largely unscripted and spoken in stream-of-consciousness), I selected an initial set of six videos that focused on trans topics for analysis. Of these, I found that the video "Beauty" (Natalie Wynn 2019) spoke the most directly about Wynn's personal experience with cosmetic surgery, so I focused additional analysis on this video. While Gorgeous's vlogs focused on her internal struggles with gender dysphoria, I found that "Beauty" complicated this narrative by bringing attention to external pressures that motivate her to conform to beauty norms, such as the responses she receives from her viewers.

Placing these videos in conversation, I show how Gorgeous and Wynn's respective narratives about beauty and cosmetic surgery reveal how both internal feelings of gender dysphoria and external pressure from viewers inform how trans women in the public eye

represent themselves on social media. However, I argue, both narratives employ trans-normative discourses about gender dysphoria and acceptable trans womanhood, reducing the desire to pass either to an internal discordance between one's identity and one's appearance or to social expectations that trans women look a certain way. While both factors undoubtedly hold true, that Gorgeous and Wynn center these narratives obscures how the labor demands of the social media entertainment industry compel influencers to embody certain aesthetic ideals. By reading passing and being beautiful as forms of aesthetic labor, I argue that trans women working in the cultural industries engage in body work not just to manage their gender dysphoria or because they are pressured to do so, but also to invest in their career outcomes so that they can amass economic and social capital.

"It was an emotional and kind of spiritual transformation": externalizing the internal

In her cosmetic surgery vlogs, Gorgeous frequently alternates between both violent and spiritual metaphors to describe her surgery, showing how cosmetic surgery "can open up the possibility to renegotiate her relationship to her body and construct a different sense of self," allowing Gorgeous to become what Kathy Davis (1995) describes as an "embodied subject" (113–14). However, by centering her struggles with gender dysphoria, Gorgeous also reinforces the "wrong body" narrative common in portrayals of trans experience, utilizing transnormative discourses about "trans authenticity as dependent upon diagnosis and subsequent medical intervention" (Johnson 2016, 469). Thus, while Gorgeous constructs cosmetic surgery as a miraculous transformation that allows her to more fully embody her identity as a woman, she does so by reproducing ideas about how trans women are supposed to look.

Throughout her surgery vlogs, Gorgeous consistently uses violent metaphors to describe the physical and emotional trauma she endures before, during, and after surgery. For example, she describes her tracheal shave as "the most intense, scary thing I've ever done. I basically lived in a *Saw* trap, pretty much" (2014a), referencing the horror film franchise known for its inventive use of horrific and often fatal torture devices. After waking up from her FFS, she recalls: "All I remember is throbbing pain. [. . .] I was screaming, in agonizing pain, obviously. I couldn't control myself" (2014b). She goes on to explain how this trauma follows her even into her post-surgery recovery period:

> And that's when the real depression sank in for real. [. . .] There's nothing that can brace you for looking in the mirror and seeing someone you don't recognize. [. . .] And I wasn't ready for it at all. It really does change you as a person, going through something like that. (2014b)

By dramatizing the physical and emotional trauma of cosmetic surgery through such violent imagery, Gorgeous makes clear how much pain she endures, to the point where she warns viewers: "Definitely do not [get FFS]! [It's] horrible! I hated it!" (2014b). However, despite her own warnings, she has continued to have various cosmetic procedures at least through 2021, raising the question of why she knowingly and repeatedly puts herself through such traumatic ordeals.

Gorgeous does in fact address her motivation for having surgery, centering her struggles with gender dysphoria to contrast her reasons with what she presumes motivates cis women to have cosmetic surgery:

> I just wanted to say, you know, I feel like my plastic surgery experience was a little different than the average plastic surgery experience [i.e., cis women's experiences], because as you guys know, I am going through a transition. I definitely wanted my exterior to mirror my femininity and what I felt for myself, and not everyone who goes through plastic surgery has that battle within themselves. Sometimes it's just—well, most of the time, I should say—it's just, I want to look prettier, or my nose bothers me. Like for example, a girl that was bullied in elementary school or high school for her nose and when she gets older, she saved up the money and decided to go through with the rhinoplasty—which I also had done—but it is very different for someone like that, because I mean, she may have emotional ties, but it's not conflicting her gender. People don't view her as male. (2014b)

While she acknowledges that cis women can be motivated by deeply personal traumas, such as being bullied because of their appearance, Gorgeous asserts that most cis cosmetic surgery is essentially "a vanity thing" (2014d). In doing so, Gorgeous employs gendered discourses about cosmetic surgery and women's presumed vanity to distance herself from cis women, even while she is undergoing surgery to better embody her own womanhood. Moreover, if vanity is a sin, then Gorgeous is also disavowing herself of sin by claiming a more virtuous reason for having cosmetic surgery, that is, because she is experiencing a "battle" between who she is and what her body looks like.

This metaphor of virtue continues as Gorgeous stresses the transformative aspect of cosmetic surgery and the psychic pleasure she gains from seeing her body transformed. Speaking about her breast augmentation, she says:

> . . . This is just one of the surgeries that God had in the cards for me. So for me, it wasn't only a physical transformation. It was also an emotional and kind of spiritual transformation, getting these breasts. (2014c)

> Breast augmentation changed my life for the better, you know. For a transgender woman like me to get breasts is—it is literally, like, a miracle. (2014d)

This discourse further differentiates Gorgeous's motivations for undergoing surgery—to alleviate her gender dysphoria and to better embody the woman she feels herself to be—from cis women's supposed vanity. By constructing surgery as a "miracle," Gorgeous suggests that the physical and emotional pain is bearable because it allows her to transform not just her body, but her spirit as well; we see how "cosmetic surgery is an intervention in identity" (Davis 1995, 113), transmuting Gorgeous's physical body into one that accords with her spiritual identity.

It is important here to note that these videos were released in 2014, the year that *TIME* magazine referred to as the "transgender tipping point" (Katy Steinmetz 2014), describing a period during which openly trans celebrities such as Laverne Cox, Carmen Carrera, and Janet Mock, as well as critically acclaimed television series which featured trans characters such as *Orange Is the New Black* and *Transparent*, gained increased mainstream attention. Meanwhile, the case of Monica Jones, a Black trans woman who was deported back to the US when she traveled to Australia in 2014 because of a previous arrest for "walking while trans," saliently demonstrates how international security apparatuses were increasingly surveilling trans women's bodies (Mia Fischer 2019).[5] Although Gorgeous had already

been active on YouTube for over five years before beginning her transition, her public coming out opened her up to increased public scrutiny, garnering both positive and negative reactions from viewers (Cunningham and Craig 2019, 218–19).

These vlogs, then, likely served both to explain Gorgeous's own experiences and to help normalize trans identity during a period when the public visibility of trans celebrities was increasingly imbricated with the surveillance and policing of trans bodies. By utilizing transnormative discourses about gender dysphoria and the "wrong body" narrative, Gorgeous simplifies her complex experience in terms that her cis audiences will better understand. Moreover, the use of spiritual metaphors both reflects Gorgeous's religious background while possibly preempting attacks from religious bigots accusing her of being a sinner. At the same time, however, these narratives obscure how trans women in the limelight face immense pressure to conform to beauty standards, informing not only how they present themselves to the public but also how they understand their own beauty.

"The vicious things they say about me in the tabloids": internalizing the external

Like Gorgeous, Natalie Wynn also transitioned publicly after having already gained an audience on YouTube. Wynn first garnered public attention for her channel, ContraPoints, which she began in 2016; she publicly came out as trans in 2017. Since then, her videos have increasingly discussed trans topics and her trans experience. In her vlog "Beauty" (Wynn 2019), Wynn recounts her experience with FFS and discusses her relationship with beauty and passing. Breaking from the more theatrical aesthetic that she had been become known for, "Beauty" is presented in a more typical vlog format; Wynn begins by introducing herself, "Hey guys, it's Natalie, welcome back to my channel" (2019), lampooning the exact greeting that Gorgeous uses to open many of her videos ("Hey guys, it's Gigi, welcome back to my channel").

This video, in fact, makes multiple references to Gorgeous and other influencers, making it clear that Wynn is in part responding to influencer culture. She states, for example, that she chose to keep her surgeries private instead of broadcasting her experience to her viewers like "the standard YouTube t-girl [i.e., trans girl]" (2019), resisting the expectation that influencers share every detail of their lives with their audiences. Wynn further resists the narratives about gender dysphoria that Gorgeous and other trans women repeat in their vlogs:

> Usually trans people say that surgeries like facial feminization, top surgery, genital reassignment, and so on serve the sole purpose of alleviating dysphoria, this discomfort that we feel with the mismatch between our bodies and our gender identities. So what I'm supposed to say is that my surgery was a medically necessary reconstructive procedure needed to make my testosterone-weathered facial bones match the 5'2" happy, baby, bouncy bio-girl I truly am inside, thereby alleviating my dysphoria, helping me safely blend into society and preventing a five-alarm psychiatric meltdown. And there is definitely truth to that. [. . .] But hypothetically speaking, I think the reality might not be quite so simple. (2019)

While Wynn acknowledges that there is some truth to this narrative, she asserts that it is a script that she is expected to follow because of transnormative beliefs about trans people, gender dysphoria, and transition-related surgeries. By using an absurd example—

that she believes FFS alone can help her to pass as a "5'2" happy, baby, bouncy bio-girl"—she challenges the conventional narrative that transition-related surgeries are simply about matching one's internal sense of self.

Rather, Wynn draws attention to how the labor of being a social media influencer has negatively impacted her self-esteem, motivating her to invest in cosmetic surgery. This labor, as she describes it, entails "spend[ing] upwards of 60 hours a month staring at [her] own face on a screen" (2019), training her to constantly surveil herself. Access to digital technologies such as Facetune, a mobile app that allows users to easily retouch their selfies, has further conditioned her not just to look at herself, but also to identify and correct her flaws: "I've noticed that when I'm in the habit of editing my flaws out of pictures, when I look at an unedited picture of myself [...] my eyes go straight to the flaws" (2019). We see here how aspirational labor and digital technologies of surveillance intersect, causing Wynn to obsess over her own appearance and to aspire to the level of beauty that she sees embodied by other social media influencers.

In addition to these technologies of self-surveillance, Wynn calls attention to how the surveillant gaze of her followers impacts her sense of self. While she is able to dismiss the comments she receives from her presumably cis "haters," she points out that other trans women dissecting her appearance has caused her significant distress:

> I decided not to post about the surgery because I wanted privacy for the recovery and to just take some time to get to feel at home with the results before subjecting myself to the vicious things they say about me in the tabloids. You know, I think I've been kind of psychologically damaged by reading for years the things people say about my appearance online. And I'm not even talking about the haters, like, at this point I can mostly brush them off. But for instance, about a year ago, I was reading through a transgender subreddit, and some trans woman was antagonizing about her appearance, and someone offered her the encouragement, "You know, you can still look hot even if you don't pass. Just look at ContraPoints!" Ugh, like a dagger to the heart! (2019)

At the same time, she explains that when "I tweeted that I wanted to get FFS [...] some trans people responded telling me that I was suffering from internalized transphobia and self-loathing" (2019). Wynn's trans followers, then, serve a disciplining function by policing her gender presentation, both by dissecting her features to "prove" that she does not pass and by pathologizing her desire to have FFS as a sign of internalized transphobia. To borrow Winch's terminology, we might think of this phenomenon as a trans-gynaeopticon wherein trans women surveil and police each other's gender presentation through social media to dictate paradoxical standards of "correct" trans female embodiment.

On the other hand, Wynn admits that she feels psychic pleasure when she is affirmed as beautiful. "What I find addictive is this constant flow of positive comments from other people, even though I know it's mostly flattery" (2019), she says, demonstrating how positive feedback from her fans also influences her emotional well-being. How Wynn responds to both negative and positive feedback calls to mind what Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997) describe as self-objectification: "a critical repercussion of being viewed by others in sexually objectifying ways is that, over time, individuals may be coaxed to internalize an observer's perspective on self" (179). Wynn's vlog suggests that she has internalized how others objectify her to the extent that she requires external validation: "Usually when I look in the mirror, I can't actually tell whether

I'm pretty or not. [. . .] I have to rely on other people's feedback" (2019). Wynn's sense of self, then, seems to be impacted by how others perceive her, motivating her to conform to a standard of beauty that will allow her to continue to receive positive responses from her fans and to avoid negative feedback.

While Gorgeous's narratives focus primarily on externalizing an internal sense of self, seeking cosmetic surgery so that she can better embody the woman she feels herself to be on the inside, Wynn's narrative instead reveals how external influences become internalized. By centering these external forces, Wynn complicates the typical narrative about gender dysphoria, which is generally assumed to arise out of an internal discordance between how one identifies and how one appears. Rather, as Wynn's narrative shows, trans women's feelings of gender dysphoria are often influenced by how others perceive them. This process of self-objectification perhaps most impacts trans women in the public eye, whose images circulate online and are dissected by millions of strangers. Wynn's vlog, then, demonstrates how being a highly visible trans woman can have negative impacts on one's sense of self, influencing her to engage in body work in part to gain social acceptance from others.

Theorizing passing as labor

Read in conversation, Gigi Gorgeous and Natalie Wynn's vlogs reveal the complex relationship between trans women's internal sense of self and external pressures placed on them, showing how these both contribute to their desire to pass and to be beautiful. These narratives, however, both employ transnormative discourses about the centrality of gender dysphoria and medical intervention in trans experience and about the beauty standards that trans women must embody to be accepted in society. While I have no doubt that Gorgeous and Wynn both experience gender dysphoria and that they sought cosmetic surgery in part to alleviate this dysphoria, I also call into question what remains unspoken in their vlogs. Namely, I argue that these narratives obscure how, for trans women in the public eye, passing becomes aesthetic labor, a job requirement for them to maintain their careers and to attain social and economic capital.

After Gorgeous calls cosmetic surgery a "miracle," she turns to this analogy, referencing the television series *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*: "I feel like I literally went from poverty to living in this gorgeous mansion" (2014d). While her earlier use of spiritual metaphors signaled a sense of virtue in her decision to have cosmetic surgery, responding to accusations of vanity, the home makeover metaphor here brings her bodily transformation back to the material realm. This analogy constructs Gorgeous's body as a house—the ultimate form of economic capital—and having cosmetic surgery as analogous to fixing up a rundown house. Both are investments of time, money, and labor intended to increase the economic value of a material asset.

The concept of the body as asset has perhaps most saliently been explored in ethnographic work on aesthetic labor in the modeling industry, where models must conform to strict body measurements in addition to normative beauty ideals to secure jobs (Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wissinger 2006; Ashley Mears 2011). Elizabeth Wissinger's (2015) concept of glamour labor expands this form of aesthetic labor in the modeling industry into the digital sphere, describing how fashion models must maintain not only their bodies, but also their social media presence in order to be desirable to potential clients.

Social media acts as a technology of surveillance in this case by ensuring that models are seen at the right hotspots and with the right people, helping to facilitate their offline career success.

While Wissinger's work focuses primarily on models whose careers are primarily offline, social media influencers instead build an online presence that they are then sometimes able to parlay into offline opportunities. Gorgeous, for example, has published a memoir, been the subject of a documentary, and appeared on television, in fashion magazines, and on runways. In 2019, she released a line of cosmetics in a partnership with Ipsy, a beauty subscription service co-founded by Michelle Phan, one of the earliest beauty influencers who was able to successfully leverage her digital popularity to secure brand sponsorships. Embodying transnormative ideals of acceptable trans womanhood, then, has helped Gorgeous to build a career both in the social media entertainment industry as well as in legacy media and cultural industries, notably in the fashion industry, which would require her to conform to normative feminine beauty standards.

While these ventures have most obviously increased her economic capital through financial compensation, they have also increased her social capital: Gorgeous met Getty heir Nats Getty while modeling for his brother August, and the two married in 2019, affording Gorgeous membership into one of the United States' wealthiest families. Her mainstream fame moreover means that she is regularly featured in celebrity gossip publications, such as in *People*, signifying how her acceptance into celebrity culture entails increased public surveillance, which then further reinforces the expectation that she conform to normative beauty standards. If we understand passing as labor and beauty as currency, it becomes clear how aesthetic practices such as cosmetic surgery are aspirational investments that trans women in the public eye make to establish their careers and amass capital.

In a 2020 photoshoot for the American fashion magazine *Paper*, Gorgeous is styled in luxurious outfits and glamorous makeup, highlighting her conformity to a particular construction of femininity (Mickey Boardman 2020). In some photos, she is nearly topless and dressed in low-cut panties, with her long, blonde hair covering her bare breast, showing off how unclockable her body is, how well she passes. In others, shot in black and white, she is dressed in a sheer, high-cut black dress, partially revealing, partially obscuring the shape of her body. The dark fabric blends into the dark steps of the spiral staircase on which she is posed—the central staircase in Gorgeous's Los Angeles home—a fitting visual metaphor for the entanglements of beauty, capital, labor, and trans women's bodies.

Notes

1. Wynn is also commonly known as ContraPoints, which is the name of her YouTube channel and not a pseudonym she uses for herself. In this article I refer to her by name.
2. Gigi Gorgeous is Giselle Lazzarato Getty's pseudonym. I use the name Gigi Gorgeous as this is the name by which she is best known.
3. I use the term influencer as an umbrella term to refer to public figures who are primarily known for their social media presence, including microcelebrities, bloggers and vloggers, and other content creators. See Crystal Abidin's (2015) similar usage.
4. Gorgeous herself has stated that she chose not to proceed with bottom surgery when she had the opportunity (2019).

5. "Walking while trans" refers to the common perception that anti-loitering laws disproportionately penalize trans women of color, under the assumption that they are sex workers.

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Disclosure statement

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Erique Zhang **(they/she)** is a PhD candidate in Northwestern University's School of Communication. Their research asks how media industries produce normative beauty standards and how transgender women and femmes then understand, navigate, and resist these norms. Erique's work has been published in *Studies in Costume & Performance, Fashion Studies Journal, International Journal of Communication*, and *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*. Erique is affiliated with the Center for Critical Race and Digital Studies and the Center for Applied Transgender Studies.

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