

**SURGICAL SHAPE-SHIFTING: TRANSGENDER EMBODIMENT IN
NINA ARSENAULT'S *THE SILICONE DIARIES***

by © Zaren Healey White

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Abstract

My project examines transgender embodiment through a case study of the life writing of Canadian transgender writer and performance artist Nina Arsenault. I focus on two texts, primarily, her one-woman autobiographical play *The Silicone Diaries*, as well as her “Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture (Identity, Transformation, and Performance),” both published in 2012. Reading Arsenault’s life writing through transgender studies and somatechnics discourses, I investigate the notion of transgender embodiment as a quest and a process of becoming.

I first explore Arsenault’s play through close reading sections of the text to analyze how she situates her experience of gender transition as a relentless pursuit of beauty and femininity. Secondly, I examine the diary entries to understand how Arsenault portrays her own changing embodiment in relation to her extensive use of plastic surgery to shape an idealized, hyperreal femininity, and how she enacts gendered embodiment through different forms of performance, including suffering. Arsenault’s artistic work reveals her gender transition to be a state of ongoing transformation rather than a straightforward path from one gender to another.

Keywords: transgender, embodiment, hyperfemininity, cosmetic surgery, body modification, autobiography, life writing, performance.

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*“...I was not in any permanent way a boy, a girl,
a man, a woman, a child, an adult,
natural, artificial, sexy, thin, healthy, beautiful, or virtual.
I am not my bodies, which are constantly disappearing.”*

Nina Arsenault, “A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture,” 68

Chapter 1: Introduction

Where do we keep our genders? Is it what’s on our bodies, what’s in our heads, or how we relate to others socially? Or a combination of all these things? Trans people’s lives cast into stark relief the differences between assigned sex and both psychic and social gender, causing us to question and re-learn how gender is manifested both psychologically and materially. Canadian transgender writer, performer, and artist Nina Arsenault has described herself as an aesthete, an art object, a cyborg, a Barbie, a faery, a goddess, and a geisha. This list is not exhaustive; Arsenault fosters identifications with a myriad of figures through her male to female physical transition. Arsenault’s 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* (2012), a series of seven monologues depicting the various points in her life that comprise her extensive body modification and the development of her art, is not the story of a makeover, but of a process of metamorphosis.

Positioning her personal narrative as an epic, Arsenault conceives of her journey in larger-than-life terms; she is motivated spiritually and artistically by imagining her life as heroic. Arsenault’s recognition of the challenges of looking like a “natural” woman

leads her to abandon the pursuit of naturalness and to embrace the maligned concept of fakeness. Her experience of changing genders forms the basis of not only her stage play, but also her ongoing self-portraiture work, and her daily presentation of a feminine self.¹

Nina Arsenault's art isn't just inspired by her corporeal body; the sculpting of her body through surgery and silicone, wigs and make-up, is itself an art practice and a literal self-fashioning. She is both the subject and the object of her work. In her gender transition, Arsenault has undergone over sixty cosmetic surgeries and procedures costing approximately \$200,000 and spanning eight years (Rudakoff 3). *The Silicone Diaries* narrates key moments in this process, but Arsenault herself is the product. The diaries include early recollections of being drawn toward images of femininity and longing to be a woman, working in online sex chat rooms to earn money to pay for surgeries, driving from Toronto to Detroit to pay a fellow trans woman to inject her with silicone, going to Mexico for affordable surgical procedures, among other events. With each new "layer of artificiality" ("Manifesto" 66) she introduces, Arsenault changes her body, mind, and spirit, and documents the progression of her transformation. This manifold self-concept, by which I mean a way of seeing oneself that takes into account a multiplicity of simultaneous identities, is not only a source of artistic inspiration, but a strategy of survival. It becomes a means to endure the inherently painful process of growth generally,

¹ In this thesis, I use "feminine" to mean the qualities or performed behaviours that signal that a person lives as a woman, or with a feminine gender expression. I use "male" or "female" to indicate the sex assigned at birth (which typically corresponds with binarized categories based on anatomy, although not always, such as in the case of some intersex persons) and I use "man" or "woman" to signal lived and embodied gender. It is important to note that, regardless of sex assigned at birth, many trans people may use the terms "male" or "female" to describe their gender (as in the convention in which some people describe themselves as female-to-male or male-to-female).

and changing one's gender in society, specifically, where trans people are still marginalized and subjected to prejudice, exclusion, and violence. Arsenault describes her autobiographical and self-reflexive work not as a neat story culminating in her transition, but as a coping mechanism to make sense of the dramatic changes entailed by the process of transitioning itself ("Manifesto" 66). While the act of cosmetic surgery often revolves primarily around the product, Arsenault has built her work upon the process.

Transformative events in Arsenault's personal journey from a young boy to an adult woman structure *The Silicone Diaries*' narrative. Her written works, both the play *The Silicone Diaries* and another piece of life writing, her "Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture," deal extensively with the relationship between flesh and concepts of self-projection. Arsenault writes:

My body was profoundly changed with every 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. ("Manifesto" 66)

Arsenault recognizes that the meanings attached to a body are mutable. The female form, as both material object and conceptual construct, provides the foundation for much of Arsenault's artistic work. She describes "yearning for beauty in a society that places great currency in the physical and sexual attributes of women" explaining her "intention to augment, to continue, to deconstruct, to celebrate, and to subvert [the lineage of the aestheticization of The Feminine] in the most vibrant and visceral ways I could" ("Manifesto" 65). Arsenault claims that her relationship to female aestheticization and

performing femininity is more nuanced and complex than simply celebrating or challenging these narratives, a point that I take up in the coming chapters.

In this thesis I examine transgender embodiment through an analysis of these two key pieces of Nina Arsenault's life writing. I use these works to explore theories of embodiment created from trans perspectives, analyzing her work in the context of her transgender subjectivity. I ask 1) How does Arsenault explore the relationship between her physical body and the enactment of her gender identity? 2) In what ways do Arsenault's life writing and performance theorize transgender embodiment as a quest and process of becoming? 3) How does Arsenault participate in the "aestheticization of the female form" ("Manifesto" 65) through her pursuit of an excessive, hypersexual, hyperfeminine ideal of beauty while simultaneously subverting essentialist or naturalized notions of what it means to be a woman? 4) What is the potential of theorizing through the flesh, as emphasized in Arsenault's depictions of physical pain and suffering as a vehicle to ecstasy and transcendence?

As a trans woman who has gone beyond simply "passing" as assigned female at birth, and has, instead, transformed her physical appearance to an exaggerated femininity, Arsenault demonstrates how powerfully cosmetic surgery can impact outward gender transition. Paradoxically, it is through transformation to become more "artificial" that Arsenault seeks authenticity; for her, body modification to achieve unreal femininity is necessary for her exterior body to match her internal gender, what Julia Serano calls "subconscious sex" (*Whipping Girl* 78). Arsenault uses her surgically altered trans body in art that explores the agony of (gender) change, the hybridity of flesh and silicone to create a plastic (surgically altered) subject, and the transgender person as a cyborg figure.

Her transformation process suggests a new incarnation of “cyborg feminism,” following Donna Haraway’s 1985 essay.

My analysis of Nina Arsenault demonstrates how both passing and not passing are political acts. Arsenault does not construct herself as having never lived as a man; rather, she retains the subject position of transgender, acknowledging her past as a person assigned male at birth and her present and future experiences as a woman. In other words, while she clearly identifies as a woman, Arsenault acknowledges the complexity of her psychic and corporeal transition. As Sandy Stone observes, transgender subject identity often emphasizes process, movement, and intertextuality (231). While the traditional gender binary is rooted in clearly demarcated categories, transgender subjectivity shows these boundaries to be permeable and unstable. Arsenault’s claimed identity as transgender is crucial to her art, writing, and performance, and certainly to the play that documents her transition. Yet while transgender experience is foregrounded, Arsenault’s writing examines feminine embodiment, women’s relationships to their own bodies, and the potential to conceptualize their appearance as a project, more broadly. Given these themes, my main theoretical framework relies on theories of transgender experience and embodiment, cyborg feminism and somatechnics, and feminist theories of cosmetic surgery.

The fact that Arsenault funded her extensive cosmetic surgery through sex work is also relevant to the social position she occupies; being already marginalized as a transgender woman, Arsenault occupied a further, although not uncommon, marginalized space as a sex worker. Indeed, these experiences of using her body to fund the attainment of a constantly evolving body are central to some of the narratives within *The Silicone*

Diaries. I analyze the many facets of Arsenault's art practice to examine the representation of hyperfemininity from a woman who was assigned male at birth, and to show how organs usually associated with being female are non-essential to the experience and performance of femininity. Arsenault's lived reality as a woman, even while retaining her penis, highlights "woman" as a set of tenuous characteristics socially agreed upon to signify woman.

Review of Transgender Scholarship

I divide literature in the field of transgender studies into four broad themes: 1) The stigmatization and marginalization, as well as invisibility or erasure, of trans identities, even within feminist and queer movements, scholarship, and communities; 2) Theories of embodiment that resist the characterization of the transsexual or transgender body as always "constructed," surgically or otherwise, and viewed as artificial; 3) The material realities of transgender people's experiences and how these connect with notions of agency and authorship; and 4) The performative nature of gender identity and expression, which may or may not be successful according to societal expectations around gender norms.

The first concept, stigma and marginalization, deals with the historical prejudice against and pathologization of transgender and transsexual people. The systemic discrimination that trans and gender non-conforming people face has shaped the field of transgender studies, and so the discipline arose to analyze and interrogate various aspects of transgender experience and to resist this oppression. As Susan Stryker explains, "transgender studies, at its best, is like other socially engaged interdisciplinary academic

fields such as disability studies or critical race theory that investigate questions of embodied difference, and analyze how such differences are transformed into social hierarchies” (“(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 3). Many scholars examine trans experience and politics from the starting point that transgender people have historically faced discrimination medically, legally, and socially. Kate Bornstein writes about how trans people threaten those deeply invested in both the gender binary and the belief that gender corresponds to birth-assigned sex and cannot – and should not – be changed. She writes, “The Gender Defender is someone who actively, or by knowing inaction, defends the status quo of the existing gender system, and thus perpetuates the violence of male privilege and all its social extensions” (“Gender Terror, Gender Rage” 237). Julia Serano’s work examines many facets of trans experiences, including working against the “sexological and sociological models” that have pathologized trans and gender non-conforming people as sick or deviant (*Whipping Girl* 115). She explores the dehumanizing of trans people by medical authorities, who both sought to limit or control the number of people who transitioned and to ensure those who did would appear clearly “male” or “female” and not stand out as trans or “ambiguous” (120).

Theories of transgender erasure interrogate the suppression of trans representation through this historical prejudice. Scholars argue that society views transgender experience as a simple transition from one gender to the other instead of its own conceptual experience (Stone, Hemmings); that the imperative to “succeed” at changing genders and pass successfully has been detrimental to trans visibility and pride (Stone, Namaste, Feinberg); and that the medicalization and pathologization of transgender people has cultivated transphobia (Spade). Some trans scholars think this imperative of blending in,

or passing, contributes to trans erasure and the stigmatization of trans persons. To “pass” means to appear to others as conforming fully to the norms of one’s chosen gender identity and presentation. In her landmark essay “The Empire Strikes Back: a Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Sandy Stone recognizes passing as a measure of “success” but argues that passing contributes to trans erasure (231). She instead posits that passing “means erasing a considerable portion of their personal experience” and calls for the “intertextual possibilities of the transsexual body” (231). In this way, Stone claims that transgender subjectivity is more complex than simply transitioning to “male” or “female” but occupies its own unique space. As Bornstein has observed, trans people are writing themselves into the conversation and, while acknowledging historical prejudice and invisibility, she suggests “transgendered folks are making a place for themselves in the culture” (*Gender Outlaw* 12-13).

Visibility is, however, a contested topic: While some activists fight for greater trans visibility, others recognize that visibility can be dangerous and is not inherently good or even benign. As Jos Truitt writes for the feminist web magazine *Feministing*:

Visibility is not necessarily a good thing, particularly for trans women. We are often hyper-visible, cis patriarchy’s convenient punching bag. We walk around constantly aware that we could get clocked – or recognized as trans – by someone who might target us with harassment or violence. And some visibility is deadly – so we should be thoughtful about how we prioritize visibility in trans politics.

Visibility is thus complicated and tied to whether a person successfully passes. To be “out” as trans but able to pass may allow a person selective visibility – they may be able

to claim a trans identity in some instances and blend in as non-trans in others. To pass, as Stone sees it, is to be invisible, and invisibility prohibits transgender politics and advocacy.

Nevertheless, the notion that trans people need to occupy normative gender positions if they are to “succeed” in their gender presentation is troubling. Leslie Feinberg’s pamphlet “Transgender Liberation” argues that being transgender isn’t new but that passing is (207). Feinberg equates passing with hiding and advocates for visibility (207). Serano writes that cisgender people objectify trans people by focusing excessively on physical gender transitions and what she calls the “cissexual obsession with passing” (*Whipping Girl* 185). She explains how continuously focusing on the transition, whether or not the person passes, “keeps transsexuals forever anchored in our assigned sex, thus turning our identified sex into a goal that we are always approaching but never truly achieve” (185-86). Talia Mae Bettcher challenges the “trapped in the wrong body” paradigm as limited and reductive; she argues it suggests a simplistic understanding of binary sex in which, for instance, a trans woman cannot ever be a “woman” without genital surgery, due to the limitations of the “wrong body” (390) and an overdetermined conceptual link between anatomy and gender. Thus while passing has to do with superficial appearance it also has to do with expectations about what constitutes a “complete” gender transition. While Arsenault presents herself as having initially pursued passing, she reveals in later diary entries an acceptance of the challenges of passing and a decision to fuse her physical transformation with her performative art practice, which I would argue contributes to trans visibility.

Trans writers and theorists have also addressed the tensions between trans communities and the larger queer community (Bornstein, Feinberg, Serano, Stone, Stryker, Whittle). The acronym LGBT, and thus much advocacy work, unites lesbian, gay, and bisexual with trans people, even though sexual orientation is different from gender identity, and many of the personal and political concerns impacting people in these groups are drastically different. Susan Stryker describes transgender studies as “queer theory’s evil twin” because of its disruption of sexual identity labels (“Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin” 212). Stone, Feinberg, and Bornstein all describe the marginalization that trans people face, even within gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer communities. Some of the challenges facing united political advocacy arise from the inherent differences between sexual orientation and gender identity. As Aaron H. Devor and Nicholas Matte explain:

Homosexual collective identity, especially in the early days before queer politics, was largely framed as inborn, like an ethnicity, and based primarily on sexual desire for persons of the same sex and gender. However, such definitions make sense only when founded on clearly delineated distinctions between sex and genders. (387)

The notion of sexual preference based on the genders of those involved is thus complicated through gender changes, or identification outside the gender binary. Furthermore, scholars point to trans-exclusionary radical feminists (frequently abbreviated as TERFs in contemporary discourse) as the source of one such rift. Before transgender studies came into its own, a lot of work on transsexuality and “transgenderism” came from radical feminist academics who condemned trans people and

critiqued binary transitioning transsexuals as reifying gender norms. As Serano explains, these critics have framed transsexuality as a “form of ‘false consciousness’ and that transsexuals themselves can only be conceptualized in one of two ways: as ‘dupes’ (who are misled into transitioning by gatekeepers) or as ‘fakes’” (140). Similarly, Stephen Whittle looks at the fraught relationship between transgender people and feminism, including the lesbian separatist movement, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

More recent work analyzes the growing connections between feminist and transgender scholarship and activism (Enke, Serano, Stryker). A concern that arises through transfeminist work is the issue of how we understand some gender identities as naturally occurring and unquestionable and others as individually determined and requiring “proof.” For example, we don’t typically question a cisgender person, a person whose gender aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth, on how they know they are, indeed, that gender. In an edited collection *Transfeminist Perspectives in and Beyond Transgender and Gender Studies*, Anne Enke writes that feminism and transgender studies “are intimately connected in their endeavour to analyze epistemologies and practices that produce gender” (1). Enke argues that “everyone’s gender is made: Gender, and also sex, are made through complex social and technical manipulations that naturalize some while abjecting others” (1). Those who are made abject through their gender are often trans people. Similarly, Stryker argues, “Transgender studies enables a critique of the conditions that cause transgender phenomena to stand out in the first place, and that allow gender normativity to disappear into the unanalyzed, ambient background” (“(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 3). Enke posits “a small number of ‘marked’ people

whose gender navigations are magically believed to be separate from the cultural practices that constitute gender for everyone else” (2). It is clear that trans people face discrimination in society at large and marginalization within larger LGBT or queer movements.

Serano takes this theme in a different direction, examining the double prejudice faced by male-to-female transsexuals, as they tend to be met with transphobia as well as sexism and misogyny related to the cultural denigration of femininity. Her book *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* chronicles the marginalization of trans people within these movements and challenges the assumptions that, she argues, lead to this exclusion. While lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have often collaborated as members of the broader LGBT community, there are challenges representing the needs and interests of different groups. Trans people face a complex blend of prejudice, both inside and outside of queer communities.

The second conceptual theme I want to address is the notion of the trans person as fake or not a “real” man or woman due to the prevalence of surgery and other body technologies in their lives. As previously mentioned, radical feminist academic Janice Raymond promoted the stance that trans women were really men in *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, a work now well recognized for its transphobic views. Raymond popularized the idea of transsexuals, specifically transsexual women, as deceptive, in contrast to “the real female form” (134).² Raymond infamously claims, “Because transsexuals have lost their physical ‘members’ does not mean that they have

² I am working from the chapter of Raymond’s book collected in the *Transgender Studies Reader* (2006).

lost their ability to penetrate women – women’s mind, women’s space, women’s sexuality” (134). Beyond the book’s clear transphobia, these ideas promote a harmful, limited view of transgender experience in which people expect genital surgery in order to see a trans person as legitimate. This concept is increasingly disrupted by work that emphasizes how many trans people may undergo no surgical changes, or hormone replacement therapies, at all. Still, some scholars examine the concept of the trans body as constructed – materially and theoretically (Prosser, Stryker). This focus arises in part from the premise that gender is a social construct, an idea not unique to transgender studies. Another factor is the presence of surgical and hormonal intervention that can change how the gendered body appears (Pentney and Garner, Stryker, Sullivan, Spade). Certainly, surgery can be a valuable tool to combat gender dysphoria,³ helping trans people comfortably live their gender identity and reconciling how others view their physical bodies with how they see themselves. In her early work, Stryker draws on the Frankenstein narrative in order to situate the transsexual body as unnatural, monstrous, “a technological construction” (245) – a concept I will further develop in my theoretical framework.

Nikki Sullivan analyzes the connections and discrepancies between theories of different forms of body modifications in her work on “transmogrification.” Sullivan argues that some academics and critics evaluate cosmetic surgery, as opposed to other body modification practices, along moral lines. Drawing on both transgender and cosmetic surgery studies and theories, Sullivan finds the similarities between various

³ Gender dysphoria is the diagnostic term for feeling that the sex one was assigned at birth does not match one’s gender identity.

transformative bodily practices, and links body modifications not related to changing gender as also representative of “trans’ practices” (“Transmogrification” 552).

Similarly, Beth Pentney and T. Garner look at the overlap in discourse around cosmetic surgery and sex reassignment surgery (also known as gender confirmation surgery) and argue that these realms of surgical transformation shouldn’t be examined in isolation.

Other scholars of cosmetic surgery and body modification including Kathy Davis, Anne Marie Balsamo, Victoria Taylor-Pitts, Virginia Blum, and Meredith Jones theorize the sculpting of the female or feminine body through technologies as a sociocultural practice that may enable women’s agency and empowerment. These theorists resist the characterization of cosmetic surgery and appearance work as superficial and study this area to understand the multifaceted experiences and motivations of women seeking to modify their appearances. While the scholars named above do not explicitly deal with body modification or surgery from a transgender theory perspective, I include them here to indicate the range of literature approaching body modification and cosmetic surgery through feminist lenses. These perspectives inform my reading of Nina Arsenault’s dramatic body modification. While many trans theorists offer a critique of “sex change surgery” as a requisite part of being transgender or transitioning genders, I consider the utility of plastic surgery in enabling physical gender transition and desired gender expression to be significant for this study of Nina Arsenault’s embodiment because it is central to her gender practice.

In the third conceptual theme, some scholars emphasize that transgender studies is not just about academic, theoretical work but needs to be connected to material realities and day to day lives. In her work *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity*,

Institutions, and Imperialism (2005), Viviane Namaste argues that work about transsexuals and transgender people shouldn't be rooted exclusively in studies of identity and passing. She argues that a focus on identity can be limiting when it sets up a dichotomy of radical transsexuals and more conservative (often equated with binary identifying⁴) transsexuals (8). She writes, "Many transsexuals... would situate themselves as 'men' and 'women,' not as 'gender radicals,' or 'gender revolutionaries' or 'boyzzz' or 'grrrrrrls'" (8). Namaste criticizes the charge that it's "not politically progressive" (8) for people to want to transition unambiguously to the opposite gender. Further, Namaste explains that much of the work on trans people that is produced out of psychiatric and medical establishments uses the existence of trans people to prove that gender is socially constructed, or to highlight trans lives as contradicting gender norms, without revealing much about the lived experiences of the people themselves (3). Like other scholars, Namaste emphasizes the importance of trans people telling their stories that include embodied realities.

As these scholars demonstrate, self-authorship is an important element of transgender rights advocacy. It is, therefore, unsurprising that autobiography and life writing have been crucial avenues of exploration. Many scholars, including some already mentioned, such as Bornstein, Stone and Stryker, have emphasized the importance of the trans person's ability to tell their own story. Heather Love writes that claiming a right to speak on one's own behalf is particularly important in trans studies because of the "historical struggles of transgender subjects to define themselves" (93). Similarly,

⁴ Identifying unambiguously along the gender binary as either a man or woman. A binary trans person is a trans man or trans woman, not genderqueer, gender fluid, or non-binary.

Feinberg discusses the problem of people applying words and names to trans people that they didn't choose to call themselves. In the foundational "Transgender Liberation," Feinberg writes, "There are other words used to express the wide range of 'gender outlaws'.... We didn't choose these words. They don't fit all of us. It's hard to fight an oppression without a name connoting pride, a language that honors us" (206). Here Feinberg speaks to the obstacles to solidarity, community, and liberation for trans people so routinely defined by others without being offered the chance to name their own experiences.

Jay Prosser reads transsexual narratives as a means to introduce the material transsexual body into the literature on transgender lives. Drawing on arguments similar to those put forward by Stryker, Prosser focuses on transsexual narratives because of queer theory's lack of attention to specifically trans embodiment. In her work on intersexuality, transsexuality, and the sex/gender binary, Myra J. Hird argues the value of "knowing" one's gender separate from the material, anatomical signs that designate its sex. She notes that, "Feminist theory particularly values the experience of living in the world as a female. MTF women claim gendered status as women based on 'knowing' themselves to be women without the accepted corporal signs designated as 'female'" (354). Since the outward, sexed body does not correspond to the trans person's felt gender, Hird suggests this "knowing" is a facet of embodiment, supporting the perspective that gender identity is a subjectively determined, embodied sense.

The fourth conceptual theme I identify considers gender as a (visible) performance (Butler, Cole and Cate, Coyote and Spoon). While she is not herself a trans scholar, queer theorist Judith Butler's work is influential in this field. Her writing on

performativity in *Gender Trouble* is a cornerstone in theory on how gender is performed. Butler conceptualizes gender as “a stylized repetition of acts” (191). Many scholars articulate the difficulty of gender ambiguity and explore identification outside the gender binary system. C.L. Cole and Shannon L.C. Cate extend Adrienne Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian continuum and apply it to the idea of a transgender continuum, imagining how gender binaries are made compulsory and enforced in the same way that Rich articulates the enforcement of heterosexuality. Ivan Coyote and Rae Spoon, meanwhile, take up the notion of “failure” both in their recent book and in their daily lives. Both prefer gender neutral pronouns and their genderqueer experiences show that people can “fail” to pass intelligibly as either gender, and can embrace that failure by declining identity on the gender binary.

As a field that emerged in the early 1990s and continues to diversify, transgender studies covers critical terrain ranging from the discrimination facing trans people and their struggle for human rights, including visibility in terms of political advocacy; understanding different conceptions of embodiment and why gender confirmation procedures matter; trans people getting to tell their own stories and depict their own experiences that write against the medical frameworks that have often silenced them; and how the performative nature of gender relates to transgender identities.

Significance of my Research

The scholarship in transgender studies is rich in areas of historicizing injustice and marginalization and examining transgender experience politically and theoretically as arising out of, but ultimately diverging from, queer studies. The available literature takes

up questions of the natural versus the constructed, the importance of combating trans erasure by highlighting trans voices and subjectivities through personal narratives, and showing the breakdown of the gender binary system through gender identities outside of male or female, trans man and trans woman. However, I have found relatively little engagement with notions of hyperfemininity and hypervisibility in terms of transgender experiences and the inability or refusal to pass. As a trans woman, Arsenault's exaggerated femininity through visible cosmetic surgery causes her transgender status to be visible and intelligible at all times; she has reclaimed her erased history (Stone 230) as part of her art practice. Furthermore, Arsenault's work warrants examination due to its seeming contradictions and ambiguities that may not reconcile neatly into larger discourses. While society may be beginning to normalize and accept the notion of gender reassignment with the expectation of a "complete" transition, Arsenault furthers the understanding of why many binary trans people do not have genital surgery for a variety of reasons. Her decision to retain her penis normalizes this aspect of transgender embodiment. Her promotion of this facet of trans identity and embodiment in culture through literature, theatre, and art serves to disrupt cisnormative⁵ expectations for gender change.

While many trans people and theorists push back against the idea of gender, particularly the feminine, as artificial, Arsenault expresses yearning for a heteronormative standard of sexy, feminine beauty – what many might consider a male-defined standard (Gilbert, Halferty). As a result, one could accuse Arsenault of reifying narrow,

⁵ Cisnormativity is the presumption that all people identify their gender with the sex they were assigned at birth and are thus cisgender.

heteronormative beauty expectations of women (trans and cisgender). However, I read Arsenault's writing, performance, and body-art as revealing the cultural constructedness of hierarchies of beauty and femininity. She shows that, through technological modifications and performance, seemingly unreal extremes are, in fact, attainable – even attainable by someone designated male at birth. Arsenault's work provides a rich site of exploration through feminist theories of cosmetic surgery and aesthetics because of its apparent contradictions. Her life writing and artistic work arises from ideas of accepting the impossibility of passing as having been assigned female at birth, and so deciding to go beyond and be extreme, unnatural, and hyperfeminine. In this way, Arsenault contributes to the available transgender narratives, artistically documenting her transition and embracing, rather than eschewing, her conscious emphasis on dramatic cosmetic surgery.

As a contemporary writer and artist, Nina Arsenault is a relatively new subject of academic study. *TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work*, the first full-length scholarly publication dedicated to Arsenault and her art, appeared in 2012. In this edited collection, scholars examine a range of elements of Arsenault's writing (Halferty), performance (Ashperger), art (Halferty, Newton, Gillespie), and life (Gilbert), from her sexual personae and history as a sex worker (Klinck), to her use of spiritual concepts and iconography (Levy, Fancy), and to the practical challenges of being a male-to-female transgender performer (Armstrong), such as learning to train her (now feminine) voice. Drawing on notions of hyperfemininity, J. Paul Halferty examines Arsenault's use of mythic and fantastic identifications in her self-portraiture, naming these “unreal images of femininity” (29). Todd Klinck's analysis of Arsenault's own life history as a sex worker, and what he calls “the evolution of a commodified sexual being,”

has been particularly useful to my work as it shares interviews with Arsenault and personal knowledge of her life not fully reflected in *The Silicone Diaries* (55). Other notable essays include Alistair Newton's analysis of "the morality of beauty," in which he invokes the renowned body artist ORLAN in comparison to Arsenault's work (109). Benjamin Gillespie explores Arsenault as embodying the hyperreal and "artist as art object" (141). Shannon Bell's reading of Arsenault's work applies her own theory of "fast feminism" as well as Lacan's concept of *objet a* or "given-to-be-seen" (95). These works put Arsenault's stage performances, writing, and living self-portraiture into conversation with broader critical frameworks and philosophies, suggesting connections across various fields of study. In addition to this, the anthology includes a publication of the full text of *The Silicone Diaries*, as well as a collection of full colour portraits of Arsenault, ranging from images before she underwent surgical procedures, to photos at various phases of her transition, to a selection of her self-portraiture work. As a whole, the collection serves to show the potential of Arsenault as a subject of inquiry. While the articles tackle different aspects of Arsenault's performance, art, or experiences, I build upon the terrain covered within to focus specifically on Arsenault's depiction of and contribution to knowledge of transgender embodiment. As a play written and performed by a Canadian transgender woman, *The Silicone Diaries* warrants analysis as a literary product that showcases an underrepresented perspective.

While scholars in various fields of study – gender, queer, and trans studies; theatre studies; art and body art studies – have examined Arsenault's work, there are, as yet, no in-depth studies on Arsenault and her body projects. The breadth of her artistic and performative work, which includes essays, columns, stage performance, self-portraiture,

and living art installations, provides many avenues through which to consider how the transition from man to woman (and, indeed, from woman to goddess, as Arsenault imagines it) is experienced as a lived reality. While I draw on Arsenault's artistic and embodied practices as exemplars of transgender embodied performance, her work conveys aspects of the corporeal and psychic elements of gender change. Her work can, as such, productively inform us about the nature of transgender embodiment and corporeality.

This thesis is in five chapters. In Chapter Two, I examine the theoretical frameworks that underpin this research. I explore how transgender studies challenge and expand upon categories that may otherwise be taken for granted, as well as discourses of the natural versus constructed human body. While Arsenault has had extensive cosmetic surgery and has crafted an "unnatural" aesthetic, I invoke discourses of cyborg feminism and somatechnics to complicate the assumed dichotomies of natural/unnatural and real/unreal. Theoretical perspectives offered through cosmetic surgery studies also help me situate my textual analyses of Arsenault's work.

In Chapter Three I analyze Arsenault's representation of transgender embodiment through her texts *The Silicone Diaries* and "Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture." I examine Arsenault's writing as a case study for transgender embodiment as fluid, incremental, and extremely personalized. Through my reading of Arsenault's play, I argue that there are diverse ways through which a person may achieve comfortable embodiment as their gender, and I suggest that there are no standard narratives or steps on this journey. I examine the extended metaphor of the quest in *The Silicone Diaries*, as Arsenault positions herself as a hero and invokes mythological identifications with

different figures and icons. This is one way in which she presents her personal narrative as an epic. Through associations with figures both Classical and contemporary, ranging from Botticelli's Venus to geisha to the Barbie doll, Arsenault engages with an extensive tradition of the representation of the female body. This chapter will examine the tenets and inspirations of Arsenault's art practice and performance, as encapsulated in her autobiographical play.

I continue my analysis of the *The Silicone Diaries* in Chapter Four, focusing on feminine embodiment as achieved through performance and projection of the self. I then consider other ways Arsenault invokes performance in the play including the ritual of suffering for beauty as a spiritual and transcendent process. I conclude by summarizing my analysis of Arsenault's life writing as a case study for transgender embodiment and by suggesting further avenues of exploration of Arsenault's multidisciplinary artistic work in future studies.

*“The woman in the mirror looks like no woman I have ever seen before.
This will be the next phase of my work with my body.
To accept the me underneath all the glamour.
The unreal cyborg I have constructed.”*

Nina Arsenault, *The Silicone Diaries*, 226

Chapter 2: Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

A feminist exploration of Nina Arsenault’s writing, performance, and art practice involves the intersection of many critical foci, such as autobiography, life writing, and performance studies; body art, cosmetic surgery, and body modification studies; and certainly, queer and transgender studies. I integrate transgender studies theories of embodiment, cyborg feminism and somatechnics, with feminist cosmetic surgery studies, into the conceptual framework that guides this thesis.

To examine transgender embodiment, I begin with the work of Susan Stryker and other notable transgender theorists, Sandy Stone, Jay Prosser, and Julia Serano, to problematize the stability of gender categories and assert an understanding of gender as separate from the culturally constructed notion of sex. I then draw on Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg to introduce Nikki Sullivan’s work in somatechnics and her notion of “transmogrification” as it pertains to cosmetic surgery, body modification, and other forms of embodiment. Sullivan’s work allows me to explore the intersection of bodily technologies with transgender embodiment, in relation to Arsenault’s use of cosmetic surgery. Finally, I introduce feminist studies of cosmetic surgery that situate body modifying procedures for cosmetic purposes as having the potential to be affirming and self-actualizing, not simply promoting accordance with patriarchal norms.

Constructed Embodiments

I assert a trans positive understanding of transgender subjectivity that recognizes gender as self-identified, based on subjective, psychic experiences of identity and embodiment, not the prescribed gender identity and expression of the “sexed” body. Sex, too, is a socially constructed category that has been naturalized by medical science. In her essay, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” Susan Stryker argues that “Transgender 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 psychological categories of ‘gender’” (9). Beyond the foundational concept in feminist studies that sex and gender are separate (yet related) concepts, the idea that gender does not produce stable or unifying categories is central to my analysis.

If the perceived category of “woman” has been integral to histories of feminist theory and activism, then trans identities and theories deeply unsettle this category. But unstable signifiers also allow new spaces in and through which to imagine different forms of embodiment. Stryker uses Frankenstein’s monster as a metaphor for transgender embodiment in her essay “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage.” Here, she is empowered by the link she sees between herself and Frankenstein’s monstrous creation. As Mary Shelley does, she reclaims the figure of the monster and, by stating that the transsexual body becomes “something more and something other than the creatures our makers intended us to be” (248), places agency and self-authorship in the hands of the creature rather than its “creator.” Construction, in this reading, is agency. Stryker suggests the monster is able to

exist because of its creator, but that it exceeds what its maker imagined. She writes, “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 challenges that the transsexual or transgender subject may experience in the world, having become “unnatural” through medical science. Her trans subject embodies a multiplicity of identities that do not neatly fit with identity as prescribed by Nature. Stryker posits transgender experience as queering how we understand the natural. Stryker’s identification with the monster links to other concepts of transgender experience, such as being at war with nature, the disjunction between body and self, and feeling like a mutant, an anomaly, a “creature” (246). Arsenault works within a similar framework; instead of shying away from icons that suggest constructedness or artificiality, such as mannequins and Barbie dolls, Arsenault invites the comparison, and incorporates these icons into her work. A transgender theory of monstrosity, as Stryker articulates, fits with Arsenault’s self-portraiture, as Arsenault explores identification with various creatures and personae. The motif of the cyborg is central, as Arsenault exploits rather than conceals scenes and poses that illuminate her constructedness. Arsenault may not hold the scalpel, but through her artistic self-construction, she is certainly both creature and creator.

Sandy Stone’s work on conceptualizing the intertextuality of transgender embodiment informs my understanding of Arsenault’s life and work. Stone’s work was crafted as a response to the transphobic discourse of Janice Raymond discussed earlier. According to Stryker and Whittle, Stone’s 1991 essay “The *Empire Strikes Back*: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” “has been justly described as the protean text from which

contemporary transgender studies emerged” (221). Stone’s manifesto acknowledges and works within the contradictions of an embodied subjectivity that is more complex than simply male or female. More specifically, Stone calls for “the *intertextual* possibilities of the transsexual body” (231, emphasis in original). Stone charts the development of transsexualism in the diagnostic/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 (231). More broadly, Stone analyzes gender identity and embodiment, and how some accounts of transsexual experience have served to reinforce gender binaries based on traditional notions of masculinity and femininity – an either/or subjectivity (230). Stone explains how in sex-reassignment clinics, candidates have historically been evaluated on the basis of their potential to perform “successfully” in their new gender, a subjective diagnostic criterion which demonstrates that assigned sex does not guarantee social gender.

Building on some of the foundational concepts developed by Stone and Stryker in transgender studies, Jay Prosser’s work in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* theorizes transgender embodiment through the concept of skin as both a threshold and a narrative. This theory relates to ideas around embodiment already introduced – Stone’s “intertextual...transsexual body” (231) and Stryker’s emphasis on the body and self as, at times, monstrous constructions. These theorists all situate skin as being mutable and symbolic of issues of identity and subjectivity beyond the superficial. Prosser writes on how stories of gender transformation have been represented in autobiography. Drawing on psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu’s notion of “skin ego” (65), Prosser argues that skin is an interface, a contested site where concepts of inner and outer

selves are mediated. Considering the familiar, although often rejected trope of describing trans people as “trapped in the wrong body” (69), and the notion of being comfortable in one’s own skin, Prosser examines how skin – our exterior, material encasing – becomes a metonym for embodiment. In examining transsexual narratives, he finds skin to be a useful motif for how we construct and express body image. How skin can be represented and transformed through technologies such as surgery contributes to an understanding of embodied selfhood. Considering Arsenault’s foregrounding of plastic surgery and cosmetic changes as a key aspect of her embodiment, as seen in the title of *The Silicone Diaries*, how skin can shape-shift is integral to both her bodily and psychic transformation.

Another important theoretical framing is the intersection of transgender embodiment with femininity as both a construct and a social reality. In *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007), Julia Serano explores these overlapping issues. Serano writes an analytical manifesto that incorporates her embodied insights as a trans woman. She also highlights the particularly harmful prejudice against trans women as being deeply tied to sexism, misogyny, and a cultural prejudice against the feminine. Serano shows that trans women’s experiences cannot be theorized apart from society’s denigration of females and femininity. She gestures towards some of the writing of other feminist scholars, among them Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Bordo, Susan Brownmiller, and Lesa Lockford, while also confirming the relevance of Butlerian gender performativity to discussions about trans embodiment, identity, and subjectivity. In her essay “Reclaiming Femininity” Serano theorizes that the denigration of femininity is normalized and people in both feminist and non-feminist

circles presume that “feminine gender expression is more frivolous, artificial, impractical, and manipulative than masculine gender expression” (*Excluded* 28). These four theorists contribute to how I understand embodiment as constructed, self-determined, and deeply subjective. Taken together, Stryker, Stone, Prosser, and Serano describe a theoretical terrain that focuses on identity, but returns to the level of the body as a felt concept. While the shape or anatomy of a physical body does not determine gender, these theorists argue for the role of the physical body – its sensations, experiences, and contradictions – as part of how identity becomes embodied.

Cyborg Feminism and Somatechnics

The next theoretical concept that informs my understanding of Arsenault’s hybrid self is cyborg feminism, which builds upon the foundation that transgender embodiment disrupts seemingly stable gender signifiers. The concept of cyborg feminism originates with Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” While critics note that Haraway does not directly analyze transgender experience in her essay (Stryker and Whittle 103), her work is applicable, from her evocation of the cyborg as “a creature in a post-gender world” (104) to her deconstruction and disavowal of ideas of essentialism and a category of woman outside of “contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices” (107). Haraway suggests that we are all “chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism” (104), a conceptual framing which is productive for constructing and understanding transgender embodiment. One of the cruxes of Haraway’s argument is that we, as human beings, are not “natural”; she resists the supposed dichotomy of natural

and unnatural bodies and selves. Haraway's foundational work allows me to read Arsenault's heavily mediated body as *changed* while resisting the reading of alteration as a corruption. Other theorists build on this theory by reading Haraway's notion of the cyborg into specific contemporary contexts around bodily technologies. Anne Balsamo's *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* examines technological and surgical intervention into the female gendered body, and how these technologies complicate our understanding of the body as natural. From weight training and working to alter the body's shape and appearance, to procedures such as laser eye surgery, many forms of bodily change are, according to Balsamo, normalized and ubiquitous, breaking down imagined divides of natural versus unnatural bodies.

Balsamo's and Haraway's work, as well as subsequent work that employs the notion of the cyborg, reads as a precursor to the field of somatechnics, which focuses directly on the interchange of body and technology. Somatechnics, coined by Samantha Murray and Nikki Sullivan in 2004, is a growing discipline that examines the interconnections of the body and the technologies that mediate, impact, and inform the body. Put differently, it is an inclusive theoretical term that goes beyond the limitations of "body modification." Nikki Sullivan's articles "Transmogrification: (Un)Becoming Other(s)," "Somatechnics, or, The Social Inscription of Bodies and Selves," and her edited work with Samantha Murray, *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologicalisation of Bodies*, are key resources in this area. Somatechnics productively expands and extends Haraway's framework to interrogate how the body, as a "culturally intelligible construct," intertwines with technologies (3).

Sullivan's work in the area of body modification practices examines discourses that present some practices as good and some as bad (554). This oppositional dichotomy is typically created between body modification – such as tattooing, piercing, branding, and scarification – and cosmetic surgery (554). Sullivan argues that scholars, including Lisa Walker, Andrea Juno, and Kathy Acker, situate body modification as radical, and cosmetic surgery as conformist, and evidence of internalized patriarchal norms (554). Sullivan, however, advances the notion that there should not be a hierarchy of body technologies in terms of feminist value. Sullivan uses the notion of “transmogrification,” “a process of (un)becoming strange and/or grotesque” (561), to suggest a way of understanding and critically examining the similar and different ways that “bodies of flesh, bodies of knowledge, and the relations between them, could be said to transmogrify” (561). Sullivan finds useful overlap between body modification and transgender theories to articulate connections between “various modes of trans-formative embodiment” (560). Sullivan's examination offers a productive theorizing of cosmetic practices as potentially subversive and radical, as opposed to necessarily indicative of a false consciousness on the part of an oppressed subject. This theoretical framework allows me to understand cosmetic surgery practices as warranting feminist analysis and having the potential to signify more than patriarchal oppression or a vain, appearance obsessed consumer culture. I see transmogrification in Arsenault's physical self-creation and the strangeness of her ultra-altered body. I understand Arsenault's autobiography as written on the body – her physical shape-shifting forms the basis for her writing, and she uses her surgically altered, transgender body to perform the play itself.

Plastic Meets Flesh: Cosmetic Surgery Studies

The theoretical work in somatechnics just discussed offers productive ways to understand plastic and cosmetic surgery⁶ in a feminist context. This framework resists the notion of the altered body as fake and that fakeness, in this context, is a bad thing. Scholars are increasingly situating cosmetic surgery as part of broader body modification practices. As Victoria Pitts argues, “from a ‘post-essentialist’ perspective, which argues that human bodies are always shaped and transformed through cultural practices, new body modifications have been interpreted as challenges to the naturalized status of Western body norms, and as forms of self-fashioning and self-narration in postmodern culture” (*In The Flesh* 23). Writers problematize the assumption of the body as natural, pure, or unmediated. As Cressida Heyes argues:

...identity is already always written on the body. The objection that we should leave the body alone in its natural state erases the ubiquity of our embodied construction. [...] To be sure, bodily inscriptions range vastly in their physical consequences – getting a tattoo is not the same as SRS [sex reassignment surgery]. But in a deeply technological world, analysis must begin from the fact that the “natural body” is an unknowable, fictive entity. (209)

Here, Heyes pushes back against the idea that cosmetic surgery turns the body into something fake or compromises its integrity. Furthermore, the notion of bodily autonomy

⁶ The terms plastic surgery and cosmetic surgery are often used interchangeably but there are subtle differences. Plastic surgery encompasses all surgical procedures, both reconstructive or cosmetic/aesthetic. Some elective procedures to change appearance may be categorized as cosmetic in nature, but all cosmetic surgery also falls under plastic surgery.

is a core consideration for many feminists who see taking action to shape and sculpt one's body as an act of both subversion and agency. As Pitts explains, "Proponents stress how body modification has subversive potential, particularly for women, whose bodies are so often pressured by cultural norms of beauty or are the victims of sexual or physical abuse" (*In The Flesh* 15). Since women have often historically lacked control over their own bodies, some scholars read body modification as an act of reclamation.

Surgery is, of course, not unique to trans persons and is often understood differently when used for the purpose of "sex change." Pentney and Garner juxtapose theories of cosmetic and transsexual body modification, and their work is thus particularly useful for situating what they call the "resonances and divergences" between cosmetic surgery and body modification generally, and how that understanding shifts when applied to transsexual and transgender subjects (80). They argue that, through the medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria (formerly called gender identity disorder), "transsexuality is pathologized while cosmetic surgery is not" (81). Their analysis shows how the "medical framing" of these two forms of body modification – for cosmetic purposes and for sex or gender reassignment – has impacted how society understands each. For the transgender individual, this prejudice against gender reassignment surgery has resulted in both pathologization and marginalization. It is important to note, however, that within this medical framework, trans people have been able to gain access to the gender confirming technologies, from hormones to surgery, as well as coverage of these procedures, that many desire and find necessary for their experience of gender transition.

T. Garner's doctoral thesis, "Stitching up the Natural: 'Manboobs,' Pregnancy, and the Transgender Body," takes up another related and important element of theorizing

the transgender body in relation to body technologies and cosmetic surgery for non-trans persons: the assumption that the trans body is artificial in its constructedness (a point also explored by Stryker). Garner analyzes the discourse of “natural” and “normal” bodies and how these concepts function in relation to body modification (7). Their thesis interrogates how some bodily transformations are naturalized, in contrast to, for example, surgeries that facilitate gender transition (7). In its examination of “The accusation of ‘construction’ levelled against the transsexual body” (14), Garner’s work challenges assumptions of the transgender body as artificial that, paradoxically, Arsenault herself invites, plays with, and accentuates. How the physical body is culturally inscribed and made intelligible relates to body technologies of transformation, such as cosmetic surgery.

Linking examinations of gender-related surgery to cosmetic surgery as a site of feminist critical examination, I draw on the work of Kathy Davis, Virginia L. Blum, Victoria Pitts-Taylor, and Meredith Jones. Davis’s work in *Reshaping The Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* imagines the potential for re-imagining embodied subjectivity through the vehicle of surgery. Examining women’s storytelling of their own experiences with cosmetic surgery, she shows how “cosmetic surgery can be a strategy for becoming an embodied subject” (96). Davis theorizes that the physical experience of cosmetic surgery has deep psychic impacts, specifically in terms of embodiment. In *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery*, meanwhile, Virginia L. Blum, approaches cosmetic surgery as full of contradictions: the premise of cosmetic surgery relies upon the voluntary wounding or cutting of one’s own flesh in order to “improve” it (31). The book’s title evokes the inherent trauma of elective, self-inflicted cosmetic surgery.

However, it also gestures towards the productive potential of wounding.⁷ These tropes are evident in Arsenault's body work: as she posits in *The Silicone Diaries*, the body is, in essence, being wounded over and over again through routine surgery (224). I will examine Arsenault's preoccupation with suffering as part of her quest for beauty in Chapter Four.

Blum expands on notions of the hybrid cyborg subject that we find in Haraway, Balsamo, and Sullivan. Thus, she notes that while some people will never entertain surgery as an option for addressing perceived flaws, some will choose surgical intervention and invite a surgical "identity"; that is, an active engagement with cosmetic surgery to transform embodied subjectivity. This is pertinent to Arsenault; in *The Silicone Diaries* she embraces her desire for surgery while negotiating a fear of going too far (224). Victoria Pitts-Taylor's⁸ work in *Surgery Junkies: Wellness and Pathology in Cosmetic Culture* situates the cosmetic surgery industry and culture at the intersection of addiction, pathology, and un-wellness. Pitts-Taylor interrogates how the choice of cosmetic surgery is morally mediated, and how and why some surgeries are considered acceptable and others deviant. Finally, Meredith Jones' *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery* critically analyzes cosmetic surgery as an integral part of the contemporary cultural landscape. Jones situates cosmetic surgery as increasingly accessible and practiced by mainstream consumers (1) and part of a larger "makeover culture" (11). Particularly relevant to my work is her chapter on "makeover artists" (151). Here, drawing on tropes similar to those put forward by Susan Stryker, Jones looks at

⁷ See, for example, Hélène Cixous' *Stigmata*.

⁸ Pitts-Taylor is formerly Victoria Pitts.

both ORLAN and Michael Jackson as monster figures who have incorporated plastic surgery into their personae in different ways. There are many interconnections among the works of Blum, Davis, Jones, and Pitts-Taylor. These works examine the feminist potential of cosmetic surgery and appearance work as having deeper, and redemptive, repercussions for women.

In this section I have outlined the theoretical frameworks guiding my approach to Nina Arsenault's work. I began with transgender studies in order to situate the pivotal starting point that gender can be separate from sex and thus gender identity and expression can be unrelated to the sexed body. By drawing on transgender theories of embodiment, I emphasized, however, that being transgender is a felt, corporeal experience. Next, I introduced cyborg feminism and somatechnics to argue the body as always culturally and technologically mediated and to resist the possibility and privilege of the wholly "natural" body. Finally, due to the centrality of cosmetic surgery to Arsenault's gender transition and the narrative of *The Silicone Diaries*, I explored theoretical frameworks that situate women's cosmetic surgery in relation to identity, embodiment, and transformation. My conceptual framework for Arsenault and her work is based on the notions that the body is culturally constructed, embodiments are unstable and in flux, and that the body can be transformed and technologized.

Research Methodology

My methodological framework privileges personal storytelling and life writing as an important way of asserting agency and articulating embodiment. *The Silicone Diaries* presents itself as an autobiographical representation of one woman's gender transition. As

a piece of life writing, I also understand the play to contribute to theories of transgender embodiment. Another piece of writing, Arsenault's "Manifesto," is an important companion text in which she reflects upon her gender transition as a journey, outlines her artistic principles, and articulates how she understands her daily life, formal stage performances, and the creation of identities and embodiments through photographic self-portraiture as intertwined.

As my research on the subjective, corporeal nature of transgender embodiment and experience centres on life writing and first-person accounts, I draw on the insights of scholars in life writing and autobiography studies. Life writing studies offer a way of working with autobiographical materials and reading and evaluating texts. Marlene Kadar explains that life writing "include[s] the conventional 'autobiographical' genres of writing, such as diaries, journals, letters, and autobiography itself. However, life writing is itself a blended genre; it may include both fictional and non-fictional elements, and ingredients of both popular and high art" (ix). Life writing is thus inclusive, varied, and critical. Kadar argues, "Studying life writing forces the reader to consider accepted standards of literary excellence, cultural truth, and larger philosophical questions related to the role and interpretation of the subject/subjectivity and its supposed opposite, objective and rational thought" (x). This approach challenges the assumption that autobiographical documents are necessarily objective, true, or non-fictional, pushes the reader to question assumptions about literary standards and canons, and invites the reader to engage reflexively and consider their own subjectivity. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's work *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives* offers a framework through which to approach these genres, and through which to tease out the

various considerations that arise from this kind of writing, in terms of how it links to my interest in embodiment.

In another text, *Interfaces*, Smith and Watson describe the complex history of “autobiography,” often used to represent the “retrospective narration of ‘great’ public lives” a mode from which women are often excluded (8). For them “life narrative” is a preferred term to encompass diverse forms of life writing and storytelling (*Interfaces* 8). As a methodology, Smith and Watson define life writing or life narrative as “a set of shifting, self-referential practices” in which the subject is “inescapably in dialogue with the culturally marked differences that inflect models of identity and underwrite the formation of autobiographical subjectivity” (*Interfaces* 9). This way of understanding life writing suggests that writers examine their own subject positions in relation to larger narratives.

Smith and Watson name “embodiment” as one of the “constitutive processes of autobiographical subjectivity” (*Reading Autobiography* 15), along with memory, experience, identity, and agency. Their statement that “the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge, as well as textual surface upon which a person’s life is inscribed” (*Reading Autobiography* 37) is particularly true for Arsenault, as the emotional elements of her autobiography stem directly from reflective experiences of being in her body, in its various incarnations, from childhood to the time of writing. The material, fleshly body as a site of knowledge production is even more pronounced.

Smith’s work, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*, historicizes the dis-embodiment and bodily subordination of the Enlightenment self. In introducing the concept of the universal

subject, Smith theorizes woman as marginalized, having a selfhood that is distinctly not that of the universal (male) subject. If, as Smith explains, the “history of the universal subject thereby underwrites a history of the female subject” (11), the idealized “universal subject” represents the trans individual even less. Fittingly for my research, Smith’s text moves towards a consideration of cyborg embodiment and politics as intersecting with subjectivity and embodiment in autobiography, in terms of how this cyborg figure, “a kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self” (Haraway, quoted in Smith 205) challenges and destabilizes the assumption of a stable “I” identity in autobiography.

Life writing, as a way of working with materials, also emphasizes self-reflexivity and situating the self as a researcher. I approach transgender autobiography, theory, and activism as an outsider – I am a cisgender woman and thus not able to read Arsenault from a space of personal knowledge and embodiment. While foregrounding my position as a cisgender identified academic, in this thesis I endeavour to support the assertion of subjectivity in Arsenault’s work, and support the subjectivity of trans cultural producers, more broadly. I acknowledge my privilege as part of a self-conscious intention to learn and avoid replicating research that has objectified trans people without centering their voices and experiences. I maintain that it is imperative to resist the discourse that trans lives and stories are owed, or must be made available, to consumers. My priority is what trans scholars and writers say about their own experiences, identities, and embodiments. While I bring in the work of other scholars in order to analyze aspects of Arsenault’s art, writing, and performance, especially in terms of theories of cosmetic surgery and performance art, I focus on trans-identified writers for transgender theory.

Trans stories must be considered in the context of issues of agency and authorship – who is telling the story and for whose benefit? As Arsenault notes in her final “T-Girl” column for *Fab* magazine, published online in 2006, “Transpeople have been the subjects of countless documentaries but we are rarely the ones in charge of our own images and stories.” Autobiography, as a genre and a practice, is integral to amplifying the voices of marginalized people, allowing them to tell their stories in their own words. As Smith and Watson affirm:

During the last century women have been naming themselves by making art and performance from their own bodies, experiential histories, memories, and personal landscapes in myriad textual and visual modes and in multiple media. These autobiographical acts situate the body in some kind of material surround that functions as a theatre of embodied self-representation. (*Interfaces* 5)

Self-representation has been valuable for women as marginalized subjects, and autobiographical modes such as writing and art have been instrumental for women’s voices, politically. For similar reasons, autobiography has been a popular genre through which transgender people have told their life stories.

Yet while some trans scholars and writers find autobiographical works empowering, others criticize the genre as exploitative and limiting. Trans scholar Viviane Namaste, for example, critiques the social pressure for trans people to tell their stories on command (*Sex Change, Social Change* 61). Writing in 1995, trans activist Kate Bornstein explains, “Up until the last few years, all we’d be able to write *and get published* were our autobiographies, tales of women trapped in the bodies of men or men pining away in

the bodies of women” (*Gender Outlaw* 12, emphasis in original). While there has always been curiosity for transgender stories and narratives of “sex changes,” trans writers emphasize the importance of not only being authors, but having the freedom and support to present their narratives in the terms they choose. There is a long history of popular media writing about transgender people that, while not always overtly transphobic, posits their gendered experience as a phenomenon for outsiders to scrutinize and validate without incorporating trans perspectives.

Not surprisingly, many trans writers and theorists are critical of the ways cisgender people position transgender narratives for cis tastes and curiosities, arguing instead that trans people should write for their own community (Fitzpatrick, Horowitz). As trans identities and politics are being increasingly discussed in alternative and mainstream media, particularly online, many media and pop culture writers have critiqued how we expect trans people to share intimate details of their lives and bodies, arguing that journalists frequently subject trans people to invasive and objectifying questions (Milloy, Mock, Truitt). Contemporary media examples of this include the infamous January 2014 interview of trans actress Laverne Cox and trans model Carmen Carrera by Katie Couric (Molloy) and, the next month, a similarly inflammatory interview of advocate and author Janet Mock by CNN’s Piers Morgan (McDonough). While Cox and Carrera were supposed to be interviewed in the context of being trans women with successful careers and bringing attention to trans visibility through those platforms, Couric took the interview into an invasive and sensational direction while using trans insensitive language. As Katie McDonough reports, “Couric, it seems, was mostly interested in talking to both women about their genitalia, in order to ‘educate’ others who may not be

‘familiar with transgenders.’” In the case of Mock and Morgan, as Parker Marie Molloy reports online for *The Advocate*:

Throughout her appearance on the show, CNN’s on-screen description of Mock read, “was a boy until age 18.” Morgan repeatedly used Mock’s old name, and asked what advice Mock would offer to young trans women, and used her former name as an example. Simultaneously, the show’s official Twitter account posed the question, “How would you feel if you found out the woman you were dating was formerly a man?”

As Mock later tweeted, “Nuance in media is nearly impossible but I do hope we continue to write the records of our own lives & relay that nuance #redefiningrealness” (quoted in Molloy). Clearly, even with an increasing availability of trans people in mainstream media and some degree of increased understanding and acceptance, trans people’s ways of representing their experiences and lives continue to be re-purposed to suit the pre-existing, cisnormative schema.

Traditional expectations for transgender biography and the public’s increasing fascination with trans lives and bodies often leads to totalizing and limiting ideas of trans experiences. As Eve Deshane explains in *The Atlantic* web magazine, many transgender narratives employ similar tropes, and their formulaic quality needs to be understood in relation to the medico-legal frameworks that have required trans people to delineate their personal histories in ways that are acceptable and palatable to cis understandings:

The autobiography has become a standard part of the transgender narrative over the past 60 years. [...] These books often evoke the same trope (“trapped in the wrong body”) and end with the final revelatory surgery.

[...] The problem with these tropes and older transgender narratives is that they are, by definition, tied up in the medical institution that created them.

[...] The transgender narrative our culture has come to know is not always the one that transgender people want to tell, but instead what the doctors, counselors, and now us as a culture want to hear.

Namaste critiques what she calls “the autobiographical imperative” for trans people (58).

While Prosser describes every transsexual person as an autobiographer due to having to construct and share a story of their experience of gender identity (101), Namaste argues that there are certain scripts the non-transsexual public expects of the trans individual, and an expectation of being willing to share anything and everything. She writes,

“Transsexuals may be allowed to speak, but only insofar as they offer their personal autobiographies, and only as long as they respond to the questions posed by a non-transsexual interviewer.” (58) Thus even in instances that appear innocuous or benevolent, in which a trans person is encouraged to speak on issues, they are expected to connect their thoughts to intimate details of their own life. Namaste continues, “The autobiographical imperative requires that transsexuals tell our stories of sex change on demand, that we speak about our bodies, our sexualities, our desires, our genitals, and our deep pain at the whim of a curious non-transsexual person” (61). Although Arsenault chooses to include and even foreground her transgender identities and embodiments in her writing and art, it is crucial, particularly for cisgender writers like myself, to be critically aware that this is not always the case nor should it be. Without suggesting that Arsenault has been pressured to participate in a trans-narrator/cisgender-consumer dyad that requires her to offer intimate experiences for display, I recognize that a larger,

socially entrenched discourse still exists in which this formula is the one that the dominant non-trans population has deemed acceptable and desirable. Still, Arsenault's self-reflexive and self-conscious narration of self and art leads me to think she is well aware of the implications of presenting her trans story – and trans body – as an open book. Arsenault invites us to look and become aware of our curiosity and desire to look, while forcing us to know that she owns her story and chooses to allow an audience to witness this narrative. She works from within the contradictions and consequences of foregrounding her body and intimate personal history, as part of both trans visibility and artistic expression.

While Arsenault frames *The Silicone Diaries* as life writing that draws on her true, lived experiences, it is necessary to note the possibilities of falsehood, interpreted experiences, and silences in autobiographical writing. Arsenault highlights memorable – and tellable – experiences over a thirty year period in disparate episodes that invoke substantial memory and recollection. In analyzing the play, I reflect on the fact that there are many other experiences and memories she chooses not to reveal or emphasize. At times, Arsenault narrativizes aspects of her story in a way that invites the reader to understand the play as a dramatized and subjective retelling of her experiences. For Arsenault, artifice is part of the pursuit of authenticity. As will become clear throughout this thesis, the tension between fact and fiction, truth and artifice, is particularly complex for Arsenault; indeed, artifice is intrinsic to her performance and the telling of her truth.

As Susan Stryker explains, there is clearly a difference between studying transgender people, and *doing* transgender studies in which personal, experiential knowledge shapes theory. She writes, “Transgender studies considers the embodied

experience of the speaking subject, who claims constative knowledge of the referent topic, to be a proper – indeed essential – component of the analysis of transgender phenomena” (“(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 23). In *Second Skins*, Prosser discusses the expectation to tell a personal story of transgender self-discovery, in answer to a question that is often posed along the lines of “when did you know?” Prosser explains:

The story of a strong, early and persistent transgendered identification is required by the clinical authorities...who traditionally function as the gatekeepers to the means of transsexual “conversion.” Whether s/he publishes an autobiography or not, then, every transsexual, is originally an autobiographer. Narrative is also a kind of second skin: the story the transsexual must weave around the body in order that this body may be “read.” (101)

Here Prosser suggests that narrative is intertwined with gender presentation – without a narrative of one’s own gender, the body may be, in Butler’s terms, illegible and unintelligible. Just as Arsenault enacts her feminine selfhood through image and performance, she enacts it through narrative – through her story of transgender experience. Prosser points to how bodies are made legible through narrative; this is particularly crucial to trans bodies (and lives), which people often consider illegible or misunderstand as a result of societal cissexism – the assumption that all people identify their gender with the sex they were assigned at birth. As I show, Arsenault frames her autobiography in similar terms, emphasizing her experience of incongruity between the gender she was assigned at birth and her chosen gender, and situating this longing as starting at an early age.

In the previous section I have outlined my research methodology for this thesis. I explained that my methodology is informed by studies of life writing and women's autobiographical practices. Drawing on transgender life writing is vital due to the historical erasure of trans voices and the fact that stories have often been co-opted to fit cisnormative standards. I emphasized that life writing is a means to assert agency and authorship within marginalized communities. In the next chapter, I analyze *The Silicone Diaries* through close reading of sections of the texts to reveal how Arsenault constructs a narrative of ongoing transgender embodiment. I focus on how she represents her cross-gender embodiment from a young age through psychic identification with the concepts of beauty and femininity themselves, often turning to supernatural, mythological, or artificial signifiers.

“Journal writing gave way to tightly crafted memoir stories about my simultaneously physical and spiritual transformations, the people who were helping me metamorphosize, and the new sexual personae I was embodying.”

Nina Arsenault, “A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture,” 66

Chapter 3: “Make me plastic. Make me beautiful”: Questing for Femininity

Nina Arsenault challenges ideas about identity, embodiment, femininity, beauty, and self-creation in her work. She structures the play *The Silicone Diaries*, a collection of seven monologues spanning thirty years of her life, around events in her interior and exterior metamorphosis.⁹ The story begins in 1979 when she was five years old and ends in 2009, overlapping with the time she started performing the work. *The Silicone Diaries* 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. Arsenault has performed the play as recently as 2012 and she is the only person to have done so. The text of the play is published only in the *TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work* anthology edited by Judith Rudakoff.

While *The Silicone Diaries* is a textual narrative, which I understand as a powerful literary representation of transgender embodiment and life writing in its own right, Arsenault wrote the play to be performed before an audience. As such, the play has components that meet Tami Spry’s definition of performative autoethnography. In Spry’s pedagogy of performative autoethnography, she emphasizes the body as a site of

⁹ In the analysis that follows, I refer to each monologue, which has a title that indicates the years represented, as a diary entry, episode, or scene.

inscription (“a cultural billboard”) and life as an artifact, themes that connect directly to Arsenault’s view of her own work (98).

In this chapter, I examine how 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. I interrogate Arsenault’s decision to go beyond passing and embrace a hyperfeminine ideal. My analysis of the text suggests that, for Arsenault, transgender embodiment is a process of becoming, rather than a journey to a fixed product. She embraces the evolution of different selves, but rather than erasing previous identities, she considers them all part of her larger project. Arsenault also situates gender as both a psychic and embodied experience that can nevertheless be detached from sexed anatomy. Arsenault deals with the potential charge of not being “real” on two fronts – she is a trans woman, so society may position her gender identity as illegitimate, and she has a body that has been heavily surgically altered and exaggerates mainstream ideals for women’s bodies. My examination of Arsenault’s diary entries and the documentation of her journey reveals her preoccupation with trying to live authentically, somewhat paradoxically, while altering her body in artificial and extreme ways. *The Silicone Diaries* is a story of womanhood, a woman’s evolving relationship to her own embodied experience, and personal transformation, more broadly. Arsenault’s work proposes a revisioning of what it means to be a “real” woman, unabashedly reclaiming fakeness and plasticity as well as the characterization of woman as sexual object. While Arsenault is, indisputably, real in the literal sense, realness in this context has more to do with how people perceive both gender and the physical body to be either real, as in authentic and natural, or not real.

In this thesis, I use “real” both in terms of privileging lived gender over sex assigned at birth, and in terms of how bodies and physical appearance can be judged as real or not real. People have often discriminated against trans women and accused them of not being real women. In a different way, mainstream advertising also uses real to connote “everyday” or “natural,” or to refer to women who are outside the narrow confines of model and celebrity body ideals. Trans theorist and performance artist Micha Cárdenas’s notion of the “transreal,” a way of understanding multiple and simultaneous realities as a political and artistic medium, is useful for thinking about how Arsenault embodies different personae and archetypes while embracing 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. At times this critique came viciously from so-called feminists who didn’t share my vision of what feminism could mean, and it continues to happen on a daily basis in my interactions with people who want to tell me that I am a man. The transreal is the embracing of an identity 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)

Cárdenas theorizes identity as multiple and fluid at the interface of the “real,” born-with body, and the written or constructed identities she has gathered over time. This notion of

the transreal also applies to Arsenault's self-concept as embodying different figures and archetypes at different phases and life stages. As noted in the previous chapter, Arsenault describes her identification with an array of different figures in her "Manifesto." It is clear that she understands herself as moving through these different embodiments and identities, but she also suggests that all of these embodiments and identities feel real on an experiential level. To examine how Arsenault understands her own embodiment, and how that contributes to an understanding of transgender subjectivity, I begin by discussing the quest elements that underlie her play and how she has framed her life, and gender transition, as an artistic journey.

Quest Narrative

Metaphor is a rhetorical element of Arsenault's writing; in particular, she uses the extended metaphor of the quest to structure her narrative and frame her gender transition, both in her play but also more broadly in her art practice and perception of her life as art. In her "Manifesto," she explains: "During my transformations, I used metaphors such as life is...a Homeric odyssey...and a hero's quest" (66). The quest narrative is a story that depicts a central questing protagonist and his expedition for something valuable or elusive. This pattern, meant to demonstrate the hero's growth, is part of a long literary tradition. W. H. Auden calls the quest "one of the oldest, hardest, and most popular of all literary genres," arguing that writers popularized the quest motif in history and literature because "human 'nature' is a nature continually in quest of itself, obliged at every moment to *transcend* what it was a moment before" (42; my emphasis).¹⁰ The familiar

¹⁰ I will take up the topic of transcendence in Arsenault's work in the next chapter.

patterns that comprise the quest narrative have been codified in Joseph Campbell's theory of "the monomyth" found in his seminal work *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (30). Campbell posits that the formula of the hero's quest is based on a process of separation, initiation, and return, stipulating a series of stages typically found in such stories. These stages include: the call to adventure, the crossing of the first threshold, the meeting with the goddess, the apotheosis, and the return, among others. Further, scholars argue that narrative forms and archetypes in literature are often gendered. Drawing on the work of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Susan Lanser, Ingrid G. Daemmic argues that certain narratives highlight the relationship between narrative structure and gendered storytelling (213). She argues that narratives grounded in the motif of a quest for paradise revolve around male characters and definitively male goals:

Despite varied intentions, settings, and genres, these narrations exhibit two common characteristics: they integrate a male-initiated adventure and quest with the longing for paradisaal bliss, and they are all written by men for a predominantly male audience. [...] First, with the exception of the imitative Christiana in Bunyan's sequence to *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to the Next*, women questers are noticeably absent in these texts. Instead, the feminine is identified as the paradisaal landscape itself. (214)

Traditionally, women (or the feminine, as it is symbolized in the natural world) may be the object of a quest but not the questing figure. Daemmic explains that in contrast to traditional, male-authored, male-centered quests, "women's narratives" emerged to take a different structural form that favoured "complex, nonlinear patterns" and moved away

“from a familiar scripted, linear progression to unfamiliar, open-ended, fluid structures that signal stories in progress” (217). In her study of the heroic quest narrative of Audre Lorde’s “Tar Beach,” M. Charlene Ball discusses the prevailing, presumed maleness of the paradigmatic quester. She explains that in the classic narrative, the hero’s quest is achieved upon union with a divine female figure “who represents his anima or soul” (61). Ball argues that this pattern rests on the assumption that the hero is male, noting that “when a woman is the hero, the narrative changes” (61). Ball describes mythmaking that writes against traditional, masculine norms as “revisionist myth,” such as in the case of Lorde’s depiction of a black, female, lesbian perspective. Ball writes, “Revisionist myth...challenges and displaces existing myth, making visible what had been made invisible and making political what had been naturalized” (63). If the archetypal questing hero in the Western canon is a figure such as Odysseus, a decidedly masculine persona, Arsenault repurposes this icon and imagines herself as the Odysseus in her own odyssey toward womanhood.

Arsenault revises and reimagines the traditional quest narrative, first, by situating herself as a woman quester, already subversive to the monomyth, and second, by offering a transgender woman’s perspective. Furthermore, instead of offering her audience a narrative of completion or accomplishment, she documents a queer journey with no clear ending or resolution, a journey that is as invested in the process as it is in the product. While historically and canonically the quest narrative’s hero is male and must repeatedly demonstrate or prove his masculinity through different feats and challenges, such as enduring a physical journey over a great distance, fighting battles, and outwitting traps, Arsenault is a woman searching to prove – or create – her femininity. Her search is for

forms of femininity and beauty that can be satisfied as a trans woman, and her arduous hurdles range from accessing silicone injections to performing as a webcam sex worker in order to earn money. While each stage of Campbell's monomyth may not map neatly onto *The Silicone Diaries*, I interpret versions of several different aspects of the hero's quest in her play, from The Road of Trials (97), the Meeting with the Goddess (109), to the Apotheosis (149).¹¹ The generic quest motif fits, considering the many obstacles involved in coming out as trans and pursuing some form of gender reassignment, including money, access to services, dealing with medical gatekeepers, and social stigma and prejudice. Arsenault frames herself as the heroine of her own life story using each diary entry to document her trials and highlight her ongoing growth. She explains "the temporality of [her] body" in her "Manifesto:" "I was not in any permanent way a boy, a girl, a man, a woman, a child, an adult, natural, artificial, sexy, thin, healthy, beautiful, or virtual. I am not my bodies, which are constantly disappearing" (68). Arsenault conceptualizes the stages of her changing body as impermanent and fleeting, insisting on her embodiment as a cumulative, dynamic process that is not limited to any single incarnation.

Arsenault's goal, as dramatized in *The Silicone Diaries*, is the attainment of her personal ideal of femininity. Arsenault also describes, at various times, successful femininity as being "convincing." In the second diary entry, she describes fearing she won't "make it as a transsexual" due to being "too masculine-looking" (208). In the diary entries based on her memories as an adult, it is clear that she considers successful

¹¹ These are some stages of the hero's quest that Campbell identifies in his text.

femininity to mean passing as non-trans. This conviction, that “success” is equated with passing, evolves throughout the play as she comes to accept the challenges of passing and decides to go beyond and pursue exaggerated extremes. As Sky Gilbert comments, “her transformation was less from man to woman as from man to a heterosexual man’s porn star fantasy” (21). From Barbie to iconic ’90s actress Pamela Anderson, shapely and normatively attractive feminine figures are a clear inspiration. It is clear her conception of femininity is inspired by certain ideals of hegemonic beauty. I will discuss her early recollections of admiring store mannequins and nude models in adult magazines later in this chapter.

In addition to performing “convincing” femininity, Arsenault explains that femininity and the ability to pass are considered capital among trans women. She writes about making the six-hour drive to Detroit for illegal silicone injections with another woman named Candi:

In my passenger seat is one of the most beautiful and *convincing* transsexual girls I’ve ever met. Her name is Candi. [...] Candi doesn’t have a car and can’t drive, so she asks me if I’ll drive her. I know she knows I’ll agree because she looks just like a real woman. She reminds me of this quite often. In our community, that means she’s the alpha, and I should just be happy to be around her, to be in the presence of such realness. (211; my emphasis)

Arsenault then describes another trans woman they meet: “We’re greeted by a beautiful woman with big bouncing breasts and an hourglass figure. Her body is so feminine. I don’t realize Simone is a transsexual” (211). Femininity, for Arsenault, isn’t as simple as

passing as a cisgender woman; she wants to embody the characteristics that typically mark someone as being assigned female at birth, such as large breasts and hips.

To succeed as a trans woman, Arsenault feels she must conceal her maleness while exaggerating feminine signifiers. This pursuit, and her evolving relationship to femininity, underscores the play. At various points in her story, Arsenault reiterates her goals and affirms her commitment to the mission. After paying another trans woman thousands of dollars to inject her with silicone, for example, Arsenault reflects on the risks and uncertainty of the future, but asserts her commitment to trying. She writes, “honestly, I’m not exactly sure what will happen to our bodies in ten or twenty or thirty years. What I do know is that we have [*sic*] to put it all on the line for who we had to be, and that means what we had to look like. There will be no going back” (214). The play does not end upon her achievement of a certain level of femininity; rather, she acknowledges that the goal is ongoing and will continue to evolve as she ages and as time passes. In this way, Arsenault rewrites the notion of a quest, showing that some journeys have no clear ending, particularly when the search is for something intangible and shifting, such as beauty or femininity.

The Fantasy of Femininity

Arsenault establishes her early interest in the female form and the fantasy of femininity in the first episode of *The Silicone Diaries*. In “Sex/object (1979),” she narrates how, while physically presenting as a young boy, she becomes fascinated with the perfect proportions of a female mannequin while shopping with her mother at the local Zellers store. Arsenault begins the play with this scene as a sort of origin story; she

uses this recollection to situate the beginnings of her transgender identification quest. She writes:

I lay my five-year-old eyes on one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. She is surrounded by bins of support bras and baggy panties, standing in the centre of the Zeller's "Lingerie" department. She is lit by fluorescent tube lights. In their unforgiving glare she is painted flawlessly. Cloaked in the white noise humming from these lights, she is frozen in time. Her neck is extended gracefully. A serene, regal expression on her face. Eyes wide open and empty. (206)

Then a five-year-old boy named Rodney, Arsenault imagines that the woman is a life-sized doll. Her mother corrects her, explaining that they are called mannequins. Here, Arsenault introduces the reader to an early cross-gender identification and interest in femininity through idealistic icons. Arsenault presents the mannequin as something – or someone – to be revered. With an exaggerated awe, Arsenault recounts herself admiring the beauty and flawlessness of the mannequin. Specifically, Arsenault notes the serenity of the inert creature. In doing so, she posits that femininity is an idyllic state offering the promise of happiness and peace to anyone who can manage to successfully achieve it.

With the description "Eyes wide open and empty" Arsenault emphasizes the inherent unrealness of this figure – she has eyes but sees nothing. The mannequin is designed solely to be on display, passive, silent, "frozen in time" (206). At the end of this scene, Arsenault asks her mother of the mannequin: "Is she real?" (206). This question, left unanswered here, lingers suggestively over the rest of the episode and the play as a whole. Arsenault chooses to dramatize that it isn't human or "real" women that her young

self looks to as ideals, but mannequins, examples of artificial constructions of femininity and the female form. This matters, as Arsenault goes on to alter, through surgery, her own body into an “artificial” or enhanced female form. Through bodily technologies, the fantasy can become reality.

Arsenault uses humour in this scene to comically dramatize the over-the-top reverence her younger self feels for the mannequin, suggesting that Zellers might be an unlikely place to find beauty icons. She is not admiring a glamorous mannequin in a high fashion store, but rather a basic, low-end mannequin in a Canadian discount department store, her beauty offset by “bins of support bras and baggy panties” (206). Her scare quotes around the word “Lingerie” suggest that this store isn’t associated with sexiness. Arsenault depicts the mannequin reigning beautiful and supreme in a realm of the less glamorous aspects of female reality, notably the bins of bras and baggy panties that women may wear for practical purposes rather than aesthetics. While there is likely nothing specifically unique or alluring about this mannequin, Arsenault constructs the scene from her five-year-old perspective, with the mannequin, under the bright lights, as the focal point of the store, revered by all who behold her. She writes, “Shoppers circle her, and, unselfconsciously, they stare at her beauty as they pass. One woman even curtsies to rub the fabric at the bottom of her slip, as if an aura of glamour could be stroked from her” (206). For Arsenault to find such glamour and grace in a discount department store reads ironically for the reader. Still, Arsenault looks back at this point and recognizes that examples of such femininity had a significant impact. She continues, “A Zellers employee approaches the beauty from behind and slips the straps of her satin nightie from her shoulders. As it flutters to the floor, bare breasts are exposed with no

nipples” (206). The absence of nipples is significant; similar to the Barbie doll, noted for her large, feminine breasts without actual nipples, the mannequin’s breasts are unreal. They exist, in molded plastic, to signal femininity or femaleness and to display clothing for women. The breasts are not functional – they have no sensation and no nurturing utility – and yet they signify the figure is a woman. This contradiction emphasizes the separation between sexed anatomy and the characteristics that connote femininity or masculinity.

Being plastic and artificial, the slim, idealized mannequin evokes the imagery of plastic surgery. Beyond signifying a certain idealized white, Western form of feminine beauty, mannequin imagery evokes the idea of passive lifelessness. A mannequin is still, silent, and passive, manipulated into poses for the sole purpose of being gazed at. Yet while Arsenault seems to embrace this imagery of passive, objectified femininity, she also appears to subvert it through her controlled and deliberate use of such images. As a trans woman, she undermines the idea of normative femininity as an innate state of being, organically emerging from birth and biology. Of course, mannequins and media imagery impact cis women as well, fostering a pressure to conform to socially prized (and often quite difficult to attain) ideals. The pervasive influence of advertising culture and media ideals is evident in the fact that Arsenault looked to magazines and mannequins for early cues on what women are “supposed” to look like.

In the same scene, Arsenault recounts looking at adult magazines as a young boy and sensing a strong, poignant yearning to be a woman. This is the first specific mention of her gender dysphoria. Arsenault recounts being in a neighbourhood playground imitating the mannequin poses she has seen, modelling an idea of performative femininity

after these beautiful exemplars: “my five-year-old back is arched. My five-year-old leg is pointed. My wrist is thrown dramatically over the lip of the slide” (206). This scene anticipates Arsenault’s discovery that femininity is more than one’s body or appearance; she begins to experiment with femininity as something she can *do*.

More significantly, in this scene she describes hanging out with other boys and rifling through “girlie magazines” in the woods behind the trailer park in Beamsville, Ontario where she grew up. She writes, “The pictures are not of women. They are Goddesses. They have the biggest hair I have ever seen” (207). If the pictures are not of “women,” what do they depict? Just as in the mannequin scene, Arsenault evokes a consideration of this real/fake dichotomy. While previously Arsenault asked of the mannequin, “is she real?” she now more confidently declares: “the pictures are not of women” (207). Goddesses are evidently something else, something more. As the narrative progresses, “Goddess¹²” becomes Arsenault’s word for a form of femininity that exceeds the real, entering the realm of icon and fantasy.

In the same scene, Arsenault recollects witnessing the group of boys acting in a sexually aggressive and misogynist way. Arsenault describes the fear and confusion she feels as the boys become violent with the magazines:

They are now turning the pages quite unceremoniously. The edges of faces, breasts and legs are being crumpled. One of the boys has a Swiss Army knife. It has a corkscrew on it. He’s slicing X’s across breasts. Down a bum crack. Through a lustfully waiting mouth. The boys’

¹² When quoting Arsenault, I maintain her capitalization of Goddess. In other instances, I will not capitalize.

excitement is turning into something that looks a lot like anger. They are chasing each other around the outside of the overturned fiberglass shell, trying to own the pictures. I can hear their yells coming through the holes in the fort. [...] Inside I scream, too. The high pitched scream of a five-year-old boy's voice, screaming like a screen siren being torn apart by a giant movie shark. (207)

Arsenault describes the boys' treatment of the magazines as "unceremonious," that is, disrespectful. For the boys, the images are titillating and exciting but do not warrant respect, and the magazine women become the objects of scorn and juvenile taunting. By mutilating the pictures they are trying "to own" the images. For her, however, the pages contain images of goddesses to be imitated and revered. In the last line, Arsenault takes on this slippage between the image as site of violence and a site of autobiographical desire. She compares her five-year-old self – now symbolically embodying the women in the images – to "a screen siren," connoting a beautiful actress or starlet, specifically one under threat. Considering that the movie *Jaws* was released in 1975, and that its iconic movie poster shows a young, blonde woman in terrifying proximity to an unseen, underwater threat, this description suggests the fantastic, but also sexist and misogynist, depiction of women as victims in thriller or slasher films.

Arsenault's internal scream, and her identification with the images being ripped apart, signals her discomfort with witnessing this violent scene. She is uncomfortable, not only because of the masculine sexualized aggression happening in front of her, but because of her own increasing subconscious identification with women, and with a particular kind of hyperfeminine women. The monologue ends with her conclusion about

the women in the magazines: “I know this is exactly what I will be when I grow up” (207). In this line Arsenault indicates a certainty on multiple levels: she has conviction that she, through a pursuit of femininity and her strong sense of cross-gender identification, will eventually “grow up” to be a woman/goddess. On another level, it reveals knowledge of the ugly and dangerous aspects of life as a woman. While at age five she didn’t yet have a concept of misogynist or transmisogynist prejudice and violence, in hindsight she can ascribe the expectation of this violence to this moment. The ripping apart of the magazine women also prefigures the tearing apart of her own body that will be a necessary sacrifice of cosmetic surgery and silicone injections.

In the mythic narrative of the play, these episodes demonstrate the starting point of Arsenault’s quest, the point at which a child assigned male became enthralled with images she would later resemble. It furthermore locates what Arsenault can now retroactively identify as an early longing to be something other than a woman; rather, she longs to be a goddess. She uses this term to signify the embodiment of a concept of femininity that paradoxically transcends physicality, adding complexity to her relationship with the real. Arsenault’s Zellers mannequin and the glossy nude women in magazines correspond to icons of a certain Western image of idealized feminine beauty and sexiness that rely on overall thinness, curvaceous hips and full breasts, long, full hair, full lips, and other features. Similar images may be found in many places and through multiple sources. While mannequins’ bodies typically echo fashion models in their adherence to idealized and possibly unrealistic expectations for the female body, rather than acting as true reflections of the range of bodies that may actually buy the commodities they display, mannequins may go even further by encapsulating extremes.

Mannequin bodies often show femininity in excess, in terms of height, waist size, and other measurements; they rarely reflect the average consumer. In these objects, femininity is excessive rather than truly normative.

Beyond their demonstration of feminine extremes, mannequins and magazine images are also static – unmoving and constructed specifically for display. The mannequin is plastic and inert, and the magazine women are photographic images of women designed uniquely for sexual consumption by the heterosexual male gaze. 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 chooses to highlight in these memories. Rather, it is images that engage with “the aestheticization of the female form” (“Manifesto” 65), which are connected to, and yet distinct from, any notion of the “real woman.” Yet by dictating the terms of her own feminine embodiment and self-objectification, Arsenault queers the hegemony of the male gaze. As a trans woman sexually attracted to men, Arsenault constructs some of her pursuit of femininity in terms of being attractive to men, for her, an important part of succeeding to live as a woman. Nevertheless, she constructs her interest in feeling beautiful and sexy as a goal grounded in living authentically as the woman she is, rather than complying with a patriarchal standard. Throughout her transformation, Arsenault looks to various icons of feminine beauty as muses, which I will analyze in the next section.

Identifications: Aphrodite and Geisha

Within the quest narrative of *The Silicone Diaries*, Arsenault names Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, as an inspirational guide during her journey of

feminine becoming. Arsenault establishes Aphrodite's significance as a muse in both the play and in her photographic self-portrait, *Transformation* which alludes to Sandro Botticelli's painting *Birth of Venus* (Halferty 38). As Halferty explains of the myth of Aphrodite's birth, Cronus castrated his father Uranus and cast his genitals into the sea and then Aphrodite rose from the sea foam (38). The goddess is significant to Arsenault's sense of herself; Aphrodite is a beautiful woman who arose from male anatomy.

Aphrodite symbolizes beauty and evokes the concept of femininity, rather than merely its physical form. During the fourth diary entry, "I am my own self-portrait (2004),"

Arsenault recounts ritually scrutinizing her face in the mirror while Aphrodite watches:

Today, I am calm as I sit at my hypermodern, see-through, plastic vanity table. Over my left shoulder is naked Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty. She is a three-foot-by-four-foot painting of a Renaissance masterwork, an *imitation* of a Renaissance masterwork of natural beauty, *supernatural* beauty, which I've hung worshipfully in the centre of my tiny bachelorette apartment. No doubt it is painted by a man. I like to remember that the ancient priests of Aphrodite ritually castrated themselves in honour of their goddess, and worked as temple whores.

(215; my emphasis)

Aphrodite is both her audience and muse. Literally framing Arsenault's reflection in the mirror, she imbues Arsenault with the conviction to pursue her ideal appearance. Jay Prosser explains the centrality of mirror scenes in transsexual autobiographies, "A trope of transsexual representation, the split of the mirror captures the definitive splitting of the transsexual subject.... The difference between gender and sex is conveyed in the

difference between body image (projected self) and the image of the body (reflected self)” (100). The mirror scene in *The Silicone Diaries* operates similarly, demonstrating Arsenault’s perception of her own awakening physical femininity. Arsenault’s projected self, a definitively feminine person, is not accurately reflected by her exterior appearance. She ritually inspects her face, searching for flattering angles, attacking facial hair with precision, and describing the labour of methodically applying makeup. Still, she recognizes and laments, “This is the most my face will ever look like a natural woman” (215). She recognizes this barrier – the limits of femininity that can be achieved without extensive body modification – in the mirror. Prosser’s “splitting of the transsexual subject” occurs, as Arsenault decides to reconcile the projected self and reflected self and “get artistic” through plastic surgery (217). In the declaration “I will be plastic,” Arsenault returns to her early fixation on the plastic mannequin, but also suggests plasticity in terms of being malleable, flexible, and able to transform – a shape-shifter.

At this point in the play, Arsenault is focusing intently on her physical appearance and beauty regimen and commits to further and more extreme surgery. Arsenault constructs her self-maintenance as work and sacrifice, drawing a link between beauty and spiritual rituals in honour of one’s god(dess). Specifically, she notes ritual castration, suggesting extreme, bodily pain as part of worship, an element I will explore further in the next chapter. The reference to “temple whores” also creates a link between sex, sex work, and spirituality, which is significant given the role of sex work in Arsenault’s own history (215). In this scene, Arsenault describes the inspection of her face, the “annihilation” of facial hair, and the process of applying makeup, reminiscent of Butler’s theory of gender performativity and “stylized repetition of acts” (*Gender Trouble* 191).

Arsenault also makes clear that Aphrodite doesn't represent a naturally occurring beauty, but something beyond the natural and real: "supernatural" (215).

Based on Aphrodite's cultural position as a symbol of beauty and femininity, I read Arsenault's decision to remove her testicles, detailed in the same diary entry, as partially in honour of her goddess. In "I am my own self-portrait (2004)," Arsenault explains that she is preparing to go to Mexico for her orchiectomy, the surgical castration of the testicles. This castration is symbolic, but also practical: in Arsenault's odyssey, this is evidently a significant juncture, in which her body's "testosterone-producing parts" (216) will finally be gone, an important and irrevocable step towards her desired femininity. She writes, "I'm nervous that after my 'orchi' I'll be unlike anyone I've ever known, a woman with a dick but no balls, but by removing my body's testosterone-producing parts, I'll be doing everything possible to have the most beautiful skin I can achieve" (216). Arsenault's desire to remove her testicles has much more to do with ridding herself of testosterone, though, than any inherent meaning of testicles as masculine. She destabilizes the assumption that body parts must have an intrinsic gendered meaning. In this scene, Arsenault suggests that gender, like art, can be imitative. Just as her worshipfully displayed Aphrodite is an imitation of a Renaissance masterwork, itself a representation of the 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 while blurring the distinctions between fantasy and reality.

As a worshipper of beauty, Arsenault simultaneously serves and is served by Aphrodite; Arsenault uses this ideal as fodder for her transformation and enactment of self. According to Annis Pratt in her study of goddess archetypes, "Aphrodite is about the

experience of feminine sexuality. For heterosexual men, this means coming to terms with the impact of a lover upon the personality, and for women it entails coming to terms with one's own sensual nature" (101). Arsenault uses the iconography of this goddess to mythologize her own self-creation, and her exploration of her sexual nature as a woman assigned male at birth. As Pratt observes, "The interweaving of magical, political, and sexual powers in Aphrodite both interested and terrified classical authors, who revered her as a cosmic force at the same time as they dreaded her effect on them as men" (113). Arsenault is not only inspired by Aphrodite's beauty and femininity, but also by her power.

That said, scholars have also interpreted the symbolism of Aphrodite/Venus as oppressive. Susan Brownmiller argues, "the tyranny of Venus is felt whenever a woman thinks – or whenever a man thinks and tells a woman – that her hips are too wide, her thighs are too large, her breasts are too small, her waist is too high, her legs are too short to meet the current erotic standard" (24). While Aphrodite may embody the pressures of beauty and femininity on one level, for Arsenault she serves as a more symbolic inspiration of a supernatural quality upon which to model ideal feminine embodiment.

Guided by Aphrodite, Arsenault reflects on her quest while inspecting her face in the mirror and decides to take her surgical transition further, valuing art over nature. She writes:

Aphrodite above your head. That is a sign. If you cannot look like a normal woman, sacrifice being normal. I will be plastic. I will think of geisha. Stylized abstractions of beauty. Shuffling through the world. I love

them. Nina, give yourself permission to be fabulous, instead of reasonable.

Really fucking fabulous. Every fucking day. (217)

Arsenault takes Aphrodite's appearance in her mirror as a sign to pursue the supernatural, fantastic beauty she craves. Having already observed that she feels stifled in her pursuit of feminine beauty, and having been warned to avoid looking like a drag queen and feeling that "this is the most [her] face will ever look like a natural woman," she decides she will have to become highly aestheticized in order to move forward.

In this scene Arsenault also names Japanese geisha as iconic figures with whom she can identify during her pursuit of an aestheticized life. She perceives geisha as highly stylized entertainers who perform an effortful femininity. Geisha means "artist" and connotes both the elaborate enactment of femininity and beauty through elaborate make-up, costuming, and hairstyling, as well as the deliberate performance and demonstration of artistic submission. Arsenault appropriates the image of the geisha as an exotic Other, a symbol of a devoted artist. Like geisha, Arsenault performs femininity, both as a sex worker and theatre artist, in a deliberate fashion. The geisha identification is also apt when considering the association of the figure with objectification *in* art and objectification *as* art. Arsenault does not identify with geisha solely because of their complex and ornate appearance, but because of their status as feminine performers. In an interview with the *Toronto Star* published online, she explains her perception of a spiritual dimension in this kind of performance: "There's a way to perform femininity that, like the Geisha girl, can be a type of spiritual pursuit" (Rankin). In *The Silicone Diaries*, Arsenault describes geisha as "trained from a young age for beauty" (215). While Arsenault holds up geisha as exemplars of stylized feminine performance, it is also

worth noting that all women are, in some way or another, trained for beauty – trained to enact it as well as trained to aspire to it.

Like Arsenault, geisha are simultaneously performers of art and living works of art. Yoko Kawaguchi's book on the geisha in Western culture describes an Australian artist, Mortimer Menpes, and his impression of the geisha in his book *Japan* (1901): "Menpes praises the geisha for being a completely artificial construct, a product of art and the imagination" (68). Kawaguchi explains, "The geisha's canvas was her own person. She, moreover, made no pretense of being anything other than totally artificial. The geisha's beauty was the beauty of the man-made – of the unnatural, even" (69). Arsenault, too, makes an artistic canvas out of her own person. She never denies her artificiality, and instead uses it as a source of inspiration and exploration. Liza Dalby concurs, writing, "A geisha strives to become so permeated with her art that everything she does is informed by it, including the way she walks, sits, and speaks. [...] To polish one's life into a work of art, however high flown it may sound to non-Japanese, is the idea behind the discipline of a geisha" (217). According to this appraisal, a geisha's life and art are interwoven. Arsenault employs a similar philosophy, explaining "I see all of my creative work... as a continuing practice of living self-portraiture. My life and art are irrevocably entwined" ("Manifesto" 64). Arsenault perceives of her own conscious presentation of beauty and femininity as intertwined with performance, and her performance intertwined with her daily life.

As a white, Western woman, Arsenault does not demonstrate a deep understanding of geisha in history or culture; rather, her understanding of their image is limited to culturally appropriated, decontextualized, and sexualized images of the exotic

Other from a Western perspective. Her emotional identification with geisha as an aesthetic inspiration is therefore somewhat superficial. Nevertheless, it is clear her reference to geisha draws on the idea of what a geisha is imagined to represent. In this way, she doesn't align her own experience with that of geisha, or suggest their similarities, so much as consider their iconic artistry to be inspiring. In another reference, Arsenault makes an explicit connection between geisha and disciplined, ritualistic, and regimented beauty work: "When I'm about to pluck, if I think of pain I think of geishas. Trained from a young age for beauty. If I have a hair on my upper lip, I think of African women and lip disks. I know nothing about them, but, my Goddess, the sacrifice" (215). These thoughts prefigure her later meditations on suffering and sacrifice, which I will examine in the next chapter. While there is an element of humility in Arsenault's acknowledgement "I know nothing about them," there is still a totalizing naiveté in linking her own practices to those of broadly generalized, generic "African women." Once more, these hypothetical, body-modifying women are appealing because of their exoticism and the lengths they go to in order to realize their particular aesthetic ideals. To Arsenault, geisha and African women are as remote and otherworldly as her mythological goddesses. In the next section, I argue that negotiating artificiality is integral to how Arsenault both participates in "the aestheticization of the female form" ("Manifesto" 65) and subverts cisnormative concepts of gender.

Embracing Artificiality

One could easily read Nina Arsenault's use of cosmetic surgery, silicone enhancement, and feminine signifiers such as makeup, wigs, and certain clothing, as

“artificial” aspects of self-presentation, yet, for her, they enable and make real her inner femininity. She explains of her surgeries in her “Manifesto,” “some of these procedures created an external feminine gender to match my own internal sense of being” (65-66). This statement reveals how, for Arsenault, matching the external to the internal was necessary for her embodiment. She continues, “Other operations, however, were motivated by my continued quest for beauty, a PASSION I devoted myself to completely – body, mind, and spirit” (66; capitalization in original). Arsenault undertakes the self-conscious task – “quest,” as she imagines it – of beautification while engaging philosophically with the meaning created through treating the body as an aesthetic project. She explains:

I understood the aestheticization of the female form and the performance of femininity as among the greatest narratives in the history of art and culture. [...] As an artist and a transsexual aesthete it was my intention to augment, to continue, to deconstruct, to celebrate, and to subvert this lineage in the most vibrant and visceral ways I could. (“Manifesto” 65)

Here, Arsenault testifies to how she imagines her embodied engagement with femininity and beauty as a living art project. Her performance of femininity may be more conscious and calculated than its enactment by a cisgender woman; femininity generally requires greater effort for a person assigned male at birth. Whether it be styling herself to look adequately feminine through video projection for an online sex chat room (209), to doing favours for more feminine or “fishy” transsexual girls in order to gain access to their resources (211), Arsenault chronicles her experiences trying to become her most authentic self.

While Arsenault is intently focused on conveying a specific trans femininity, she describes a ritualized performance of femininity undertaken by many non-trans women. As with plastic surgery, scholars have linked women's rituals of applying makeup and constructing an appearance to the promotion of hegemonic femininity, and feminist discourses have often read makeup as a symptom of patriarchal oppression. In her 1990 book, Naomi Wolf writes about the beauty myth's coercive role in constructing and controlling women: "we are in the midst of a violent backlash to feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement" (2). "The beauty myth," she writes, "is not about women at all. It is about men and power" (4). Scholars, including Wolf, Susan Brownmiller and Susan Bordo indict the oppressive culture of beauty and prescriptive femininity, but more recent scholarship has explored experiences of makeup in a way that emphasizes women's individuality and agency.

As I have shown, scholars of plastic surgery and body modification argue that investment in physical appearance doesn't automatically correlate to false consciousness or being duped by patriarchy. Rather, they suggest that body modification can mean radical self-determination for some women. Kathy Davis claims that it "makes more sense to frame cosmetic surgery as an intervention in identity – that is, a person's sense of her embodied self – than as a beauty practice" (*Reshaping the Female Body* 74). While recognizing that the desire for appearance modification has cultural roots in gendered beauty norms, Davis makes a case for expanding the view of cosmetic surgery as having transformative and healing potential.

While makeup and hairstyling are more accepted and less "extreme" (and permanent) practices of shaping appearance, mainstream society still often reads these

practices as fulfilling normative femininity standards under patriarchy. Natalie Beausoleil's work explores the "invisible work" (34) of makeup. She writes, "the emphasis on the oppressive character of a male-defined beauty ideal limits our ability to understand women as other than manipulated and passive. The analysis of images and representations produces women as victims" (34). Makeup can be a critical practice; increasingly, women are articulating their makeup use and attention to appearance as consciously intended for their own pleasure and satisfaction. Beausoleil reads makeup and "appearance work" as possibly providing pleasure, creativity, and self-expression; appearance may be used in "elaborating the self" (46). Furthermore, as body modification and plastic surgery become more common, accessible, and discussed, these practices become analogous to makeup. The gulf, then, between makeup as normative and plastic surgery as extreme is slowly narrowing, as scholars interrogate both practices as informing an understanding of women's self-determination.

In *The Silicone Diaries*, Arsenault decides that the "artificial" technologies of makeup and hair aren't enough and she will take more drastic measures to create her ideal physical embodiment – to become plastic. She makes the decision to take her body art further, to self-consciously engage in developing an appearance that is artistic. Arsenault names the iconic doll Barbie, a widely known image of exaggerated feminine ideals, as an inspiration for the embodiment she is working towards. She recollects calling her cosmetic surgeon's office in Mexico:

"Nancy, I've thought it over calmly. I want Dr. Arias to give me not a woman's nose. I want a nose like a Barbie doll, girl. Pull the eyebrows tight. Underline that. Extreme. Extreme. Extreme. Jaw shaving. I want to

put silicone in my face when I get down there, girl. [...] Make me plastic. Make me beautiful. Thank you, Nancy.” (217)

Like the mannequin Arsenault admires in the first diary entry, Barbie is a similar iconic female form. She signals that the beauty she seeks is linked to plasticity; that is, the promise of transformation. Here, I read plastic as offering something special, beyond the mundane, but also mutable. In her analysis of Barbie’s plasticity, Kim Toffoletti reads potential in the “symbolic ambiguity” of plastic as a material (70). She argues, “Instead of replaying gendered assumptions that associate mass culture and production with the feminine and inauthentic, I suggest that Barbie’s plasticity embodies a generative tension. Her promise lies in her plasticity” (70). Rather than read plastic creatures, in this case dolls, as unchanging in their meaning, absolutely fixed in their artificiality, Toffoletti reads plastic beings as signifying flux and shifting meanings. Mary Rogers describes a similar quality in her analysis of Barbie: “A fantastic icon contributes to a culture by exaggerating what is actual, possible, or conceivable. Such an icon invites fantasy by taking the as-if or the fictive towards its outer limit” (3). These concepts – the malleable potential of plastic and the idea of the fantastic icon – can also apply to the Zellers mannequin. Seemingly static and passive, fixed and unchanging, the plasticity of the mannequin, like the Barbie, offers a site of shifting potential.

Another way that Arsenault subverts cisnormative notions of what it means to be a woman is through her sex work. The second episode of *The Silicone Diaries* shows Arsenault negotiating how to convey femininity and pass as a woman while earning money based on her status as a transsexual. She is twenty-five years old and working in online sex chat rooms in Toronto. She explains:

I'm nervous to work here, because people say I won't make it as a transsexual. I am too masculine-looking. They say I will never find a job, or a lover. That I will always be a social outcast. But I am here to make money so I can have as much plastic surgery as possible, to look as much like a woman as I can. I can either do that or...

That's the only option. (208)

This scene gives the reader a glimpse of Arsenault's work ethic and determination at this phase of her journey; she is determined to work to earn money for surgery to appear more feminine even as her success in the sex chat business rests upon achieving adequate femininity, from a hegemonic, heterosexual male perspective, while still catering to a specific clientele and playing into their expectations for a "chick with a dick" (209). As a result, Arsenault's success in this work requires her to subvert cisnormativity, while also maintaining feminine attributes, and she identifies this work as integral to her quest.

In this chapter I have argued that, through life writing, Nina Arsenault documents her yearning for womanhood as a quest. As a woman and a trans woman, Arsenault revises the traditional quest narrative. Her diary entries detail her early preoccupation with icons of feminine beauty, particularly otherworldly exemplars of beauty that can be described as "plastic," from mannequins to magazine models to Barbie dolls. Through fostering identifications with icons such as Aphrodite and geisha, Arsenault finds inspiration at the intersection of beauty and art. I have explored how Arsenault's quest towards hyperfeminine appearance and embodiment is a pursuit of her most authentic self. Because performing femininity is so central to Arsenault's transformation and *The Silicone Diaries*, in the next chapter I will examine other expressions of gender

performance and embodiment. Specifically, I will explore how the notion of gender as performative is challenged and productively expanded upon by Arsenault's life writing and art practice. I will also analyze another key way that Arsenault documents the evolution of her embodiment, through inviting ritualistic suffering as part of her spiritual journey.

“...it’s a huge ego boost to be hand-picked out of a pack of posing, real women.”

Nina Arsenault, *The Silicone Diaries*, 218

Chapter 4: “An imitation of an imitation of an idea of a woman”: Embodied Performance

Performance and performative acts are central concepts in Nina Arsenault’s life, work, and enactment of herself. She emphasizes harnessing the power of ways of thinking to shape reality as central to her transformation. Arsenault situates this projection of the self as a form of performance. The epigraph of her “Manifesto,” a quote by German mystic Meister Eckhart, illustrates this concept: “When the soul wishes to experience something, she throws an image of the experience out before her and enters into her own image” (64). This quote constructs identity as active and performative; Arsenault creates the self through performing her desired state of being. She also actively creates the self through suffering for beauty; she situates this physical and psychological endurance as a type of performance that can yield growth and transformation. In this chapter, I start by introducing concepts in performance studies, before analyzing *The Silicone Diaries* through theories of gender performance, most notably Judith Butler’s work on performativity. I argue that, in addition to feminization surgeries, Arsenault also performs womanhood through her posture, body language, physical voice, actions, and words. She shows how feminine gender expression is made legible and real in society when others recognize and interpret it. I then examine how Arsenault engages in the performance of ritual and suffering, particularly through surgery and body work, presenting the pursuit of feminine beauty as an agonizing yet joyous endeavor. My analysis reveals that Arsenault

conceives of the risk and sacrifice involved in such devoted pursuits of an ideal appearance to have the potential for ecstasy, transcendence, and even martyrdom.

Scholars working in the field of performance studies seek to understand performance on a variety of levels, arguing that daily interactions and social relations have performative elements. Working in performance studies, Marvin Carlson suggests that “The recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behaviour raises the possibility that all human activity could potentially be considered as ‘performance,’ or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself” (70). Here Carlson points to the role of performance outside the realm of fiction and theatricality: performance, as a mode of understanding, interaction, and social presentation, can apply to everyday life experiences. As such, the logic of performance can inform how we analyze social interactions. As I noted previously, Butler posits that identity is constructed or made manifest through performatives, that is, the repetition of acts. Her theory suggests that gender does not exist apart from how a body performs it, and how others interpret that body. In other words, everyone is both actor and audience. Butler explains that individuals realize gender norms not just through their own repetition, but also through continued enactment by groups. The performance is collaborative, and many actors are required to codify its scripts. As Butler puts it in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” “gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (160). In her discussion of the butch/femme dynamic within lesbian couples in *Gender Trouble*, Butler claims that the parody or replication of these “heterosexual constructs”

(man and woman) in a non-heterosexual context reveals the perceived original to be itself constructed. Butler argues that gay is not a copy of straight, “the original,” but rather a copy of a copy; by this she means that straightness is as constructed as gayness. She writes, “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). I suggest that I can rewrite Butler’s theory of the original as “nothing other than a parody of the *idea*” to apply directly in a trans context. Arsenault’s autobiographical writing and performance demonstrate that trans woman is to cisgender woman, not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. I develop this concept further in the next section through examining how women perform femininity in order to be read in social contexts.

Performing Femininity

From a Butlerian perspective of gender performativity, the enactment of gender is an active, ongoing process in which gender is produced as the result. For Arsenault, to blend in as a “natural” woman means to be doing, or performing, the gender “woman” well. In her “Manifesto” Arsenault describes social reception and adjustment as a huge part of gender transition, even more challenging than physically experiencing and recovering from plastic surgery:

The physical recoveries were often painful, but adjusting socially and psychologically to my increasingly feminine and sexualized body (plump lips, breasts, hips) was even more challenging. Because I was personifying new social and sexual roles, people treated me accordingly. (66)

Here Arsenault emphasizes the interpersonal nature of her ongoing process of gender transition, explaining the interplay between what she personifies or projects and how she is interpreted and received by others. She dramatizes this social, public side of a gender transition in the play. In the diary entry “Me ‘n’ Tommy Lee (2006),” Arsenault destabilizes “woman” as an essential category and demonstrates how gender is performed socially. In this scene, Arsenault recounts meeting former Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee, ex-husband of Pamela Anderson, at a club. This experience resonates as a momentous occasion in Arsenault’s life because she initially passes for a “real” woman.

In this scene, Arsenault describes entering the Ultra Supper Club alone and realizing Tommy Lee and his entourage are there, as the club appears to be filled with “rocker chicks” trying to be noticed by him (217). Arsenault navigates public gender performance in this encounter while other women, Tommy’s entourage, and Tommy himself, evaluate her in the restaurant. Arsenault describes her self-conscious efforts to construct an exterior femininity that is alluring and confident despite feeling insecure. She describes taking the anti-anxiety drug Ativan before going out, which helps her shed inhibitions. She writes, “I give into a primal urge to tease my hair up with a magnificence usually reserved for porn stars and Vegas showgirls. I paint my eyeliner so intricately. What a gorgeous pill” (217). Here she indicates that she experiences some self-consciousness about styling herself in an extravagantly feminine way, so seeks to overcome insecurity. With some chemical assistance, Arsenault is more able to embody the glamorous, confident woman she wants to exhibit. She describes her sexy, skin-tight outfit and how the waiter at the club says her outfit could be a “classed-up version of Pamela Anderson’s wardrobe from the movie Barb Wire” (217). By wearing her clothes,

hair, and make-up a certain way, Arsenault is more able to curate a feminine sexuality reminiscent of Anderson, whom she describes as “the ultimate silicone sex symbol of all time, and...the Marilyn Monroe of the ’90s” (218). Arsenault performs the hyperfemininity she admires, or at least respects, in Anderson, and is able to channel an aura and confidence that helps her in this scenario.

After one of Tommy Lee’s people requests her to join his table at the club, she thinks, “it’s a huge ego boost to be hand-picked out of a pack of posing, real women” (218). In other words, Tommy Lee and his guests do not immediately know her transgender status. Furthermore, Arsenault suggests that *all* the women in the club are “posing,” or self-consciously performing feminine attractiveness. This statement denaturalizes femininity as innate to cisgender women; beauty and femininity do not necessarily just *happen* without effort and forethought.¹³ While Arsenault often invites a reading of aspects of herself as “fake,” here she gestures towards the potential fakeness of so-called “real” women. To Arsenault, realness is not only a concern for trans women. Mistaken as a real woman by Tommy Lee, Arsenault invokes Butler’s idea of parody while describing 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 performative, based on imitating and re-enacting social scripts. She posits that the performance of femininity, by trans women and those assigned female at birth, is the representation or imitation of a concept, not an essence.

¹³ Similarly, masculinity is also enacted and performed, as seen in Tommy Lee’s performance of heterosexual masculinity.

In this diary entry, Arsenault sets the scene as a rather hostile, competitive environment in which the women scrutinize and try to outperform one another. Arsenault describes walking past women who murmur comments ranging from “That fake plastic bitch” to “That’s a man!” and harnesses a gutsy, confident attitude while reveling in the attention:

I shade these Tommy Lee rejects with a downward cast of my extra long lashes at the forty-five-degree angle, which everyone knows is the shadiest angle possible, and by flipping my hair to the side, knowing that the four bags of twenty-eight-inch-long hair extensions look positively pornographic as they cascade through the air to bounce off my glowing, tanning cream-bronzed shoulder. I see the moment as if I am outside myself... I’m the star of the movie now. (219)

Arsenault luxuriates in illustrating the spectacle of this scene for the reader. She describes watching this encounter as though she is outside her body – despite feeling radiant and powerful in her own skin, she feels disembodied. This prefigures her later sense of bodily transcendence in the last entry in her diary. Arsenault demonstrates a transition from the nervous, inhibited woman who entered the restaurant to the confident and sexy woman she now projects, likening herself to an actor in a movie.

In this scene, Arsenault demonstrates that she recognizes the value of performance, both in terms of gender and, more broadly, in performing a confident attitude. By projecting the embodied persona she wishes to exhibit, she is more readily able to succeed in the moment. Her self-aware reflection of the moment makes clear there is deliberation involved in performing the kind of femininity that embraces the artifice of

false lashes, hair extensions, and tanning cream. Arsenault positions this kind of exterior as a curated presentation of femininity.

In the context of Arsenault's autobiography as a quest, this diary entry reads as a challenge, one of many turning points where the protagonist must prove herself and persevere. As previously discussed, Arsenault once felt that she was too masculine to ever "make it" as a transsexual. This issue was exacerbated by the fact that a doctor would not recommend her for gender transition, suggesting she would have difficulty passing as a woman (Halferty 33). In this scene, Arsenault engages with issues faced by many trans people, such as transphobia, misunderstanding, and being misgendered. She describes how members of Tommy's entourage start to mouth the words "That's a guy! That's a fucking guy!" (221). Tommy Lee reacts with shock when he discovers that she is trans, and while he is not overtly offensive or insulting, the encounter is cut short. Arsenault explains:

I don't want to be made to feel less beautiful because I was born into a male body, or because I have fake parts. Everything 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)

This is one of the few instances in the play in which Arsenault directly expresses frustration with transphobia and the politics of passing. She asserts that the cues that signal womanliness, elements of both her physical exterior and personality, such as attitude and radiance, are what cause a sexual attraction. This episode shows gender

identity as relational; regardless of how she views and understands herself, to be read socially as a woman requires other people to interpret her as such. Clearly, a (presumably) heterosexual man's attraction to her shows that she expresses a feminine gender, despite not having a vagina, clitoris, and labia. As I examine in the next section, Arsenault shows that her womanhood does not rely on her anatomy.

Arsenault has sculpted an exaggerated feminine body while retaining her penis, demonstrating that while body parts may be "sexed," they are not necessarily gendered. While deciding to have an operation to remove her testicles, Arsenault has made no move to include a vaginoplasty among her surgical procedures. The absence of a vagina and the presence of a penis provoke questions about how Arsenault imagines feminine embodiment. As Arsenault responds in an interview for an online newspaper:

I certainly never walk around thinking, "I've got a dick," like that means anything. Listen, 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)

In this interview, Arsenault shows how her own understanding of gender evolved throughout her transition. She also destabilizes the necessary meanings attributed to body parts, including genitals. In "A Cock of One's Own: Getting a Firm Grip on Feminist Sexual Power," Sarah Smith shows how phallic pleasure and power can be wielded outside of presumptively male bodies; a phallic object or image, be it a dildo, strap-on, or actual penis, can be understood and experienced as separate from masculinity or

maleness. Smith argues that the dildo is possibly “the key we’ve been looking for to unlocking gender norms and expanding women’s sexuality” (302), noting how she herself “was thrilled by the dissonance of the lesbian dick, the titillating possibility of a female phallus” (299). In the case of Arsenault, the female phallus is a source of power. Rather than be ashamed of her penis, Arsenault draws joy and pleasure from it. She reveals, “it is the identities that society despises and degrades that give me the most pleasure and excite my sexuality [including] the phallic woman” (“Manifesto” 68). While undergoing many non-genital procedures to confirm her gender as female, Arsenault realizes that her penis can belong on a feminine body.¹⁴

Performative gender can operate distinctly from sex and Butler uses drag performance to illustrate this. She 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). Butler argues:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. [...] *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency.* (187, emphasis in original)

Thus, part of the experience of viewing a performance as drag is recognizing the distinction between the gender of the performer and the gender they are portraying. A

¹⁴ While for some trans people, a change of genitals may be important for their psychic experience of changing gender, many trans people never alter their genitals.

man performing as a drag queen is able to communicate the signifiers of femininity, revealing how gender can be communicated, or performed, separate from the “true” gender of the performer. So, in drag, two concepts are simultaneously conveyed: the *performance* of woman and the underlying *truth* of man, or vice versa, in the case of drag kings.

The way in which Arsenault draws on femininity prompts a consideration of theories of drag and parody. Her representation of heteronormative femininity is exaggerated – long, big hair, long eyelashes, full lips, large breasts – in the same way that (male) drag performers may typically execute a portrayal of women. The difference, of course, is that Arsenault identifies as a woman, and so is continually performing femininity rather than just for limited periods of time. Butler’s notion of parody is limited; it fails to account for how gendered bodies can, through exaggeration, parody their own gender in terms of a socially understood notion of that gender expression.

While I read Butler’s discussion of drag – a theatrical performance rather than a daily lived performance – as elucidating a non-essentialist, poststructuralist understanding of gender conventions, some scholars, such as Julia Serano, critique the broader idea of gender as performance as inadequate in relation to trans lives. I understand Butler’s work as examining how the effect of gender is produced, reproduced, and enforced through performative acts, not performance. Gender may be constituted and realized through performatives, but the interpretation of Butler’s work as suggesting that gender is *just* a performance can be invalidating for trans people’s experiences of gender dysphoria as very real and challenging. In *Excluded*, Julia Serano argues that those who can readily reduce gender to a fiction or mere construct are probably benefiting from cisgender

privilege. She demonstrates how important it is for feminist work on social constructionism to remember that gender, while culturally created, is a real and powerful force depending on your social location. She writes that

[empowerment through ideas of gender as just a construct] is a convenient strategy, provided that you're not a trans woman who lacks the means to change her legal sex to female, and who thus runs the very real risk of being locked up in an all-male jail cell. Provided that you're not a trans man who has to navigate the discrepancy between his male identity and female history during job interviews and first dates. [...]. It's easy to fictionalize an issue when you are not fully in touch with all of the ways in which you are privileged by it. (106)

Serano argues that gender is more than a construct or a performance for trans people, whose gendered experiences are so often posited as artificial or fake (as discussed in the previous chapter). She concludes, "So don't dare dismiss my gender as a construct, drag or a performance, because my gender is a work of non-fiction" (108). As Serano insists, while gendered behaviour can be enacted along certain social mandates, gender expression is not the same as artifice. Yet for Arsenault, artifice is a conscious and deliberate aspect of her gender expression.

While Butler doesn't explicitly engage with transgender issues and politics in *Gender Trouble*, she recently responded to questions about trans identity and gender performativity in an online interview with Cristan Williams. Responding to "What, if anything, would you like trans people to take from your work?" Butler replies,

Some trans people thought that in claiming that gender is performative that I was saying that it is all a fiction, and that a person's felt sense of gender was therefore "unreal." That was never my intention. I sought to expand our sense of what gender realities could be. But I think I needed to pay more attention to what people feel, how the primary experience of the body is registered, and the quite urgent and legitimate demand to have those aspects of sex recognized and supported. I did not mean to argue that gender is fluid and changeable (mine certainly is not). (*The TransAdvocate*)

Here, Butler makes clear that her analysis of gender as realized through performatives does not suggest that gender identity is not fixed and immutable for many people. Arsenault's work shows that gender may be enacted and realized through performative acts, including through signifiers of femininity, but also that the embodied experience of being a gender, and more importantly, being misgendered, such as when a trans woman is *accused* of being a man, is not trivial or merely a performance.

In *The Silicone Diaries*, Arsenault reflects on the unsolicited advice she's received from people on how to look "real" and "natural:" "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 inherently parodic; it is always understood in terms of a person of one gender imitating the opposite gender. The warning to avoid looking "like a drag queen" presumes that there is a universal image of woman that is feminine, yet moderate – not hyperfeminine. Arsenault's use of excessive signifiers of femininity situates her as trying

to present a feminine image, which runs the risk of appearing *like* a drag queen, in other words, not actually a woman. Arsenault navigates this through her experiences styling herself through the lens of a webcam as a sex worker.

In the diary entry “Shemale porn saved my soul (1999),” Arsenault negotiates performance on multiple levels: she performs sexual attraction and arousal to men through sex chat rooms, and performs heterosexual femininity as a woman who is openly transsexual. In this scene, Arsenault performs in a more literal sense, styling herself to look and sound a certain way through a webcam, earning money through her ability to perform before a virtual audience and deliver the desired performance. At this stage of her narrative, she has yet to undergo many of her cosmetic procedures, and she describes using the mediating interface of the computer to present herself in a certain way, manipulating camera settings to create a feminine image:

I’m fucking sexy when I work here, because I believe that the fake image on the screen is me. I have the digital camera set to wash me out. Everyone does that a bit. I’m art-porn; eyes, nostrils, lips in a close-up. The image of me on the computer monitor is something so much softer than me, so much more feminine. A cartoon line drawing of myself. A Warhol silkscreen of myself that masturbates. (209)

Arsenault portrays this kind of daily, conscious performance of femininity as a key to success in the sex chat room business. For her, the work is necessary to finance surgery, and get access to more permanent technologies through which to present a feminized body beyond the filters and settings of a webcam. Through its digital mediation, the webcam work becomes a way for Arsenault to practice performing her feminine gender

expression, similar to the way, as a child, she practiced emulating the gestures and poses of magazine models in the playground. Thus, Arsenault's navigation of passing and then ultimately not passing, such as during her encounter with Tommy Lee, her conceptualization of her anatomy as irrelevant to her gender identity, and how gender performance is imitative, offer insights into how embodiment must be performed and enacted. In the next section, I take the ideas of performing gendered embodiment and the requirement of being read as a woman further in order to consider the roles that pain and sacrifice play in Arsenault's performances of self and pursuit of (hyper)feminine beauty.

“My sublime privilege is to suffer”: Spirituality and Transcendence

In *The Silicone Diaries*, Arsenault explores suffering and sacrifice as part of spiritual transformation, situating work with her body, from silicone injections to vigorous exercise, as leading to transformation and transcendence. Arsenault shows the potential for ecstatic revelation through pain and engaging in rituals and spiritual practices, while also revealing the risk of going too far and becoming a martyr for beauty and femininity. At various points, Arsenault presents pain as a sacrifice required in order to achieve beauty, both for herself and for other trans women companions represented in the play. Her psychic relationship with suffering goes beyond accepting it as a requirement of plastic surgery; she forges an aesthetic (and ascetic) relationship with discipline and pain. Arsenault also emphasizes the spiritual *work* of physical transformation. She writes in her “Manifesto”:

I attempted to integrate the voice/breath/body work into my life, to live it all the time. [...] As I continued with this training, my daily life was

increasingly invigorated with a heightened emotionality and intensified connection to the outer world. Again, the revelatory changes in my body and spirit were intrinsically connected. (67-68)

Going through such a radical transition required mental dedication and a daily, lived devotion to “training.” Arsenault describes these “revelatory changes” elsewhere as a form of spiritual ecstasy, which I will also explore later in this chapter.

In addition to cosmetic surgery, silicone injections are key to Arsenault’s body modification and act as an important motif for the play, as emphasized in the work’s title. Cosmetic surgery scholars argue that the extensive physical pain and suffering of cosmetic surgery has traditionally been hidden from popular culture discourses through a focus on “before and after” in which “during” is invisible. Meredith Jones explains, “The before/after hermeneutic framework typically contrasts two photos of a body part, one before surgery and one after recovery is complete. [...] The images give an impression of seamless and painless change” (16). She notes that reality television programs, such as *Extreme Makeover*, have started to change this model, providing a greater glimpse into the process (16). As opposed to concealing the process of transformation through surgery, Arsenault has revealed photos post-surgery and even incorporated them into her performance. Several are included in *TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault* as examples of self-portraits, emphasizing, rather than obfuscating, the physical trauma and healing she has experienced.

The diary entry, “My boy-holes vanished (2001),” emphasizes the pain of cosmetic surgery and enhancement by depicting Arsenault receiving black market silicone injections as part of her work towards femininity. The episode chronicles a

journey to Detroit with a fellow trans woman Candi to find Simone who can administer the injections. Arsenault explains after they meet Simone at the door, “Behind her back, Candi and I are freaking out. Simone has hips. Curves like a woman. Like a drawing of a woman. I didn’t think we could ever have that. There’s no plastic surgery to give us that” (211). Arsenault says Simone is “like a drawing of a woman,” suggesting that Simone reflects an artistic standard for feminine beauty. This recalls Arsenault’s preoccupation with feminine beauty as an artistic construct and her conception of the goddess figures she finds represented in art and magazines.

Silicone symbolizes something about femininity that Arsenault doesn’t feel she can achieve through surgery, no matter how extensive – hips and a shapely hourglass figure. Arsenault is hesitant for months about the risks of having stolen medical-grade silicone pumped into her body through a syringe. After watching how Candi’s body transforms over time with no negative repercussions, Arsenault decides to go through with it:

The needle only stings a bit going in, but when the silicone is flooding into my hips I can feel the muscle being stretched, almost torn. [...] Eighteen syringes on each side. That’s the maximum Simone would pump in the first session. [...] We say goodbye to Simone, knowing we’ve just done something dangerous together, something illegal, something beautiful. [...] She leaves with thousands of dollars from me. (214)

While she describes the experience as “something beautiful,” it is also clearly something painful. Foregrounding the stretching and tearing of altering the body in this way, like the tearing apart of the women in “girlie” magazines she witnesses as a child, Arsenault

emphasizes the visceral nature of body modification in a way she doesn't address elsewhere in the play: while cosmetic surgery is frequently mentioned, as something that has happened or is forthcoming, she doesn't elsewhere focus on the gory details of procedures or chronicle the specifics of her healing. Arsenault recalls Simone injecting the silicone into her hips and patting and massaging it into place, like a sculptor, further inviting us to understand the body as artwork.

Yet Arsenault accepts the pain of sculpting her body as inevitable in her pursuit of femininity. In an interview with feminist theorist Shannon Bell, Arsenault details her profound and masochistic relationship to the pain/pleasure of surgery: "I live for beauty. I have suffered for it; the suffering is sadomasochistic. The pain of it is thrilling, the endurance, the feats to achieve it have been very much a part of it. It is the act of the forbidden, the joy of the forbidden" (102). This attitude corresponds with her emphasis on artistic process and her own transformation as a slow, laborious, yet joyful, crafting; Arsenault frames the pain and suffering that accompany her surgeries as a source of pleasure. She continues:

I say I have suffered for it, this suffering has been also ecstatic. Even to call it suffering is to reduce it to one thing. There's been ecstasy and joy. I enjoy going for surgeries, I like having people taking care of me, I like the anesthetic needle going into my veins, I like the feeling of the anesthesia, the ability to see myself one way, one day and then two weeks later having a completely new face. It's an ecstatic experience. (quoted in Bell 102)

In this context, ecstasy suggests both emotional euphoria but also religious ecstasy, being a heightened or altered state of consciousness and identification with God or a higher

power. In her “Manifesto,” Arsenault describes one of her many “fantastical hybrids” as a “plastic monastic” (68), emphasizing her commitment to beauty and femininity as something she pursues with spiritual patience and devotion.

Arsenault’s conception of religious ecstasy, detailed in the interview response above, is consistent with motifs and references she uses elsewhere in her art practice. Among various spiritual or Christian allusions in her work, I see this theme in the title and content of her 2012 SummerWorks performance exhibition in Toronto “40 Days and 40 Nights: Working Towards a Spiritual Experience” (Stewart). The performance involved Arsenault living inside her installation for the whole festival, forty days, the last eleven of which were open to the public for viewing. According to CBC, Arsenault “said she has been experimenting with food, sleep and light deprivation in a quest to have a spiritual experience (Carletti). Forty days alludes to a common duration of time used to signify a long trial or hardship in the Bible. I see a similar approach to religious archetypes and ecstasy in the work of French performance artist ORLAN. ORLAN engages in performative self-portraiture and art practice, including surgery as art, in a way that highlights transformation as a form of revelation. ORLAN has appropriated and reimagined religious iconography in various works, often to challenge or blaspheme Christian traditions and “propaganda” (“This is my body...this is my software” 35). The notion of resurrection recalls Christian imagery, as well as other religious traditions that believe in reincarnation. Still, ORLAN chooses the term “reincarnation” over “resurrection.” She writes that, through surgery “It was possible to bring the internal image near to the external one and to appropriate one’s *incarnation*” (42, emphasis mine) and “This performance is like giving birth to oneself” (42). While both terms suggest

death and the end of a body, resurrection suggests a rebirth as the same being, while reincarnation clearly evokes a rebirth and a transformation – the spirit comes back but the physical form has shifted. ORLAN describes some essence of herself as an incarnation, which can be pulled to the surface and revealed through the process of *re*-incarnation. Arsenault writes, “Self-portraiture is a means of resisting death through images and stories that inscribe, ‘I live through this; I am transformed; I experience revelation. The works iconize the constant and perpetual process of TRANSGURATION” (“Manifesto” 69; capitalization in original). Transfiguration is another word for metamorphosis yet it is frequently associated in the Christian tradition with the Transfiguration of Christ. In the context of self-portraiture, Arsenault resists death by documenting her vibrant, visceral transformations in “living” self-portraits. By capturing various incarnations of the self in image, Arsenault testifies to her own personal growth.

Arsenault knows there are risks associated with her pursuit of extensive surgery, but feels they are necessary: “Nina, your spiritual journey wants to take you through all of this. If you don’t get it, you will be stuck at this layer of development” (217). The next layer of development is a trip to Guadalajara, Mexico to see her cosmetic surgeon Dr. Arias. Arsenault describes many trans women who have come for affordable procedures and recoveries before their return trips. This scene is replete with religious iconography, as Nancy Bianca Valentino, her friend and fellow trans woman who arranges the procedures for the women, prays to “statues, idols of Catholic martyrs” which fill the recovery room after surgery (222). These references further solidify Arsenault’s conception of suffering as intertwined with spiritual growth. Arsenault describes how, healing post-surgery with other trans patients, the girls are united by the fact that they are

sex workers:

One of the girls asked, “So what do y’all do for a living? How did y’all afford your surgeries?”

“Oh honey, don’t give that show. You’re a whore, too, darlin’ I can smell it on ya.’ We all are.” (222).

Arsenault recounts how Nancy removes a painting of Mexico’s version of the Holy Madonna, the Virgin of Guadalupe [*sic*], from the wall to reveal a water stain silhouette in the clay. Arsenault recalls, “Nancy says, ‘This proves the Holy Madonna watches over us whores as we heal’” (222). This scene evokes both the Virgin Mary and the Biblical prostitute, Mary Magdalene. The women, gathered together in one humble apartment, are self-described “whores” healing after surgery. This imagery also recalls the Magdalene laundries, popularized in the nineteenth century, for so called “fallen women.” Whether purposefully or not, Arsenault’s description of this scene evokes such an institution, and Nancy’s statement of being watched over by the Madonna suggests hope for redemption, or perhaps an assertion that while they may be whores, they are not sinners.

In this diary entry, “The patron saint of plastic surgery (2001-2006),” Arsenault narratively positions Nancy as a helper or guide on her journey and as the episode’s eponymous “patron saint.” Arsenault depicts Nancy as an extreme devotee of plastic surgery who dramatizes the risks of ongoing surgical enhancement, a very real threat for Arsenault herself. Arsenault explains, “Nancy looks like a woman. The most surgically altered woman I have ever seen in my life. Nancy makes the Jacksons look conservative. The bridge of that nose is so razor sharp, it looks like you could grate cheese off it” (221). While Arsenault often depicts herself as the exemplar of surgical alteration, she describes

Nancy as someone even more extreme, who has gone further and maybe even too far. Nancy lives with painful scar tissue where injections went wrong (233). Through Nancy, Arsenault is able to see the risks and how her painful sacrifices could be devastating.

Later in the diary entry, Arsenault describes returning to Mexico years later for more surgical refinements, while Nancy continues to have procedures to fix her botched injections. Arsenault explains Nancy's predicament: "The problem is that the anesthetist is having trouble reviving her after surgery. Maybe because she's been under so many times. They told her if she went under again she might not come up" (224). In a poignant moment of the play, Arsenault explains that Nancy ultimately dies, "due to complications of surgery that she had been warned about, but which she felt she could not live without" (224). Arsenault understands this tragic event as a wake-up call, a glimpse of what can become of those who, like herself, have devoted themselves to the pursuit of their ideal face and body. When a friend baldly states as fact, "Well, we all knew Nancy was a plastic surgery addict," Arsenault reflects: "Some girls just want to be comfortable, and once they get started, some girls want to be as beautiful as they can be. Nancy and I have shared a passion for beauty and femininity that is far greater than that. To reduce a full, fabulous life to a single word, 'addict,' is wrong" (224). In Nancy, she recognizes an affinity but will not use the stigmatizing word "addict" feeling the word fails to convey the complexity of Nancy's experience, and the meaningful commitment involved in pursuing such a transformation.

It is at this point in her quest narrative that Arsenault commits to pursuing a different fate. She vows, "I promise to do everything I can to stay healthy.... I get down on the floor, and I pray that the spirit of Nancy Bianca Valentino has moved to a place

without her wounded physical body” (224). Here she alludes to a hope that Nancy can transcend her body. Nancy is presented as a martyr, a woman who has suffered and sacrificed everything to pursue the appearance she longed for. Even after her disfigurement, Nancy performs a maternal role for the women at the clinic, caring for the women before and after surgery and helping transsexual women get the surgeries they want. Through Nancy’s experiences, Arsenault realizes she must maintain her mental wellness and focus on aspects of herself beyond her physical body.

Arsenault depicts the psychological attention that accompanied her transformation as a spiritual practice of revelation. She ruminates on the suffering she has experienced and her increasingly strained relationship with her physical body in the final diary entry, “Venus/machine (2007-2009),” a title that evokes another version of Aphrodite, and Arsenault’s identification with the goddess. By this point in *The Silicone Diaries* she’s gone far on her quest, but feels the effects of so much surgery and sex work. She has experienced extensive physical pain as part of her transition; her body starts to feel detached and unnatural because she has become so hyperaware of its appearance:

After all my cosmetic surgery my body feels stiff and rigid. I’m wracked with tension. I feel like I’m posing all the time. I don’t think my body knew I wanted to have all these procedures. I think my body thought I was getting into car accidents over and over. (224)

Arsenault reflects that while she has done much work with her body, she has neglected aspects of both physical and mental self-care. Having completed all the surgeries and procedures she wanted, she realizes she has become alienated from her embodiment, rather than comfortably situated in her own physicality. In this way, she has become

object. Arsenault realizes that exercise and meditation are the next chapter of her body work.

This stage of her quest constitutes another aspect of performance; Arsenault performs the ritual of discipline and rigorous exercise as a stage on her quest. She buys an exercise bike and begins to engage her body in a different way, turning to discipline, physical exertion, and focused breathing techniques as part of her spiritual practice. She writes, “I will get inside the sensations on the inside” (225). By exerting and straining herself in this way, Arsenault learns to reinhabit her body, and re-experiences the new sensations as a form of monstrous embodiment: “I can feel the air moving into my back ribs. It’s like there’s two little Cupid’s wings back there. [...] Maybe they’re demon wings” (225, emphasis mine). This quote shows Arsenault’s perception of the spiritual dimension of this process; she visualizes a symbolic transformation, imagining wings forming on her back. What they mean, though, is ambiguous; she feels they may represent either angelic or demonic qualities and she seems content with this ambivalence.

This next phase is transformative, allowing Arsenault to get back inside her object body. The exercise bike becomes a new challenge to be dominated, and through the exertion Arsenault inhabits new states of being and new embodiments. Further engaging in disciplined exercise as a spiritual practice, she names the bike “Beelzebub,” another name for the devil in Christian theology, and uses it to ride through her demons: “It has two horns that come up – handlebars. I like to think I am grabbing the devil by the horns” (225). Through the discipline of breathing and exercising on the bicycle, Arsenault attempts to control her own unwieldy body. She writes, “There’s a woman in here.

There's a human animal inside this body" (226), and searches for other emerging identities:

I'm making eye contact with the woman in the mirror. Beneath the mask of my face she has the eyes of a snake. [...] I look into the mirror, and my body is the body of a giant serpent. I see the serpent in a spiral. I see the breath moving through the spiral. Glittering scales. The skin shedding off a snake. (226-227)

During this phase in which Arsenault tries to become re-engaged with her physical body, she describes her face as a "mask." It isn't the surgically altered, unnatural face that is a mask, it's her own face, or self, from which she's become estranged. As she visualizes her spiritual transformation, she imagines a physical metamorphosis. A snake transforms through literally shedding its skin; Arsenault has modified her skin and physical form to invoke a desired identity. An important image in Christian iconography around Eve and the Fall, in this context the snake image suggests the mutability of a physical encasing while evoking a disconnection between self and skin.

With its focus on reflection and selfhood, this passage also depicts another pivotal mirror scene that dramatizes Arsenault's changing embodiment. As previously mentioned, the mirror scene is a common trope of transsexual memoirs (Prosser 100). By this point in the play, Arsenault is no longer looking to exterior identifications, such as Aphrodite, for inspiration. Instead, she looks within, focusing on the body she has achieved and learning to integrate it with her new mental state. During her quest, she has sought authenticity (becoming who she really is, a woman) while inviting physical transformation on the surface. Moving beyond a focus on pain and suffering, through the

metaphor of the snake Arsenault imagines the shedding of a skin, experiencing a transcendent experience beyond her physical body. This transcendence is a metaphor for transgender embodiment more broadly – casting off the limitations of skin, or the assigned-at-birth gender, through the process of expressing one’s chosen self.

In her “Manifesto,” Arsenault emphasizes the link between the physical and psychological pain of her transformation. Through this process, she explains, “I realized how profoundly my body and my internal sense of Self were intertwined” (66). Here, Arsenault brings to the fore the importance of the inner transformation that must accompany such drastic outer transformations. She has completed her surgical goals, but her quest is ongoing. Aging with and through such an unreal body is the next part of her spiritual pursuit. Arsenault uses the metaphor of a snake shedding its skin to embrace a new phase of embodiment and recognition of continuing layers of transformation on her quest.

As I have examined in this chapter, projection of the self, or performance, is the foundation of Arsenault’s conception of both her gender transition and her art practice. Arsenault’s play documents how she has grappled with her performance of femininity, negotiating what it means to pass as a woman. She recognizes that gender is both emulative – “a imitation of an imitation of an idea of a woman” – and relational during her encounter with Tommy Lee (219). Arsenault is a woman, but must be interpreted or read as a woman in society in order to fully perform “woman.” Arsenault also demonstrates suffering, ritual, and spirituality as types of performance. It is through performing the action of suffering – experiencing pain, undergoing surgeries, straining to achieve a hyperfeminine ideal – that Arsenault completes the work necessary to reach her

evolving ideal of feminine embodiment. Through her conceptualization of suffering as necessary, Arsenault aestheticizes the physical and mental anguish of surgery and bodily transformation, while also foregrounding the joy and ecstasy that is possible.

“No emotion, thought, or expression is taboo.
The primary feat of self-portraiture is the
depth and vitality of the reveal.”

Nina Arsenault, “A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture,” 64

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Nina Arsenault never minimizes or downplays her surgical and hormonal constructedness; rather, she emphasizes her unreal and “plastic” beauty in her art and portraiture. Indeed, the title of her play highlights the centrality of silicone as a ubiquitous signifier of cosmetic surgery. *The Silicone Diaries* conveys the significance of the material of silicone on two fronts. First of all, “silicone” suggests the centrality of cosmetic surgery to her transition narrative, on a practical, functional level. Several episodes revolve around either working to earn money to obtain surgery, planning procedures, or travelling to receive surgeries. It is clear the physical changes surgery and injections enable are foundational to how Arsenault recollects this period of her life and her evolving femininity. Beyond this, silicone evokes a larger association of Arsenault’s focus on transformation, change, and malleability – as a material, silicone is a metonym for shape-shifting. Her striving for an idealized beauty can be judged as narcissistic, yet, as a highly self-conscious artist Arsenault doesn’t appear bothered by that assessment.

Arsenault’s narrative of self-creation and reality creation is captured in her extensive self-portraiture, writing, and theatrical performances. Imagining the epic potential of life, of any life, Arsenault imbues her own with archetypes and myth, experiencing her own personal and powerful version: “I was an active participant in the story, identifying the myth I was living compelled me to decide how I wanted my

variation to unfold” (“Manifesto” 67). For Arsenault, the patterning of mythic and divine imagery and archetypes onto her imaginative conception of her life brings strength, vigour, and ultimately, redemption: “Living self-portraiture is, therefore, the REDEMPTIVE POWER TO SIGNIFY. It is to see, create, and vivify a rich personal mythology through the potentialities of life and culture” (“Manifesto” 69; capitalization in original). Finding joy and peace in the present moment, in the Now, through reflection and mindfulness as a key aspect of changing embodiment, is figured as an essential lesson on her hero’s quest.

In this thesis, I have examined Nina Arsenault’s life writing, her one-woman autobiographical play *The Silcione Diaries* as well as her “Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture,” as a case study for transgender embodiment. Transgender studies problematizes fixed signifiers and the idea of one, definitive narrative of transgender transition, and opens up the possibility of varied, diverse experiences. While some trans people undergo gender reassignment surgeries, others never do, even if they still undergo hormonal treatments or enhance their gender expression through hair, clothing, makeup, or other technologies. Although Arsenault’s quest for femininity follows a series of surgical and appearance altering hurdles, her emphasis on the process, even more than the product, reveals transition to be a state of ongoing becoming, not a linear path to a “complete” and finished gender change.

Transformation through surgery and other bodily technologies has been a central aspect of Arsenault’s self-creation as an artist. Arsenault conceptualizes surgery as part of a process of continued evolution, de-emphasizing permanence and the notion of a finished product or self. She asserts this perspective in her statement, “I am not my

bodies, which are constantly disappearing” (“Manifesto” 68). In this study I focused on two examples of Arsenault’s published life writing. Further research on Arsenault’s work could focus on her photographic self-portraiture and how she has documented her gender transition and quest for femininity through a range of formal and informal photography projects. A particularly compelling avenue for further study would be how the notion of self-portraiture has evolved with the speed and ease of mobile, digital photography and the ubiquity of self-portraits or selfies. I see this in how Arsenault easily adds to her body of photographic work by posting new photos on her website and Facebook page, as web and social media platforms have enabled forms of self-publishing for writers and visual artists. The immediate access to audience reaction and engagement through digital and web-based art is also an emerging facet of Arsenault’s work.

The Silicone Diaries speaks to Arsenault’s personal struggle to find satisfaction on the mythical quest she has so elaborately imagined and enacted. She explains this in the last diary entry while pedalling furiously on her exercise bike:

Of course, this is the next step in the journey. To surrender to the beauty of whatever the moment is. Every moment has its own beauty. That is enough. Accept the moment. [...] This is the most I will ever look like a mannequin. I accept this moment. I think of geisha. Trained from a young age for beauty. I love them. I am them. (226)

In this scene, she learns that the quest will never end, but it has to change and she has to take on new pursuits. Arsenault realizes that there will be new phases of her transition as she ages, and decides to focus on self-acceptance and the present moment, shifting away

from her previous determined emphasis on the future and obtaining more and more surgery.

The Silicone Diaries effectively portrays the difficulty of self-acceptance, anxiety, and vulnerability, as well as the inspiration and empowerment that Arsenault has experienced throughout her ongoing transformation. The play grapples with the inherently painful process of self-fashioning and the shaping of one's personal reality through the shaping of one's material body. Arsenault explains in an interview of her play, "In a certain way it's about plastic surgery, and then on a totally other level it's not about plastic surgery at all. It's about love and inner beauty and harmony and intimacy, but in the most unusual and unexpected places – places like at an Internet porn site" (Rossi). Arsenault focuses on the process. It is not only the polished, finished product that constitutes a work of art; Nina Arsenault's *The Silicone Diaries* is about the bloody, painful, process of sculpting and creating a body and a soul.

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