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Josip Petrovic

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Transgender in (Social) Media	3
2.1. Transgender in Mainstream Television.....	3
2.2. Transgender on the Internet and Social Media Networks	7
2.3. Carmen Carrera and Social Media Networks.....	9
3. Transgender Studies	13
3.1. Beyond Sex and Gender	13
3.2. Trans, Transsexual, and Transgender.....	15
3.3. Theorizing the Transgender	18
3.3.1. Katrina Roen	19
3.3.2. Surya Monro	20
3.4. Trans-Identity Theory	22
4. Transgender Embodiment.....	24
4.1. “Wrong Body” and Transition	26
4.2. Carmen Carrera: Embodiment of Femininity.....	28
4.3. Retraining the Body	30
4.4. Redecorating the Body	31
4.5. Remaking the Body	34
4.5.1. Embodiment and Hormones	35
4.5.2. Top Surgery and Embodiment of Transfemininity	37
4.5.3. Facial Feminization.....	38
4.5.4. Bottom Surgery	39
5. Transgender Self-Construction.....	41
5.1. Carmen Carrera’s Instagram Construction.....	43
5.2. Carmen Carrera’s Name	46
5.3. Bodily Self-Construction.....	48
5.4. Narrative Self-Fashioning	50
5.4.1. “Wrong Body” Narrative	51
5.4.2. Body-Naturalizing Narratives	53

5.4.3.	Narratives of Sexual Desire	54
5.4.4.	Narrative of Motherhood	56
6.	Transgender Social Construction.....	58
6.1.	Construction of Trans-Femininity on Social Networking Sites	59
6.2.	Construction of Trans-Femininity in Mainstream Media and Reality TV	64
7.	Conclusion	69
	Works Cited	72
	Acknowledgements of Illustrations	82
	Illustrations	83
	Abstract	87
	Zusammenfassung.....	88

1. Introduction

“This is a story about determination and a relentless pursuit of happiness.”

Carmen Carrera/Christopher Roman

“In the past 10 years, I’ve been three different people,” model and transgender activist Carmen Carrera tells SELF. “In the beginning, I was a confused gay person, then I was an androgynous drag queen, and now I’m a woman who just wants to live.” (qtd. in Shy and Wasylo)

Carmen Carrera was born as Christopher Roman. Roman grew up in Elmwood Park, New Jersey, with his mother, his grandmother and an older sister. He knew he was different from an early age, but his mother never told him he should be any other way. “Consequently, I didn’t grow up thinking that I was wrong being who I was—until I got to school” (“Show Girl”). At school, Roman realized that feminine boys were being picked on which is why he tried to act in a more masculine way. “From the age of eight, I learned how to disguise my femininity by cutting my hair short and wearing a uniform of hip-hop jeans and T-shirts. If someone asked me about a book or movie, I’d stop and think, ‘OK. What would a boy think or do?’” (qtd. in Roberts “Born in a Man’s Body”) As soon as he finished school, however, Roman left New Jersey and went to New York. By that time, he knew he was not a straight man. Once in New York, he started photographing drag shows. He got immersed in drag culture and started doing makeup professionally. A chance encounter with transgender drag performer Angela Carrera would change Christopher’s life forever:

The [drag show] finale starred this stunningly beautiful goddess. She was obviously a transwoman, and she took my breath away. I discovered that what I really wanted to do was perform. [Later] I participated in an amateur show, and the audience loved me—I won! After that, I started touring clubs and acquired a fan base. I also realized that being onstage gave me an escape: I could be feminine. (“Show Girl”)

Christopher, like many other gender non-conforming individuals, had been suppressing his femininity for years, fearing public censure for transgressing the gender boundaries. Transgender rights are described by *Time Magazine* as the “next civil rights movement” (Wellborn 18). Michael Silverman, Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund (TLDEF) representative, calls the fight for transgender rights “America’s next great civil rights struggle” (*Growing up Coy*). The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) as well as the availability of pay-to-view and streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu have decidedly contributed to a greater visibility of the trans community and the sudden increase in interest regarding trans issues. With Laverne Cox, the first openly trans woman, receiving an Emmy nomination and *Transparent*,

a TV show featuring Jeffrey Tambor portraying a transgender woman, receiving multiple Golden Globes and Primetime Emmy Awards, the transgender community has been experiencing a major leap in positive media representation.

The representation of transgender individuals in the media, as well as their reaction to this representation has already been the subject of analysis.¹ Authors such as Glover (2016) and Skidmore (2011) problematized the fashioning of transgender individuals by the mainstream media, while others (Stryker 1994; Ekins and King 2006) pointed to the importance of home computers and social media for the creation and strengthening of the transgender community and community activism. Considering the current importance of social media networks for the creation and strengthening of the transgender community, I believe that the topic of transgender self-fashioning through exposure on social networking sites has been underexplored. With the increased number of transgender individuals appearing as openly trans in mainstream media and on social media networks, my thesis' goal is to analyze how transsexual femininity is (self)represented and (self)constructed on reality TV and social networking sites.

“Carmen Carrera: Queer in Paradise – Trans-Femininity in Social Media and Reality TV” (see fig. 1) aims to explore how trans-femininity is portrayed and constructed on reality TV and social media by focusing on the transitioning of American television celebrity and male-to-female transgender activist Carmen Carrera. Carrera’s transition to female is closely connected to her exposure in mainstream media and SNSs. The construction of Carrera as female is to a large degree taking place in and through her media exposure. Carmen Carrera is unique within the trans community in that her transition to a woman was carefully planned and executed on SNSs. In May 2012, two years after appearing as a gay participant on *RuPauls Drag Race*, Carrera posted the first of a series of videos on her official YouTube channel detailing her transition to female. Different steps in her transition to woman are carefully documented and explained in YouTube videos, or her Facebook and Instagram posts. My thesis is not an analysis of the transgender community’s portrayal in different media, but an exploration of how transgender identity is (self)constructed by its very representation on reality TV, magazine covers or the various social media channels.

In my thesis I examine both textual and audio-visual material featuring Carmen Carrera with an emphasis on her transition path, her body, beauty, and sexuality. I base my examination of transgender identity construction primarily on videos and photos uploaded to SNSs by Carrera

¹ See Phillips (2006), Willox (2003), and Wellborn (2015)

herself, as well as on the (video) interviews and reality TV shows featuring Carmen Carrera. I investigate how media outlets co-produce narratives of transgender femininity through close reading and textual analysis of magazine and television interviews, as well as through visual analysis of videos and images featuring Carrera.

I draw from transgender theory and transgender identity theory in particular, to analyze and organize my analysis of trans-femininity construction. In chapters dealing with identity construction in reality television and social media sites, I refer to relevant authors from identity and media studies.

The term “trans” is, according to Feinberg (Preface x), emerging as a choice description in some parts of transgender and transsexual communities. Carmen Carrera calls herself “transgender” even though a more accurate description of her identity would be “transsexual”. Since both “trans” and “transgender” are umbrella terms which include the category of “transsexual”, the thesis will use both as synonymous with “transsexual” unless otherwise stated.

As others (Darnell and Tabatabai) have done before, I recognize my position as that of an outsider to both transgender culture and community. My analysis of trans-femininity construction does not rest on my own intimate knowledge of trans culture but is rather based on the personal stories told by trans people and on academic writing dealing with the transgender phenomenon.

I begin my thesis (Chapter 2) with an overview of transgender representation in mainstream media and social networking sites (SNSs). Chapter 3 will look at key terms and concepts in transgender studies; it will discuss how the transgender individual has been approached by feminist and queer studies before I introduce the transgender identity theory as a framework for the analysis of Carrera’s trans-femininity construction. Consistent with the transgender identity theory, the following remainder of the thesis (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) will analyze transgender identity construction, in the context of its representation in social media and reality TV, by focusing on transgender embodiment, self-fashioning and social-construction, respectively.

2. Transgender in (Social) Media

2.1. Transgender in Mainstream Television

According to the American non-governmental media monitoring organization GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), only 16% of Americans personally know someone who is transgender. While this percentage is almost twice as high among Millennials (27%), it is dramatically low among the population older than 45 years (9%). As a

result, people, and especially the older population, are more prone to transphobic attitudes and negative stereotyping regarding the transsexual and transgender community. Research shows that trans people experience pervasive mistreatment, harassment and violence within their family, at school or at the workplace, resulting in serious psychological distress as well as economic hardship and instability (transequality.org). The media has played a significant role in sustaining and legitimizing the negative treatment of the trans community.

Media portrayals of transgender individuals have for a long time been predominantly stereotypical and unfavorable. Transgender characters in television (most of them transwomen) have often been portrayed as deceiving, as traps for straight men, deranged murderers, or they have been used as a comic relief (Wellborn 37-39). Espineira notices that an important concern expressed by trans groups and their representatives to change the image of trans people in society has been expanded since the early 2000s “by a wish to change the image of trans in the media” (323). The trans community has understood the importance of media representation of trans individuals as a valuable tool in changing the perception of transgender people among the general population. With more trans people living visibly and telling their stories, the acceptance of trans individuals has been increasing. TV, internet and social media play a significant role towards furthering this acceptance.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in positive, fair and accurate media portrayals of the transgender community. Not only is there a growing number of trans characters in mainstream TV, but there is also a growing number of trans actors and actresses starring in mainstream movies and TV shows. Carmen Carrera has been one of them. After her participation in the reality TV show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, Carmen Carrera made a guest appearance on the TV series *What Would You Do?* and *Jane the Virgin*. Her appearance on *What Would You Do?* publicly outed her as transgender and as being in the process of transitioning. In *Ricki and the Flash* (2015) she acted alongside stars such as Meryl Streep, was a guest actress in three episodes of *The Bold and the Beautiful*, and will play leading roles in the 2019 TV show *The House of Mayhem* and the movie *Prescience*. Carmen² appeared as herself in the documentaries *South Beach on Heels*, *Finding Kim*, and *Words*; she married her long-time partner Adrian Torres in December 2015 during the final episode of the VH1 reality TV series *Couples Therapy*. In March 2017 as a

² I recognize that referring to Carmen Carrera by her first name implies a level of informality not necessarily appropriate to an academic text. However, consistent with Carmen Carrera’s understanding of social media networks as a means of creating meaningful and affective connections between herself and her followers, I will continue referring to her as “Carmen”.

correspondent on Fusion's travel documentary series *Outpost*, Carmen Carrera drew attention to the difficult living conditions of trans women in Brazil. The transgender community seems to be coming out of the ridicule stage and steadily moving towards regulation and respect.

The shift towards a more positive portrayal of trans characters, however, already began in the early 1990s. *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, is the single most revolutionary trans-themed movie that paved the road for LGBT characters and themes to a broad mainstream audience. In 1999, Hilary Swank played the tragically deceased transgender man Brandon Teena in the award-winning *Boys Don't Cry*. Swank got an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for portraying the violence transgender individuals experience within their immediate environment (Brown). *Hedwig & the Angry Inch* (2001), *Soldier's Girl* (2003), and *Transamerica* (2005) all explore the complex relations of gender and sexuality, of what it means to be a man, a woman, or a transgender parent. More recently, in 2015, Tom Hooper's *The Danish Girl* presented the public with a fictionalized biography of Lili Ilse Elvenes, "a heroic forerunner of the current movement for transgender rights" (Scott) and one of the very first transgender women to successfully undergo sex reassignment surgery in 1930.

Many of the trans-themed movies, however, excessively focus on transitioning or otherwise romanticize transgender identity in a way that obscures the actual living experiences of trans people. Bradshaw, for example, complains that *The Danish Girl's* treatment of transgender identity is "too tasteful and lacking passion". Opposed to these movies is Sean Baker's comedy drama *Tangerine* (2015), a fast-paced, coarse movie presenting the viewers with two transgender prostitutes in the less "Hollywoody" parts of Los Angeles. Shot with three iPhones and with a budget of 100.000 USD, the movie is "as far from industrial cinema as another galaxy" (Dargis). Aside from its unconventional production, it is the movie's treatment of trans identity that caught both critical and viewer attention. Trans identity is not idealized; it is immediate, loud, vulgar, and clearly informed by the trans lived experience. "What's radical about *Tangerine* isn't identity — which enters directly and obliquely, playfully and powerfully — but that Sin-Dee and Alexandra [the movie's main characters] aren't limited by it" (Dargis).

The transgender community, however, increasingly becomes a theme in non-scripted television as well. In 2014, Laverne Cox and Laura Jane Grace both released documentaries (*T Word* and *True Trans with Laura Jane Grace*) dealing with issues of growing up transgender. Caitlyn Jenner (formerly Bruce Jenner, an Olympic gold medal-winning decathlete) followed with her own documentary series *I Am Cait* in 2015, and in June 2016, *Growing Up Coy* was released.

This documentary follows the legal battle of a Colorado family fighting for their six-year-old transgender daughter's right to use the girls' restroom at her public school.

The sudden increase in interest regarding the trans community can be traced to the radically new media landscape – the availability of pay-to-view and streaming platforms as well as the popularity of social media networks. In 2013, Netflix premiered *Orange Is the New Black*, and Amazon Prime launched its hit series *Transparent* in 2014; both of these shows feature compelling transgender characters. In *Transparent*, the family's patriarch, Mort, comes out as a transgender woman to his three adult children. Mort/Maura is played by cisgender actor Jeffrey Tambor and the show portrays the ups and downs of a highly dysfunctional Jewish-American family. The sheer number of awards the show received testifies not only to the quality of the show's production, but also to the overwhelming interest in trans issues in the general public. Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black* features transgender actress Laverne Cox playing a transgender character, Sophia Burset. The show has received a lot of critical acclaim and Laverne Cox has become the first transgender individual to be nominated for an Emmy award. Trans actresses such as Candis Cayne (appearing in *Dirty Sexy Money*) and Jamie Clayton (starring in Netflix's *Sense8*) played transgender characters in their respective shows. Having transgender actors and actresses portray transgender characters is essential to fighting inaccuracies and stereotyping in mainstream media. Trans individuals such as Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner, Carmen Carrera, Chaz Bono or Candis Cayne have been using their public exposure to fight the stigma connected to being transgender, dramatically changing the stereotypical perception of trans in the process. Laverne Cox explains why that is important:

For me personally, I am an individual who consumes mainstream culture. I watch a lot of television. I go to mainstream films. And I want to see myself. I want to turn on the television and see people who look like me who have similar experiences that I have. And I think that trans people want and deserve that; everybody wants and deserves that. We should have representations that humanize our experiences and tell the diversity and the complexity of our experiences. (qtd. in Gjorgievska and Rothman)

There is an agreement within the trans community and the general public alike that we are entering "a golden age of trans media representation in television" (Molloy). "A transgender tipping point is happening in the media," Wellborn observes (56). Jeffrey Tambor dedicated his 2015 Emmy Award to the transgender community: "Thank you for your patience, thank you for your courage, thank you for your stories, thank you for your inspiration. God bless you" (qtd. in Spencer). "Please give transgender talent a chance, give them auditions, give them their story. [...] I would not be unhappy if I was the last cisgendered [sic] man to play a transgendered [sic] woman," Tambor said

in his second consecutive 2016 Emmy Award acceptance speech (qtd. in *Hollywood Reporter*). Yet speeches such as these, and the increasing number of transgender themed movies and shows appearing in recent years, should not be mistaken to signify that there is no more negative stereotyping of transgender individuals in the media. They have, however, led to a new sense of confidence and self-esteem, which transgender individuals experience as a result of this new mass media exposure of the trans community.

2.2. Transgender on the Internet and Social Media Networks

According to a summary of reports presented on *smartinsights.com*, the number of social media users worldwide reached a mark of 3.2 billion (June 2018), rising by 13% compared to 2017. Among the top five most popular social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter), Facebook is ruling supreme with more than 2 billion active users. YouTube is used by approximately 1.5 billion people. Instagram has around a billion and Tumblr around 800 million active users. Twitter is the least popular of the five social networks with a still impressive number of 330 million active users. Social media occupies a unique position among other media forms “in that it enables users to narrate [their] own experiences without the assistance [or censorship] of media professionals” (Glover 10).

Sean Baker’s *Tangerine* has illustrated how new technologies open possibilities of hearing new and underrepresented voices in film. The democratizing potential of technology, especially pertaining to LGBT+ communities, is most obvious in the sphere of social networks. Carmen Carrera uses social networking sites as the primary channel of communication with her community. “You will find your support system. We are all connected on social media now. Keep your head up,” Carmen tells a young trans woman in one of her Facebook live videos (“Answering your Questions”). Social media, according to Laverne Cox, has played a vital part in humanizing the trans experience and demystifying difference: “Social media has been a huge part of it and the Internet has been a huge part of it, where we’re able to have a voice in a way that we haven’t been able to before. We’re being able to write our stories and we’re being able to talk back to the media” (qtd. in Steinmetz).

As Glover observes, traditional mass media only affords visibility to trans individuals considered deserving of exposure, either through their adoption of heteronormative attitudes or their adherence to respectability politics. The range of transgender bodies and identities represented is narrowed down by media professionals since transgender individuals whose narratives, gender embodiment, and sexual practices do not live up to the heteronormative ideal

are effectively silenced and made invisible. The transgender community, however, is composed of individuals who, to varying degrees, adhere to prescribed sexual and gender norms. Not all trans individuals are able to or wish to identify with the sanctioned transgender representations embodied in Laverne Cox, Candis Cayne, or Caitlyn Jenner. In Chani Wellborn's 2014 survey investigating reactions of the transgender community regarding their media representation, many of her interviewees felt that, even though women such as Laverne Cox or Caitlyn Jenner are welcome faces bringing the humanity of transgender individuals and an awareness of their struggle to the public, these trans women cannot be the faces representing the trans community as a whole: "I don't think she's the spokesperson for [the transgender movement], but I think she has helped a lot, to help show other people of the humanity of transgender people (MtF Alison qtd. in Wellborn 49).

There is a strong wish within the trans community for role models who do not necessarily fit the idealized transnormative mold. Social media bridges the gap between the need to have visible transgender role-models and the apparent lack of transgender diversity and role models in mainstream media. Trans role-models on Facebook and YouTube are perceived as more authentic and easier to identify with than the idealized versions of transgender femininity or masculinity presented in the mass media (Wellborn; Glover). The reliance on social media networks points to an observable shift from television to social media in the trans community's search for guidance and role models. Internet fora and social networking sites are becoming increasingly important in providing visibility as well as positive role-models for nascent transgender individuals. According to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center "LGBT youth rely on the Internet and related technologies to a greater degree than their peers in order to find an accepting peer group and social support" (qtd. in S. Norton 2). The shared lived experience of the trans community is indispensable in the formation of transgender identity. Illustrating this, MtF Gwen (56 y/o) knew she was different from her peers, but only discovered she was transgender after having discussed her confusing feelings of difference with a transgender acquaintance on Facebook (Wellborn 71). Internet fora and social networking sites act as support communities, providing virtual global platforms for LGBT+ individuals to mutually connect and exchange advice and information. This thesis will focus on social networking sites and internet use as a way to build and strengthen transgender identity. The opportunities these online communities provide will be analyzed and discussed in the following chapters dealing with Carmen Carrera's own use of social networking sites as part of her self-fashioning project.

2.3. Carmen Carrera and Social Media Networks

While the anonymity of internet fora and social networking sites (SNS) often facilitates cyberbullying of gender and sexual minorities, those same fora and SNSs provide relatable models of transgender identities, and previously unimagined validation and recognition of LGBTQ+ identities.

Carmen Carrera is unique within the transgender community, in that her transition from gay man to trans woman was carefully planned, executed and simultaneously shown on her social media channels. Carmen explains that once people around her started noticing the estrogen-induced changes on her body, she came out as trans on her social media sites and her YouTube channel. “I chose to make my transition publicly,” she remembers. “I documented everything on social media, spoke about it whenever I could... Because I remember how hard it was growing up without any visible resources, so, I try to let people in — to inspire them to consider what’s possible” (“6 Questions”). As Carmen told the *Glamour* reporter, she met her husband on social media and her family learned that she was transgender by following her on Facebook. Her entire transition has been closely connected to her social media channels. The focus of this thesis will therefore be the construction of Carmen Carrera’s trans-identity in the media through her (self)representation on popular social media networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, as well as on reality TV.

As both Glover and Wellborn have noticed, mass media professionals educate the public on trans issues by providing visibility to a very specific type of individual within the transgender community. For this reason, social media plays a crucial role in presenting the public with alternative trans-narratives, which do not necessarily comply with heteronormative gender and sexual norms. Carmen Carrera has announced and publicly displayed her transition from gay man to trans woman on social networks. Her carefully documented transition on YouTube made her a role-model for a generation of trans women, who had difficulties identifying with polished and fully transitioned transgender women such as Cox and Jenner. Trans role-models, such as Carmen, provide guidance and support on social networks by narrating real-life stories other transgender women can relate to. “I love this video, it’s so intimate like just hanging out with your bffs and having a conversation and being real”, YouTube user Anastasia Rae comments under “Carmen Answers Your Facebook Questions” video. “OMG Carmen, you don’t know how much you are inspiring me. It’s like a wake-up call. Ty [sic] so much for this, have you ever wondered how many lives you are saving atm [sic]?” - Zenys Kawaii Mini World comments under another video.

As a competitor on the reality TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR)* she became part of the mainstream media, but her career really took off after her social media fans launched a petition on Change.org to make Carmen Victoria's Secret first transgender “angel”. Carmen Carrera’s success, both as a performer and in her recognition as a woman, is intimately connected to the skilled use of the internet and social media networks. There is a strong underlying connection between the highly successful multi-media format of *RPDR* and Carmen’s own experienced use of online and offline media outlets. According to Gudelunas, *RPDR* “is created with an astute awareness of the social media” (234) – to ignore this fact when analyzing Carmen would be to miss a key point in her identity construction.

Referencing to social media on *RPDR* is pervasive. The audience is continually invited to act as a virtual judge in the show by voting and thereby supporting their favourite contestants on *RPDR* official social media channels. Some episodes (e.g. S10E10 “Social Media Kings into Queens”) have social media celebrities appearing as guests on the show. *RPDR* official social media channels have been used to announce the new seasons’ contestants and exclusively feature much of the show’s video content. Many of *RPDR* spin-offs and satellite shows are only available online and are not broadcast on regular TV. More recently, in the attempt to draw ever larger audiences, the size of the social media following seems to be an increasingly important criterion in determining which drag queens will be invited as contestants on the show: “Self-promotion is part of drag culture and in order to be a successful queen [...] establishing a brand is critical and hence the focus of so many *RPDR* challenges” (Gudelunas 236). The show and RuPaul himself act as teachers to the queens helping them establish themselves as their own brand, on the one hand, by basing the show’s challenges around self-promotion and, on the other hand, by providing the contestants with the necessary knowledge of social media and internet self-marketing. Writing for *Forbes*, Jackie Huba remarks: “The strategies drag queens use to market themselves hasn’t [sic] been studied or considered as traditional business marketing, but it [sic] should be” (“Build Fan Loyalty”).

By highlighting the importance of the internet and social media networks in the success project that is *RuPaul's Drag Race*, my thesis aims at drawing attention to the importance of the same and similar techniques in Carmen Carrera’s own project of identity construction. The use of multiple online and offline media channels in self-promotion and brand establishment is equally important in both enterprises. *RPDR* not only provided Carmen with a platform from which she was able to reach a larger and by far more diverse audience than ever before, the show also provided her with the necessary knowledge of social media and internet use. Gudeluna’s analysis

of *RPDR* contestants' social media following places Carmen among the top 10 most popular queens³ across various SNS platforms (238). Similar to *RPDR*, Carmen embraced digital outlets across various platforms including social media to stay in touch with and increase her follower fan base.

Carmen Carrera has approximately 1.230.000 followers and subscribers⁴ on her different social media channels. Through shares and re-tweets of her posts she is able to reach an audience which is at least twice as high. Most of Carmen's fans are following her on her official Facebook page (around 600.000 people), followed by Instagram (490.000 followers) and Twitter (101.000 followers). On her official YouTube channel, Carmen has 37.000 subscribers and her videos have been viewed 2.627.616 times. Carmen's Facebook page is marked as "very responsive to messages" (source: Facebook); she posts and engages with her online community daily on different SNSs. Her followers are a source of self-validation, a means of furthering her career, but also, as this thesis aims to illustrate, a means of establishing her identity as a woman. At present, most engagement is generated on Instagram, where some of her posts have been liked and commented by more than 80.000 users. "It's kind of like validation," she tells CNN reporter Sarah LeTrent. "No matter how insecure I might be, no matter how un-pretty I might feel, there are people out there who look to me to be strong and to keep going and to keep proving people wrong" ("Spotlight"). Carmen's different social networks are pieces of a whole, they are interconnected either by individual posts referencing supplementary social media networks or by the use of direct links leading to alternative channels: by asking her Facebook followers to watch her livestream on Twitter, or asking her Twitter community to follow her Pride playlist on Spotify; by creating a YouTube video answering questions asked by her Facebook fans, Carmen's social media channels work in synergy, producing an image of sexualized Latina femininity.

As a rule, all of these channels serve the purpose of Carmen's self-promotion. However, different SM channels are being used for distinct, though related purposes. Early YouTube videos provide an intimate story of Carmen's transition from male to female in the form of a video diary. Facebook and Twitter have mainly been used for discussing the difficulties of fitting in a society deeply suspicious of non-normative gender expressions. Her Instagram account is predominantly used for presenting Carmen as the ideal of Latina feminine beauty. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Snapchat are used simultaneously to present Carmen as the woman she has

³ Analysis conducted in September 2016

⁴ Analysis conducted in January 2019

become and, through the very act of representation, to construct her as a woman. Carmen's cosmetic and plastic surgeries have been carefully documented and explained on her Facebook page and in her YouTube videos. It is these videos in which she publicly discusses her transition choices that have made Carmen a role model within the transsexual community. She uses her social media channels to fight transphobia and insist on her womanhood.

Since visual or textual portrayal of transgender identity is at the core of the paper, the understanding of representation on SNSs for the purpose of the thesis should be clarified. The thesis does not view media in general and social media in particular as accurately reflecting reality. Rather than merely reflecting the reality of transgender lived experience, the thesis recognizes that media channels are actively producing what they purport to reflect.

(Self)representation is a productive force. Carmen's social media channels are not simply representational of Carmen as a trans woman. These channels are actively establishing her as that which they represent. In view of this understanding of representation, the thesis approaches mainstream media representation of Carmen as instances of social construction in which she is being produced as a woman through the societal recognition of her gender. Contrary to those, Carmen's (self)representations on her social media channels will be viewed as examples of her own self-fashioning efforts to present a very specific type of Latina femininity.

Social media channels, thus, have strong transformative potential and cannot be viewed purely as reality's mirror or television's "second screen"⁵ (Henn et al. 290). Henn et al. use the term "spreadable" to refer to the content that is actively shaped by the social media consumers. The content is remixed, reframed and reconstituted by members of the audience (290). Carmen's social media channels predominantly feature Carmen herself. In a very literal way, Carmen Carrera is her own content and she is shaped, reframed, and reconstituted through active involvement of her fans.⁶ The petition on Change.org asking Victoria's Secret to make Carmen their first trans model is a good example of this. The petition was started by Carmen's fans and it is the single most important event which launched Carmen's career as both a professional model and actress. Dagget recognizes the importance of an emotional connection forged "through confessionals and personal stories" between reality stars and their fans (280). In Carmen's case, the emotional connection

⁵ "Second screen" involves the use of devices such as tablets or mobile phones to enhance the viewer experience and provide interactive features for content that is usually broadcast on another device, usually television.

⁶ See Yudelman, and Bratich for more on transformative potential of reality TV and social media.

achieved on social networks serves an array of pedagogical, political, and self-fashioning goals. For Carmen's project to be pedagogical and political, however, she needs to be able to reach individuals outside the queer and trans community. Correspondingly, Carmen cannot achieve her goal of being fully recognized as a trans-woman without the active involvement of the cisgender community.

The following chapter provides a theoretical framework for understanding and analyzing the construction of trans-femininity in the context of social media and reality TV. It elucidates the key terms and tropes within transgender studies and sheds light as to why Carmen's self-fashioning efforts need to be accompanied by societal recognition of her core gender in order for her identity project to be successful.

3. Transgender Studies

3.1. Beyond Sex and Gender

"Please Use Sex Only When Speaking of Fu**ing"

Kate Bornstein, *My NEW Gender Workbook*

While the focus in gay and lesbian studies is on sexuality, and the emphasis in feminist studies is predominantly on gender, transgender identities radically destabilize both of these categories. Carmen Carrera is a male-to-female transsexual attracted to men. She destabilizes binary categories of sex and gender. In transgressing the gender binary, she not only exposes gender to be fluid, but also problematizes sexual orientation and sexual identities. Carmen subverts the meaning of what it means to be male or female, destabilizes the notion of heterosexuality and discredits sexual identities such as gay and straight. She was assigned male at birth, yet her gender identity and gender expression is that of a female. Does Carmen's desire for men designate her as homosexual man or heterosexual woman? Carmen herself would use her sexual preference in men as proof of her femininity. Her desire, to quote Jody Norton, "constitutes a homo-heterosexuality that deprives the regulatory homo/hetero binary of its force" (144).

It is increasingly clear that the simplistic labelling of bodies as either "male" or "female", based on the existence of external genitalia, is problematic. Research shows that what we call 'biological sex' "encompasses chromosomal and hormonal makeup as well as internal and external genitalia, all of which can appear in combinations that defy a simple binary sex system" (Handler qtd. in Phillips 8). When used in this thesis, "sex", unless specifically marked as activity, will be referring to hormonal, chromosomal, and anatomical differences that usually result in

classification of individuals as either male-bodied or female-bodied, resulting in the creation of the male-female binary. Consistent with Kessler and McKenna (1978), Bornstein (1994), Butler (1990, 2004), and Nagoshi (2014), the paper recognizes that the category of “sex”, when referring to “biological” male-female binary, is as socially constructed as the category of “gender”.

Gender, does not exist outside social conventions and, according to West and Zimmerman (1987), is constantly being “done”. Gender is “performed,” Butler famously claims. (*Gender Trouble* 1990). The idea that gender is a construct which does not naturally follow from sex has for its immediate consequence a theoretically unlimited number of gender identities and expressions. Once the “natural” connection between sex and gender is rejected, gender becomes fluid, allowing individuals to apparently freely choose how they wish to express their gender identity. Butler, however, points out that individuals “only become intelligible subjects through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (*Gender Trouble* 16). In order to be seen as intelligible, individuals have to perform gender according to socially sanctioned gender norms.⁷ Individuals, thus, have some agency in performing their gender but are, at the same time, “limited by the discourses that create and limit our everyday lives, feelings, experiences, and acts” (Siverskog 6).

Bornstein defines gender more closely by dividing it in five components: gender assignment, gender role, gender identity, gender expression and gender attribution (*My New Gender Workbook*). Gender assignment is what the authorities say an individual is, resulting in the designation of individuals as either ‘male’ or ‘female’, based on the presence or absence of a penis. Gender role is “the sum total of qualities, mannerisms, duties, and cultural expectations accorded a specific gender” (ibid. 50). Gender identity is a subjective feeling of what our gender is at any given moment, even though, Bornstein notices, it is most often mistakenly understood to be the same as gender assigned at birth. Gender expression is the way a person expresses the gender they feel to be. Gender attribution is the assumption made upon meeting someone of whether they are a man, a woman or something else altogether. Gender is attributed based on a complex, culturally determined set of cues ranging “from physical appearance and mannerisms to context and the use of power” (ibid. 51).

Traditionally, gender is seen as binary and individuals are either recognized as women or men. The understanding of gender as a spectrum, while providing more possibilities for gender

⁷ These norms usually follow the causal relationship between sex, gender, desire and sexual practice.

expression, is still problematic for individuals who do not see their gender identity within the traditional spectrum of identities ultimately still limited by the existence of two genders. Transgender, agender, bigender and genderqueer individuals are left unaccounted for within the understanding of gender as a binary or binary spectrum. In cultures accepting the existence of only two genders, the two modes of gendering are “maling” and “femaling” (Ekins and King 33). Only biological males, according to Ekins and King, are expected “to male”, and only biological females are expected “to female”. “Where this rule is broken – where males ‘female’ and females ‘male’ – [the] favored term is transgendering” (ibid. 33).

In *Second Skins*, Jay Prosser points to the common misreading of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* regarding gender performativity. By using transgendered subjects to bring into relief the performativity of gender, Butler has made herself vulnerable to criticism of voluntarism and antimaterialism (Prosser 28). “What was meant by gender performativity [appeared to be] gender theatricality” (ibid. 28). Gender was misunderstood to be “a theatrical role that could be chosen... [leading to the belief] that gender, like a set of clothes in a drag act, could be donned and doffed at will, that gender is drag” (ibid. 28). It is crucially important to understand that Butler did not intend such reading of performativity even though *Gender Trouble* was “both embraced and critiqued” in such reading (Prosser 28). Butler’s notion of performativity, Prosser clarifies, was not based in “Goffman-esque understanding of identity as a role but in Austinian speech-act theory” (ibid. 28).

My own reading of Carmen Carrera’s trans-identity construction, however, will be relying on Erving Goffman’s understanding of identity as a performance. In his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman explains identity through the metaphor of a stage, a performer and his/her observers (10). Goffman’s understanding of identity is valuable in the analysis of Carmen as a transsexual woman because it allows me to frame her social media activity within concepts of stage, performance, observers, and co-participants. Goffman-esque understanding of identity, the thesis will illustrate, presents a far more useful approach to understanding transgender identity construction than the Austinian speech-act theory.

3.2. Trans, Transsexual, and Transgender

At the heart of transgender studies is the transgender individual. These individuals, according to Nagoshi et al., “live with a gender identity different from traditional binary gender roles and their gender identification either violates the heteronormative conceptualization of male

or female or mixes different identity and role aspects of being male or female” (“Deconstructing the Complex Perceptions” 406).

Transgender studies emerged in the 1990s from a body of work, often autobiographical⁸, critically engaged with the medical approach to transgender as well as feminist and queer theory. The autobiographical work mixed with political commentary and critical scholarship unfolded into a broader field of transgender studies. Called queer theory’s “evil twin”, the field of transgender studies has developed “in the shadow of queer theory” (Stryker, “Transgender Studies” 214), out of sexuality studies and feminism, sharing queer theory’s interest in gender categories and sexual identity but privileging gender categories. Underscoring this thesis’ focus on internet and social media networks in the trans lived experience and identity construction, Susan Stryker was among the first theoreticians to point to the importance of modern communication technologies for the trans community. She suggested that the growth of home computers in the 1990s gave a critical push for the creation and strengthening of a “transgender community” and community activism (qtd. in Hines 28). Ekins and King echo Stryker’s opinion in their *Transgender Phenomenon*, claiming that the rise of the internet brought on “the most significant change in the telling of transsexual stories” (58).

During the 1990s, the term “transgender” gradually started replacing the more common term “transsexual” which was “the dominant Western identity category for transgender individuals” (Hines 4). While the terms “transvestite” and “transsexual” were coined by the medical community to describe the “deviant”, the “perverted” and the “abnormal”, the term “transgender” was created by people who identified as transgendered and who, “in the main, resisted their medicalization” (Ekins and King 29). Susan Stryker understands the term ‘transgender’ to have two distinct, though, related meanings. Originally, the term refers to people who cross the lines of gender without seeking sex reassignment surgery. The second meaning of ‘transgender’ is much more expansive and refers to “all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries” (“Performing Transgender Rage” 254). “Transgender”, according to Wellborn, “emerged as an umbrella term for a broad range of individuals whose gender identity, expression, or behavior does not match the biological sex that they were born with” (2). “Cisgender” is the opposite of “transgender”. Cisgender or simply “cis” is used to describe people whose gender identity matches

⁸ Leslie Feinberg’s “Stone Butch Blues”, Sandy Stone’s “The Empire Strikes Back”, Susan Stryker’s “Performing Transgender Rage”.

the sex assigned at birth. Cisgender individuals have or perform a gender role which is considered appropriate for their sex. “Transgender” captures a wide spectrum of sex and gender crossings such as cross-dressing, cross-living, “passing”, transforming the sexed bodies through surgery and hormones, as well as other forms of gender crossing or blending. In its broadest sense, transgender (TG) or “trans”, includes identities such as hermaphrodites/intersex, drag-queens, drag-kings, transvestites or cross-dressers, transsexuals (TS), genderqueer, bi-gender and other sex and gender-variant people.

While the phenomena of cross-dressing and intersexuality have been known for centuries, “the category of ‘transsexual’ is a relatively recent achievement of culture” (Rubin 33). Transsexuality, according to Rubin, was made possible by breakthroughs in the science of endocrinology and surgery. Transsexual individuals feel a strong disparity between their physical bodies and their gender identity. No doubt there were individuals before who felt their gender identity not matching their physical bodies, but until relatively recently these people had no other option but to cross-dress and live their lives as their ‘chosen’ gender without modifying their bodies. The medical term for the clash between one’s physical sex and gender identity is called “gender dysphoria” (GLAAD). Transsexual women⁹ are individuals assigned male at birth who identify as women. Conversely, transsexual men¹⁰ are assigned female at birth, but feel their gender identity to be male. Transsexuals might attempt to resolve this disparity by transitioning to the gender they emotionally identify with.

Transition is a process by which transsexual individuals gradually align their gender expressions and gendered body with the gender identity they identify with. The hegemonic belief that all men have male bodies and all women have female bodies is utilized by transsexual individuals who modify their bodies accordingly in order to achieve congruency between their body and their core self¹¹. “Transition”, according to GLAAD, involves a number of steps ranging from “telling one’s family, friends, and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents” to “hormone therapy, and possibly (though not always) one or more types of surgery” (“GLAAD Media Reference Guide”). Even though transition involves a whole range of different steps, in both cis and trans

⁹ MtF, M2F, male-to-female

¹⁰ FtM, F2M, female-to-male

¹¹ “Core self” in this thesis will refer to subjective feeling of one’s gender identity as opposed to gender identity one has been assigned at birth.

communities transition is usually associated with medical body-modifying procedures. These surgical interventions are called “sex reassignment surgery” or SRS.

Early in her career Carmen Carrera could safely be described as a drag-queen. Nowadays she refers to herself as transgender woman even though her transition to womanhood through medical procedures clearly positions her as transsexual. Adding to the general confusion surrounding trans, the terms “transsexual” and “transgender” are partly overlapping. While many transsexuals, such as Carmen, identify as transgender, not all transgender individuals identify as transsexuals.¹² As already stated, transgender individuals or transgenders typically cross the gender lines by subverting the gender roles or gender identities assigned at birth. However, unlike transsexuals, transgenders usually do not wish to have hormone treatments or sex-reassignment surgeries. Contrary to “transgender”, “transsexual” is thus not an umbrella term. My own use of the term “transgender”, and especially when related to Carmen, will primarily refer to *transsexual* identities and their movement across the gender binary.

3.3. Theorizing the Transgender

In *TransForming Gender*, Sally Hines gives an overview of how the category of transgender has been historically approached within different theoretical fields. Although ethnomethodology was the first to separate gender from biological sex and expose both biology and gender behaviour as a social construct (Kessler and McKenna 1978), this theoretical approach still rested firmly on the male-female gender binary and as such was not able to account for the complexity of the transgender movements between and, especially, beyond the accepted binary. Within gay and lesbian studies, on the other hand, transgender experiences and practices such as cross-dressing and cross-living were dubiously absorbed into the homosexual narrative (Hines 16, Prosser 10). Gay and lesbian studies, while recognizing specific instances of (trans)gender-crossings, render the transgender identities invisible by problematically presenting them as essentially homosexual.

Feminism and queer theory have both engaged with transgender identities. To a certain extent, these approaches are useful in theorizing the transgender phenomenon but, due to their conceptual deficiencies, both ultimately prove inadequate to fully understand the trans experience. What became increasingly clear among the theoreticians of transgender is that none of the established

¹² See Katrina Roen’s “‘Either/Or’ and ‘Both/Neither’” on the discursive tensions between transsexuals and transgenders

approaches proved fitting in theorizing the trans phenomenon in all its complexity and that there was an obvious need for a new theoretical approach to transgender.

3.3.1. Katrina Roen

In “Embodying Research and Practice”, Julie Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy claim that transgender theory “as a critique of queer theory, developed from Roen’s (2002) ideas that transgenderism included more than just an “either/or” conceptualization” (435) of gender identity. In her by now landmark article in transgender studies, “‘Either/Or’ and ‘Both/Neither’”, Katrina Roen discusses the divisions raging within the trans community that, at their core, have the binary understanding of gender. Even though “transsexualism” has been incorporated into the broader term of “transgenderism”, different trans individuals position themselves differently with respect to the binary understanding of gender. Contrary to the transsexual community who accept the fluidity of gender identity but keep the gender binary unquestioned (“either/or” conceptualization of gender identity), Roen makes clear that transgenderism also includes a “both/neither” conceptualization of gender which actively transcends the gender binary. Roen points to what she sees as divergent ultimate goals of the two communities. Transgenderism, as a political approach, has as its ultimate goal the transgression of the gender binary; expansion, subversion and abandonment of categories such as “transsexual”, “man” or “woman”. Transsexualism, on the other hand, does not aim at deconstructing the binary of gender, its primary concern is the right of the transsexual to be accepted as their “chosen” gender, either as a man or a woman.

Sandy Stone, Judith Halberstam, and Susan Stryker are among the most vocal proponents of radical politics of gender transgression. They all accept the queer understanding of sex and gender, view subjectivity and physical body as constructed by discourse, and dismiss the essentialist understanding of identity. Passing as one’s chosen gender (staying closeted) is seen as maintaining the binary gender system and considered to be politically incapacitating. Henry Rubin, Zachary Nataf and Jay Prosser are among authors defending the transsexual position of passing. Roen terms this political and academic tension within the trans community “both/neither” versus “either/or” debate.

‘Both/neither’ refers to a transgender position of refusing to fit within the categories of woman and man, while ‘either/or’ refers to a “transsexual imperative to pass convincingly as either man or woman” (505). The transsexual community clearly privileges post-op individuals such as Carmen Carrera. Transgenderism, on the other hand, advocates gender fluidity, transgression and being out and public, and seems to exclude individuals who, for whatever reasons, choose to pass

as either men or women. Roen's key contribution to trans scholarship was demonstrating that many trans people have no wish to strictly define themselves as either trans men or trans women. The FtM and MtF acronyms have been reformulated to reflect this growing politicization within the trans community. Some parts of the trans community now use an asterisk or an X (Ft* or FtX, Mt* or MtX) to underline the rejection of the gender binary and emphasize the openness of their gender (see Espineira 324).

Situating Carmen within either one of these positions is difficult. It appears that Carmen is adhering to the political position of "either/or." She meticulously constructs herself as a woman within the normative gender binary. This seemingly situates her within the transsexual politics of passing. However, Carmen is first to openly declare that she is a *transgender woman*. In doing so she comes closer to the radical politics of gender transgression and responds to Bornstein's call to trans to "come out of the closet, to stop hiding (trans)gendered past, and to live openly as transpeople" (qtd. in Roen 503). In the course of this paper, I will analyze Carmen's transsexual trajectory from gay man to transgender woman and the achieved position in which she feels comfortable enough with her female identity to claim that "being woman does not require a vagina" ("Carmen Answers your Facebook Questions").

3.3.2. Surya Monro

Surya Monro made a key contribution to transgender theory in removing transgender as the subject of feminist and queer theory. In *Theorizing Transgender Diversity* Monro explores a complex relationship between the transgender community, on the one side, and different strands of feminism and queer theory on the other.

Monro views feminism as a highly problematic basis for analyzing trans because feminism, and especially its more traditional strands, depends on the male-female distinction. Feminism has been described by other authors e.g. Sally Hines as "largely hostile to transgender practices" (17). Radical feminist authors such as Janice Raymond and Sheila Jeffreys see transsexual individuals as reinforcing stereotypes of "über-femininity" and appropriating female bodies and space (ibid. 18). Transgender women are viewed as tools of patriarchal oppression and as an attempt by the men-dominated culture to subvert and further weaken the category of 'biological women'. Raymond's argument that "transsexual women are not, nor can they ever be, 'real' women" (*The Transsexual Empire* 18) is highly problematic for transgender individuals like Carmen who feel their identity to be that of a woman. Radical feminist positions such as these have an interest in

perpetuating the gender binary and the separation between categories of men and women. Such strands of feminism cannot be constructively used in theorizing the transgender phenomenon. Poststructural feminism, on the other hand, is by far more useful in understanding trans (Monro 37). By separating gender from sex, poststructural feminist authors allow for a variety of gender identities and expressions beyond normative masculinities and femininities. Feminist authors such as Butler and Haraway challenge the binary opposition of man-woman and see both sex and gender as fluid and constructed by discourse. “Viewed from this angle, trans identity can be seen as socially constructed in the same way that male and female identities are” (Monro 37). Monro points to transgender authors and theoreticians such as Kate Bornstein, Susan Stryker and Sandy Stone who indeed see the transsexual practices of transitioning as performativity by which “the self [is] socially constructed and expressed via discourse” (37). These transgender authors see the body itself as discursively produced. The findings of Monro’s own study, however, only partially support the poststructuralist (constructivist) approach to trans, since most of the trans interviewees in her study see their gender identity in essentialist and embodied, rather than constructed terms.

In so far as “queer involves the scrambling of binaries as a means of challenging oppressive social norms concerning sexuality and gender” (Monro 38) queer theory can be used in understanding transgender identities. Queer theory approaches gender identity, gender roles and sexual orientations as “social constructs and, therefore, open to questioning, subversion, and self-construction” (Nagoshi “Transgender Theory” 434). Precisely here does Hines locate a problem with the queer understanding of transsexuals. As with poststructural feminism, queer theory sees identities as social constructs and “often leaves non-performance-related transgender identities unaccounted for” (27). This is highly problematic for transsexuals who, on the one hand, rely on the self-construction as part of their identity project; on the other hand, however, must reject the purely constructivist nature of their identity since the whole point of crossing the gender binary is getting to a point where their gender expression matches their core gender identity which is experienced as *essentially* male or female. Queer as theory has thus proved unable to fully account for and encompass the diversity of identities within the transgender phenomenon. In addition, queer emphasis on radically and openly transcending and transgressing the dominant norms of gender and sexuality is a motive for many transsexuals to dismiss the queer label. Rather than standing out, the pervasive discrimination against non-normative gender identities and identity expressions, as both Monro and Rubin (2003) point out, leads the majority of transsexuals to wishing for a complete assimilation into the dominant society.

Even though poststructuralist feminist and queer approaches can be used in addressing certain aspects of the transgender phenomenon, they are ultimately inadequate in theorizing the transgender. Monro sees the central problem with both these approaches to transgender identity in their “decentering of the subject” and their lack of attention to how institutions and power structures directly affect the everyday lives (the lived experiences) of transgender individuals and the formation of transgender identity (40).¹³ The transgender individual has been ‘decentered’ in the poststructuralist feminist and queer approach “lacking both biological and psychological reality” since both agency and identity, but also the body itself, are understood to be formed by dominant discourses (39). In a sentence which presents a clear break from these theoretical approaches Monro seems to be calling for a new theory of trans:

To argue that experience of an essential self is simply internalized discourse is to risk accusing [transsexuals] of false consciousness, thereby denying them agency and autonomy. In addition, there is a clear disjunction between the unusual experiences of transpeople and the social context in which they develop their identities, indicating that something is missing from poststructuralist, constructionist accounts. Interestingly, recent discussion by transpeople indicates support for an essentialist model of the self, which, while acknowledging the impact of biology, lends itself neither to biological determinism or a binary gendered system. (39-40)

With some transgender identities, such as drag-queens – queer theory’s postmodern understanding of gender fluidity accounts perfectly for the trans experience; with other identities, such as transsexuals, queer and feminist approaches do not adequately account for some individuals’ deeply embodied and essentially experienced identities. Essentially experienced transgender identities, those that are non-performance-related, that are outside the male-female binary, are left completely unaccounted for. Monro clearly states that the experience of essential self must be considered by any theoretical approach which aims to account for the full range of transgender identities. Monro proposes an approach to trans that combines the postmodernist approach - “to make sense of gender plurality”, the poststructuralist approach – “to understand the construction of gender”, and an analysis of social structures to ground the theory in the daily lived experiences of transgender people (43).

3.4. Trans-Identity Theory

Following Monro’s urge for a new theory of transgender, Julie Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy make an important contribution to the studies of transgender by developing an approach

¹³ Vivian Namaste expresses similar concerns in her *Invisible Lives*.

which in their words “both encompasses and transcends feminist and queer theory” (*Gender and Sexual Identity* 1). In their book, Nagoshi and Brzuzy integrate aspects of the feminist and queer approach into the new theory of transgender identity.

The feminist approach to transgender is necessarily problematic in so far that it retains the essentialist understanding of gender. Queer theory’s social constructivist assumptions about gender identity account only for a fragmentary understanding of transgender. Nagoshi and Brzuzy observe that although queer theory “may accept feminine males and masculine females, as well as a plurality of gender identities, it nevertheless builds on the assumption of the male versus female gender categories” (“Transgender Theory” 435). Gender is understood as fluid but only within the male-female binary.

A comprehensive transgender theory, however, must account not only for trans individuals who experience their identity as *either* women *or* men, but also those who feel themselves to be *both* male and female or *neither* men nor women (Roen 2002). Furthermore, Nagoshi et al. are aware of Monro’s observation concerning the importance of lived transgender experiences and the limitations that the body places on gender fluidity. It is true that essentialist understanding of gender as based on the body “reinforces traditional stereotypes about gender and gender roles” (Tauchert qtd. in “Transgender Theory” 435). However, understanding gender as a purely social construct denies the identity that comes from the body. Studies by Monro (2000), Rubin (2002), and Hines (2007) all confirm the existence of embodied transgender experiences. Further complicating the issue was Nagoshi and Brzuzy’s observation that several transgender theorists¹⁴ “recognize that the understanding of embodied experiences interacts with the socially constructed aspects of gender and sexual identities” (*Gender and Sexual Identity* 77).

The trans-identity theory proposed by Nagoshi and Brzuzy consists of three parts. There is clearly a need for “a theory of gender identity that incorporated both a fluid self-embodiment and a self-construction of identity that dynamically interacts with this embodiment in the context of social expectations and lived experiences” (ibid. 77). *Embodiment*, *self-constructed* and *socially constructed* aspects of gender and sexual identity are here interconnected and made sense of through the narrative of lived experience.

Consistent with Rubin, Monro, and Hines, Nagoshi and Brzuzy recognize embodiment as the first source of (trans)gender identity. Embodiment is related to the subjective feeling of how

¹⁴ e.g. Susan Stryker (2004, 2006), Kate Bornstein (1994)

the sexed and gendered body expresses one's core identity. Embodiment, according to Finn and Dell, is closely related to "body management practices such as clothing, hormones and surgery" ("Practices of Body Management" 464). Nagoshi and Brzuzy, however, point out that these embodied aspects of sex and gender identity are, at least partially, understood through socially constructed processes. Chapter four of this thesis will explore body management practices the focus of which is the transsexual re-construction of the *right* sex and gender.

The second source of trans-identity is the "explicitly self-constructed aspect of identity, one that derives meaning from the narrative of lived experiences" (*Gender and Sexual Identity* 87). Queer theory's ability to subvert the imposed, socially constructed identities lies precisely in the existence of this self-constructed aspect of identity, the authors point out. Nagoshi and Brzuzy recognize the deliberately exaggerated 'performances' of the normative gendered behaviors as an example of such self-constructed¹⁵ subversions (ibid. 87).

In formulating their trans-identity theory Nagoshi and Brzuzy could not contest the feminist and queer view that gender roles and expressions are socially constructed. "The feminist and queer theory view could not be denied, that expected gender and sexual behaviors and physical appearances were socially determined and enforced by external social mechanisms of stereotyping, socialization, and reinforcement/punishment and by internal identifications resulting from the repeated performance of these expected behaviors and appearances" (*Gender and Sexual Identity* 86). These socially constructed aspects of identity are the third source of gender and sexual identity. The self only exists as a synthesis of the three aspects of identity which interact together and according to Nagoshi and Brzuzy "can only be understood in terms of the narrative of one's lived experiences" (87).

This thesis will proceed to analyze Carmen Carrera and her modelling of trans-femininity in social media sites and reality TV by focusing on her embodiment of (trans)femininity, as well as the self-constructed and socially constructed aspects of her transgender identity.

4. Transgender Embodiment

Contrary to queer and postmodern feminist discourse, which privileges performativity and the constructed nature of sex and gender, the material body with all its conscious and unconscious sensations is the main focus in Carmen Carrera's transition to woman. The body is understood as

¹⁵ I am aware that in identity studies "self-fashioning" is the more established term, but following Nagoshi and Brzuzy's own use of the term "self-construction", I will be using these terms interchangeably in my thesis.

the source of identity for transsexual people. Research work by leading theorists of transgender such as Prosser (1998), Namaste (2000), Roen (2002), Rubin (2003), and Schrock (2005), as well as transsexual life stories, confirm the importance transsexuals place on the body as the focus of their identity project. In their trans-identity theory, however, Nagoshi et al. state that the embodied aspects of identity are at least partially experienced through socially constructed processes. Gendered physical appearance is enforced and essentialized by social mechanisms of stereotyping, socialization, reinforcement, or punishment. Transgender individuals internally identify with the socially enforced embodiment, consequently deciding to change their physical bodies to match the internalized normative body ideals. Transgender embodiment of either femininity or masculinity is, thus, influenced by social norms, but also closely connected to explicitly self-constructed aspects of identity. Identity is necessarily a product of a particular culture, but it is experienced as an internalized core.

The present chapter analyzes Carmen Carrera's embodiment of trans-femininity by exploring her self-presentation on the Carmen Carrera official YouTube channel as well as in selected Instagram and Facebook posts. As mentioned before (see chapter two), all of Carmen Carrera's social media channels work in synergy to produce a distinct image of sexualized Latina femininity. Whereas Facebook and Instagram have mainly been used to promote her latest work as well as address and respond to transphobic attitudes, Carmen's YouTube videos provide an intimate story of her transition from male to female in the form of a video diary. These highly personal YouTube videos in which Carmen talks into the camera addressing her followers, deal with intimate body transformations she is going through on her path to womanhood. Frankly and matter-of-factly, Carmen walks her audience through the various instances of body transformation, explaining her breast augmentation surgery, her facial feminization procedures, the risks connected to vaginoplasty as well as why she eventually decided to undergo breast reduction surgery. On her YouTube channel, Carmen features videos which move from illustrating her initial obsession with highly sexualized, hyper-feminine embodiment in the year 2012 towards understanding of female embodiment that is less dependent upon society's expectations and more upon personal choice and feelings of well-being.

Among her fans Carmen is known and referred to as the "Body Beautiful". In one of her earliest YouTube videos, Carmen shares with her fans that she is undergoing surgery so she can be the Body Beautiful. Carmen describes herself as "a clothing-optional kind of person" ("Happy First Day of Summer"). On *RuPaul's Drag Race* she was the contestant best known for her nude-looks. Both her Instagram and Facebook account feature photos that are, in Carmen's own words

“borderline [sexting]” (“Carmen Carrera on Anthony Weiner”). For Carmen, showing off her body and her feminine beauty is highly empowering. A look at her social media channels shows that for Carmen, her body is just as much in focus today as it was at the beginning of her transition. The question of why the body is such a central point in Carmen’s identity project is made clearer in Rubin’s research.

In his *Self-Made Men* Henry Rubin provides examples of how the feelings of embodied maleness changed with the coming of new generations of transsexuals. Some of the older transsexuals in his study conflate gender roles and sexed bodies. Embodying maleness for these older individuals is closely connected to taking on the appropriate social roles. With the opening up of gender roles to both parts of the man-woman binary, the material body remains the only “legitimate difference” between men and women. As a result, the younger trans-men in Rubin’s study “link their core male self only to their bodies” (178). Noticing that taking on “appropriate” gender expressions and roles is not necessarily enough to get transsexual individuals recognized as their preferred gender, these individuals retrain, redecorate and remake their body (Schrock et al.) as a way of transitioning to the gender they identify with. Since gender expressions and gender roles have become increasingly detached from particular gender identities, the body, according to Rubin, becomes the main vehicle of gender attribution.

4.1. “Wrong Body” and Transition

The story of being trapped in the ‘wrong body’ is a dominant transsexual narrative. Trans men and trans women feel that their bodies do not accurately express their core selves. Carmen’s male body failed to express her core female identity. Therefore, for Carmen, the “wrong body” narrative is a narrative of betrayal by her own body that must be put right through hormonal therapy, cosmetic and reconstructive surgery. Unlike most FtM who only become distressed with their bodies in puberty once the menses start and breasts appear, MtF transsexuals, including Carmen, report of early gender-related trauma. In “Model Carmen Carrera” and “Inside Edition”, Carmen addresses those early childhood feelings of being trapped in the wrong body: “Imagine waking up in the wrong body. I was just a kid [...] who did not really have an idea of male and female roles. My life would be much easier, I would be happier if I could wake up tomorrow as a girl. I grew up like that, like wishing and wishing and wishing” (“Model Carmen Carrera”).

In order to have her femininity recognized as authentic by her surroundings, Carmen needs to retrain, redecorate and remake her body to present as female. “Biologically female feels right in my heart and my soul, but God gave me a male body” (“Carmen Answers your Facebook

Questions”). Transitioning to the *right* gender involves a number of steps and, as stated by Carmen herself, there is no right way to transition: “There are trans women who go through sex-change surgery and there are trans women who decide not to. For me, it’s the final step in a long process (“Born in a Man’s Body”).

Most of the transsexual participants in studies done by Rubin and Schrock et al. agree that transitioning starts with hormones, continues through top surgery and is eventually completed by bottom surgery. Carmen, in this respect, exemplifies a typical transitional trajectory. Top-surgery in MtF transsexuals like Carmen involves breast augmentation and the bottom-surgery involves the removal of male genitals and the reconstruction of a fully sensitive vagina (vaginoplasty). Even though Hird suggests dividing transsexuals into “pre-transition/operative”, “transitioning/in the process of hormonal and surgical sex-reassignment”, and “post-transition/operative” (578), GLAAD advises against it since “not all transgender people choose to, or can afford to, undergo medical surgeries.”

It is certainly not easy for the cisgender community to understand how it feels to inhabit the “wrong body”. Most of us spend our lives feeling largely at ease with the way our bodies express what we perceive to be our core selves. In rare cases, people choose to have plastic surgery to achieve specific beauty ideals or regain lost form and/or function of certain body parts. Rarely do we feel that our whole body is an inaccurate expression of a core self. This, however, is how transsexuals feel about their material selves. With transsexuals there is a strong disparity between their physical bodies and their gender identity. Simply stating, however, “I feel like a man”, “I’ve always felt like a girl and never like a boy” or “I do not feel like my assigned gender” does not make the state of gender dysphoria any clearer. How does it feel to inhabit a “wrong” body? How would a transsexual woman know how a “biological” woman feels? The transsexual community has remained largely misunderstood since the answers to these and similar questions have been practically impossible to get through positivist, quantitative research. Ed, one of the transmen taking part in Rubin’s study might bring us closer to the answer: “I do not feel like a woman”, he says, “although, I don’t know exactly what a woman would feel like or what a man would feel like. But I do not identify with my female parts” (146). Physical sensory experiences remain limited to our own body. In admitting that he does not know how other women feel within their bodies, or how a “man” should feel, Ed clearly and rightfully limits his embodied feeling of masculinity to his own body parts – those that he does not identify with. Unlike transgender individuals who can identify as both and neither gender, as third gender, or genderqueer, most transsexuals move within a strict male-female binary. Since Ed does not identify with his female

parts and since there is no other gender identity he can claim for himself but “male” and “female”, it stands to reason for him that he must be a man. This is a confusing experience for most transsexuals which is why it can take years before some transsexuals are able to truly name their confusing embodied feelings and understand who they are and what they are experiencing – Carmen, as a case in point, only realized she was transsexual in her mid-twenties.

Carmen’s YouTube channel is unique in that it justifies and describes, often in minute detail and with videos to illustrate them, the feminizing reconstructive and cosmetic surgeries performed on the transsexual body.

4.2. Carmen Carrera: Embodiment of Femininity

Carmen Carrera is often criticized for embodying a highly stereotypical kind of (Latina) femininity. Latina femininity has, by theoreticians of Latinidad¹⁶, been linked to familism (Alcalde 2010), motherhood, connection to self and others (Greer 2013), as well as to the trope of tropicalism (Martynuska 2016) and the related highly sexualized version of femininity, to which, consistent with Van Oosten (2017), and McKelvie (2010), I am referring to as “hyperfemininity”. Familism and motherhood as themes both point to the central role of family and family unity in the performance of Latina femininity. These themes prioritize social relations as a form of empowerment in times of crisis (Alcalde 2010). While familism and motherhood as tropes of Latinidad are undisputed, Latina sexualization and her consequent othering in the mainstream media representation has been severely criticized by authors such as Valdivia (2011) and Martynuska (2016).

McKelvie sees hyperfemininity as an “exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role” (219). Van Oosten et al. relate it to women’s “enjoyment of sexualization, which, in turn, predicts engaging in self-sexualizing behaviors (e.g., flaunting one’s breasts), self-objectification (i.e., placing a higher importance on the appearance than the function of one’s body), body surveillance (e.g., being preoccupied with how one looks), as well as gaining self-esteem from feeling attractive” (4). All these aspects of hyperfemininity can be identified in Carmen Carrera’s own performance of trans-femininity.

Time and again Carmen Carrera refers to Jennifer Lopez as one of her most important role-models (“Carmen Carrera Dishes on Couples Therapy”). In “The Exotic Other” Martynuska explores Latina images in US media by focusing on two iconic Latina celebrities - Jennifer Lopez

¹⁶ Latinidad, according to Angharad N. Valdivia, is “the process of being, becoming, and/or performing belonging within a Latina/o diaspora.

and Salma Hayek. I find this text particularly useful in analyzing Carrera's own performance of trans-femininity since it establishes a connection between the media representation of Latinas and hyperfemininity, while dealing with Carmen Carrera's most important celebrity role-model. Martynuska claims that the Latina body is presented as "oversexed as well as sexually available; all that is identified with seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair or extravagant jewellery" (73). Popular Latina representation, according to Martynuska, "emphasizes female breasts, hips and buttocks to indicate sexual desire and fertility. The tropes of tropicalism also involve expressive dancing, especially involving movement below the waist" (75). Both Martynuska and Beltran (2002) point to the fact that the media representation of Jennifer Lopez has mostly focused on her body and, particularly, her bottom. "Lopez is famous ... primarily for her celebrated body emphasizing her sexy hyper-buttocks" (Martynuska 76). These descriptions of tropicalized Latina femininity are valuable since it is these very same and similar images and performances that Carmen is trying to reproduce in her own performance of femininity. Star images "serve as definers of power and identity for a society (Dyer qtd. in Beltran 72). That J.Lo's version of Latina femininity is not authentic but clearly constructed by the US mainstream media is of no importance for Carmen who tries to emulate it.

Radical feminists such as Raymond or Jefferson accuse transsexual women of performing hyper-femininity and perpetuating oppressive gender norms. Rubin, however, recognizes that performing stereotypical femininity is seen by many MtF transsexuals as the only way to achieve recognition of the gender they identify with. Van Oosten points to similar pressures in the cisgender community when observing how "adolescents are socialized to adopt stereotypical gender role orientations" (11). Modifying the body through makeup, clothes, or surgery, becomes the chief means of achieving intersubjective recognition of the gender trans individuals identify with. The project of trans-women's body modification has little to do with willful oppression of "biological" women through perpetuating gender stereotypes (Raymond; Jeffreys) and more with the extreme pressure society exerts on trans individuals to conform to the "right" gender expressions and roles. For trans individuals to be recognized for the gender they identify with, they have to modify their bodies in accordance to normative claims about male or female embodiment. Appealing to these norms becomes crucially important in their identity project. According to Monica Prata, the founder of Nouveau She¹⁷, being even more feminine than the average lady is

¹⁷ NouveauShe is a business founded and run by stylist and makeup artist Monica Prata. NouveauShe offers full range femininity training, teaching transwomen makeup, clothing, hair styling, and "feminine comportment".

very important to transwomen (“Meet the Consultant”). In an interview with NBC News, Carmen admits that it was difficult for her family to accept she was transgender, even when she was in full makeup and “going the extra step to express [her] femininity” (“Trans Advocate”). Carmen, as many other transsexuals, often appeals to the most stereotypical gender presentation in order to make sure she is recognized as her *right* gender. Transsexual individuals do not want to *pass* as women. Passing is seen as a highly loaded term implying deception. Carmen does not perform femininity in order to deceive her family or cisgender community, but for her surroundings to see her for the gender she believes most accurately to reflect who she is. Without appealing to established or even stereotypical gender norms, transsexual individuals have little chance of being recognized by other subjects as the gender they identify with.

In “Transsexual’s Embodiment of Womanhood”, Douglas Schrock, Lori Reid and Emily Boyd explore the strategies by which self-declared MtF transsexuals embody womanhood as part of their transition to socially recognized females. They describe the transsexual understanding of femininity that informs the MtF embodiment of womanhood. All of the accounts of bodily transformation “implied a change in taking the perspective of a generalized other. More specifically, interviewees were similar to women who undergo cosmetic surgery in that the cognitive process of bodily evaluation was filtered through ‘the hegemonic male gaze’” (327). Schrock et al. propose three distinct practices MtF transsexuals employ in embodying womanhood: retraining, redecorating, and remaking the body. These three strategies will be discussed in the remainder of the chapter.

4.3. Retraining the Body

Carmen grew up with her mother, grandmother and an older sister. Ever since she can remember she was surrounded by strong female role-models. Embodying femininity, however, either through gestures, makeup, sartorial presentation, or body modification, is necessarily problematic because there is no clear definition of femininity. There is no one type of woman that one can take as a model. Femininity does not have to be heels and a dress; it can be hoodies and pants. Many (biological) women believe that femininity is less about the outward presentation and is more about the lived experiences of womanhood, the way one has been treated by society at work, school, or family for allegedly having a certain kind of genitals. That being said, there is obviously a standard or, better yet, a stereotype of femininity that a lot of trans women are trying to imitate. According to Carmen’s own words, her mother has always been a big beauty inspiration for her (“Carmen Carrera: Show Girl”).

Introduced to the world of drag performance in her early twenties, by the time Carmen was 25 and a contestant on RPDR she was already “exuding feminine sexuality” (“Model Carmen Carrera”). She was one of the fan-favorites because she had already retrained her body to present femininity. Carmen explains, however, that the process is not an easy one: “I have to figure it out as I go along, like, I have to be the observer and just be like, okay, I know I am a woman but, now, how do I fit into this society? I would like for the female population to be more welcoming to us because we [transgender women] just need more help along the way (“6 Things Trans Women Want You To Know”). By observing and studying real or fictional women, as well as the media representation of women, transsexual women break the concept of “embodying womanhood” into smaller units that they are then able to mimic:

I watched how they did things. How they held a cigarette, how they sat, how they walked, how they gestured . . . picking up a fork, the way a woman drives a car. Men don’t realize it, but everything is so different. If you start listening, when [women] end a sentence, they go up. The voice inflection will always go up. And when you do that, it softens your voice. (MtF Kris qtd. in “Transsexual Embodiment of Womanhood” 322)

Decoration seems to have a very immediate effect on the embodiment of womanhood in that it “accommodates, reshapes, and *retrains* (emphasis added) the material body” (324). Schrock’s interviewees provide examples of how clothing and makeup enforce normative feminine behavior. Wearing skirts, for example, makes it difficult to sit with legs spread, walking ‘like a woman’ is easier when wearing women’s shoes, and holding a cigarette close to the tips of one’s fingers helps avoid smudging the lipstick. Wearing women’s clothes and makeup Schrock et al. note, “shaped [interviewees’] bodies into feminine conformity, which over time, helped feminine gestures feel authentic” (324).

By regular repetition of normative female speaking patterns, gestures, and bodily movements Carmen, Kris and other MtF transsexuals are able to retrain their bodies and feminize their role-taking, turning, what at first appeared as inauthentic behavior, into natural behavioral patterns confirming their authenticity as women.

4.4. Redecorating the Body

According to Schrock et al., clothing and makeup are two principal ways transsexuals redecorate their bodies. Carmen speaks of her earliest experiences with body redecoration for *Glamour* magazine: “I’d raid Mum’s make-up bag, slathering my face with foundation, lipstick and mascara. I’d bring her blouses and trouser suits into the bathroom, too, enjoying the thrill of doing up bows and zips, and posing. I would turn my face to the mirror like I was in a music video and

a woman would return my gaze” (“Born in a Man’s Body”). The story points to the importance gendered clothes and makeup have upon the embodiment of trans-femininity.

Most trans women do not want to attract attention to their being trans; they are aiming at blending into the gender they identify with. Very often, however, their presentation of femininity is based upon a rather stereotypical vision of femininity that could be described as ‘what-men-believe-femininity-should-be-and-not-what-being-feminine-actually-is’. Transsexual women that describe themselves as feminists generally have a problem with applying makeup and wearing stereotypically gendered clothing. However, as one interviewee illustrates, they are aware that they might have to compromise their beliefs if they want to be recognized as women in society:

I’ve always identified with women coming from a feminist perspective. [...] A lot of this clothing and makeup are things that I’ve always thought were ridiculous. [...] I’m hoping that I don’t have to do that. But I’m not certain, you know. I’m wondering if I do have to start wearing a lot of makeup and dressing in more traditionally feminine ways and try to get people to think of me as female. (MtF Marzie qtd. in Schrock et al. 326)

Marzie’s comment about the pressure to conform to normative gendered embodiment echoes Rubin’s observation of the tremendous forces exerted upon transsexual individuals to conform to society’s expectation of how women and men should dress and act. Testimonies such as Marzie’s discredit radical feminist claims of transsexuals being the agents of patriarchal oppression. Rather, the pressure to present stereotypically gendered illustrates society’s oppression of all of its members with the aim of subduing them into conforming to the established gender norms.

Redecorating the body, especially in the beginning of their transition, was rather frustrating for many MtF transsexuals. In hindsight, they humorously report of ‘hideously inappropriate’ clothing such as pink ribbons and miniskirts. Monica Prata, a consultant teaching trans women how to be more feminine, describes the appearance of most of her clients’ female wardrobe. The dresses are often too tight, too low cut, too short, too sparkly: “These features speak as to how men are taught to fetishize women, and how men are taught to be attracted to women, and how to sexualize women” (“Meet the Consultant”). Ms Prata could easily be referring to Carmen.

Looking through the visuals Carmen posts on her social media channels presents the viewer with the image of a distinctly feminine looking woman. It is worth noting, that through her sartorial choices, Carmen also follows a distinct pattern of both sexualizing and objectifying herself for the heterosexual male gaze. She routinely chooses clothing that obviously accentuates her feminine figure, most notably her hips, waistline, legs and breasts. As will be illustrated, it is the secondary and tertiary sexual attributes that are exceptionally important in identifying a person as their correct

gender. This pattern does not change whether she dresses for public events, professional performances, private occasions or even her sports routine, photos of all of which are publicly shared on her social media outlets.

In her clothing choices Carmen favors either tight-fitting outfits (sportswear consisting of e.g. yoga pants, leggings, tight tops) or otherwise revealing attire such as off-the-shoulder flowy dresses with high slits revealing her legs and even hips (see figure 2). Her professional clothing takes this tendency to a yet more extreme level, as both a burlesque performer and a (swimwear) model Carmen by definition wears the most revealing and sexualizing outfits (see figures 3 and 4). Carmen's sartorial presentation firmly reinscribes her in a traditional heteronormative binary. For Carmen, being reinscribed as a woman within the traditional binary, however, is the whole point of her transition. She has changed her body according to stereotypical expectations surrounding the female body, and uses it to legitimize her core feminine gender. Her clothes are not meant to cover the body, the opposite is the case, they are meant to show it off and further emphasize it.

In an autobiographical article for *W* magazine, Carmen explicitly equates her (almost) nakedness with a form of resistance to oppressive social norms. "I want to leave something behind so people can look back one day and say, 'Wow, remember when trans people were discriminated against the most? This person was like, 'Screw everybody! I'm going to parade around half-naked and be super-proud, because that's how everyone should be!'" ("Carmen Carrera: Show Girl"). Tying in to the often perceived "nude" theme in her clothing, the color of her clothes further emphasizes her perceived nudity. Carmen has a tendency to favor earthy, brown or skin-coloured clothes that cover her while at the same time creating an illusion of nakedness. Contrary to her claim, however, the showing of her body has less to do with resisting the oppressive social norms and more to do with actually establishing her within a normative gender binary.

Many transsexuals describe feelings of inauthenticity when applying makeup for the first time: "Applying makeup sometimes feels like I am putting on some kind of mask. I've made some terrible messes... When I first went out with makeup, I looked like a drag queen!" (MtF Shelley and Joyce qtd. in Schrock et al. 324) For Carmen, putting on makeup started early in her childhood, and was everything but inauthentic. Makeup, just like clothes, was a means to affirm her gender. As Carmen became more firmly established as a woman, however, her makeup changed to reflect her new-found confidence. In her later videos, she does not feel pressured into applying a lot of makeup. Her fans increasingly see her in sports clothes, wearing little or no makeup: "Should I feel ashamed for wearing no makeup on Facebook?" she asks in a Facebook live video. "Am I

only supposed to be on FB when I am completely dolled up? No, guys, no – this is me, guys, this is me – sorry. I wake up like this every day. No, I do not have any shame ‘cause this is my human existence and I am not ashamed of it” (posted on 19 Sept. 2018). Carmen’s makeup nowadays looks much more natural than what it looked while she was a man performing in drag. Carmen still applies makeup, but her use of it has significantly changed from the exaggerated expression of femininity in drag culture. Now her application of makeup in “nude” tones creates the impression of her not wearing makeup at all. Rather than flaw the impression of her femininity, the more subtle use of foundation, lipstick, and shade effectively heightens Carmen’s now natural feminine appearance (see figure 5).

The apt use of clothes and makeup which produces the image of femininity/femaleness points to the importance of external cues in gender attribution. Carmen’s makeup, clothes, and her body are a valuable illustration of how a female sexed body only becomes intelligibly female as a result of gender performances women engage in. Since the “sexed body is an effect of the cultural construction of gender” (Prosser 26), a biological male can assume a female cultural position if they engage in appropriate gender performances. For her to establish herself as female within the male-female gender binary, Carmen relies on the same gender performances that all women have to engage in. Redecorating the body through clothes and makeup becomes a vital step in her transition to woman.

4.5. Remaking the Body

The process of transitioning to their core gender is different for every transsexual. The transition to an unambiguously female body is the preferred norm within the MtF transsexual community. The idea that the body needs to be corrected, either through hormones or surgery or both, in order to express an inside identity, is the central principle behind the transition.

In a chapter focusing solely on Carmen Carrera’s body modification, it is worth clarifying her opinion on viewing trans people solely through their physical transitions. In a famous interview with Katie Couric, after being asked about her bottom surgery, Carmen shushes the host and refuses to discuss her genitalia and SRS. Carmen argues that when discussing trans people, transitioning and genitalia is always in focus, but that trans people are more than their transition. “I’d rather talk about my modelling career and being in *W* [magazine] and Italian *Vogue* and showing people that after transition there is still life to live” (“Carmen Carrera on Katie Couric”). Clearly, there is a great deal of interest in the cisgender community regarding transsexuals’ surgeries and body modification: “Why do people have to go so deep into my body, and my

chemistry and my chromosome count to discredit my femininity, I will never understand it,” Carmen vents in her Facebook video “Answering you Questions”. A paradigm shift, Carmen seems to be saying, is necessary when dealing with the trans community. Focusing entirely on the body when discussing trans people tends to objectify them and effectively prevents addressing prejudice and bias they are facing in their everyday lives. That being said, this chapter will proceed with brazenly discussing the body-modifying techniques employed by Carmen Carrera and the transsexual community in order to affirm and legitimize their femininity.

Different transsexual women approach their embodiment of femininity in different ways. Whether the MtF women decide to have hormone therapy or one or more body-feminizing surgeries, the ultimate goal for the majority of transsexual women is to achieve an embodiment that others would associate with the potential to give birth. Whereas retraining and redecorating the body for some transsexuals feels more like impersonating than embodying womanhood, remaking the body along the lines of normative gender embodiment immediately increases feelings of authenticity. ‘Female-embodied’ essentially implies being perceived as capable of giving birth. Most transsexual people who chose to remake their body do so by starting hormone replacement therapy (HRT) usually followed by top surgery. If trans women wish to be recognized as women, they need to have female bodies.

4.5.1. Embodiment and Hormones

When simply performing in drag didn't feel authentically feminine any more, Carmen decided to undergo full gender reassignment. Within the transsexual community, hormones are valued for having a direct effect on the development of secondary sex characteristics such as voice, fat distribution, facial and body hair growth, etc.

As soon as filming [RPDR] finished, I started taking the necessary medication. My doctor gave me progesterone and an oestrogen injection to reduce my masculine characteristics. I felt my muscle mass become leaner on my shoulders, thighs and arms, and my waist thinned out. I became fleshier around my hips and bum. It felt strange, but I was so excited it was working. I looked in the mirror and, slowly, I was morphing into my mother. (“Born in a Man’s body”).

Hormones are perceived to actively produce the chosen gender as opposed to the surgery which only transforms the offending body parts: “[Estrogen] is valued because it alters the most important features used in the sex attribution process” (Rubin 154). HRT causes a range of changes in transgender individuals who have started the therapy. In MtF transsexuals, such as Carmen, HRT causes a feminine pattern of muscle-, hair- and fat distribution. Skin, body temperature and

genitalia undergo significant changes. Carmen talks about how hormones have made her body weaker. She has lost muscle mass as a result of her hormone therapy. In “Breast Implant Removal Surgery,” Carmen explains the effects of HRT on her body and her embodiment of femininity:

I was on hormones for two years before the surgery. I had breast tissue development – a lot. A good B cup. HRT and SRS [sex reassignment surgery] – I needed those in my transition. I am not telling people what they need to go through. This is what I needed. I wanted to first go with hormones before going with surgery. My voice, my face, my body, everything changed as a result of hormones.

Hormones are seen as a natural way to achieve the gender embodiment which one identifies with. In Carmen’s very first YouTube video she discusses how her body naturally changed as a result of hormone therapy: “These are my boobs. This is all just, all hormones. My ass is all real. This is my first surgery below the neck. [...] My whole body is softer now that I am a girl. It was different when I was a boy.” At the same time she started becoming curvier; her hips started getting wider. “All of my weight [now] gets distributed around my hips, butt, thighs. As a trans-person, as a woman, this is where you want it distributed. People love the curvy girls. It’s sexy and attractive” (“Fashion Week Prep and Self-Love”).

Carmen’s voice is one of the most commented upon aspects of her transition. Time and again, trans and cis users ask in the comment section of her YouTube videos how she managed to change her voice to sound so feminine. While voice feminization happens as a result of hormone therapy, through surgery or specialized voice feminization, Carmen has avoided giving a straightforward answer as to how exactly she feminized her voice. In “Carmen Carrera on Joe Budden” she explained that she always had a rather feminine voice and before her transition, while she was still feeling the pressure to present masculine, used to “butch it up” (deepen it) to give a more masculine presentation.

Carmen not only describes her voice as ‘naturally’ feminine, however. Despite her sex reassignment procedures, she has also continued to insist that her female body is for the most part natural as well. It appears that Carmen frames all the changes brought about by HRT as “natural”: “I’m mostly 100% natural, aside from the fact that I need to monitor my hormone levels, which keeps me feminine” (“Fashion Week Prep and Self-Love”). The narrative which describes the transsexual *female* body as genuine is used to legitimize one’s transition and trans-identity. The insistence on the naturalness of one’s body is closely connected to self-construction – the second constitutive part of transgender identity (see chapter 5). In regards to MtF embodiment and

especially MtF *remaking* of the body, hormonal therapy is undoubtedly one of the most important ways of transitioning because hormones are seen as a source of embodied femaleness.

In addition to hormones causing bodily changes, participants in studies by both Rubin and Schrock et al. report of hormones feminizing and masculinizing their subjectivities as well. In a video interview for *SELF* magazine, Carmen describes gaining “crazy emotional awareness that [she] never had before” as a result of her estrogen therapy (“Model Carmen Carrera”). Such effects are perceived as natural and as an affirmation of one’s authenticity as woman. Consistent with Schrock, Reid, and Boyd, the changes in her physical body seem to have legitimized and allowed for the further feminization of Carmen’s subjectivity. As Schrock et al. reveal, transformation of secondary sex characteristics caused by HRT “brought forth unprecedented feelings of authenticity as women. Although interviewees believed they had always been women on the inside, changes to the physical body shaped how they experienced womanhood” (328).

4.5.2. Top Surgery and Embodiment of Transfemininity

Two years after having started her hormone replacement therapy Carmen published a video on her official YouTube channel announcing her top surgery. “Carmen Carrera and Husband on Getting Boobs!!” has since been viewed 567,831 times and has received more than 230 comments. In the video, Carmen explains that she wants her breasts bigger. She had already developed some breast tissue as a result of her HRT, but decided to further feminize her body through surgery. She chose the procedure in which a saline solution (525 cc) is injected under the muscle: “I do not want to go for the fake look. I want to move natural, for them to feel natural. [...] 700 cc would be too much. I want to be the Body Beautiful” (“Carmen Carrera and Husband”).

Whereas bottom surgery is often seen as too expensive, too risky or simply unnecessary, top surgery is being performed by most MtF transsexuals. As Rubin pointed out in her analysis of trans men, secondary sex characteristics are an essential means of inter-subjective recognition and gender attribution. Top surgery is seen as one of the most important body changes transsexuals go through. Carmen chose to enlarge her breasts because female breasts are hegemonically seen as the most distinguishable sign of femininity. The bigger the breasts, the more feminine one is perceived to be. Carmen describes the feelings of authenticity brought forth by her breast augmentation. “The female spirit in you is trying to deal with what [one] has and genetics is not necessarily helping [...] Breast surgery is an accomplishment. It made me feel proud. It is one step closer to feminizing your body” (“Elite Model Carmen Carrera”). Carmen’s trans friend Melina

echoes Carmen in declaring that, to her, “breasts are, like, the most beautiful thing about woman. I would be scared to take my breasts off. [...] because it’s like, part of, woman.”

Whereas genitals are for the most time covered and, consequently, inessential in attributing gender, perceived secondary and tertiary sex characteristics such as breasts, voice, and gestures, are invaluable in facilitating the gender attribution process. In order to establish themselves as female, trans women modify their bodies according to normative ideals of female embodiment.

4.5.3. Facial Feminization

Besides HRT and SRS, facial feminization is the most common way for transsexual women to achieve a culturally enforced and desirable female body ideal. When asked by one of her Facebook fans how they should proceed with their transition, Carmen is quick to suggest laser hair removal followed by HRT. Removing facial hair as the most prominent signifier of masculinity is the first step in feminizing the face. In addition to more common procedures such as laser hair removal and rhinoplasty, many trans women are willing to undergo a range of other procedures – chin and jaw reconstruction, buccal fat pad removal, or filing of the forehead to soften and feminize their facial bone structure. The sheer number of different facial and body feminizing procedures points to the importance transsexual women place on the embodiment of their core gender. More importantly, it illustrates how difficult it is for individuals assigned male at birth to embody womanhood. Society is rigorously policing gender boundaries. Since gender attribution functions on the principle ‘if-it’s-not-a-man-it’s-a-woman’, it is often very difficult for transsexual women to conceal all markers of their biologically male bodies. A single marker of maleness can have them misgendered and prevent them from being recognized as the women they identify as.

Carmen seems to be very open about her facial feminization procedures. Before her top surgery, Carmen claims to only have had a rhinoplasty. In “Dr Simon Ourian”, she tells her YouTube audience about her first visit to a plastic surgeon specializing in trans feminizing procedures. She had been on hormones for a year and wanted to feminize her face. She was offered a number of different feminizing procedures but decided to just do her nose. In “Carmen Carrera Breast Augmentation” the viewers see Carmen with bandages under her eyes. Carmen reveals that she hasn’t only had breast augmentation surgery, but that she has also had fat transferred to her cheeks so she does not have to do too much contouring¹⁸ for her shows. She is in pain, but happy because she “does not look like a big dude”. In another instance Carmen presents her viewers with

¹⁸ Contouring is the visual altering of facial features solely through the use of make-up.

a video of her non-surgical nose-job. She uploaded a video of her entire nose job procedure. At the end of “Dark Circles Treatment”, she concludes: “I feel so much more confident. I can go out without concealer. I can be happy.” Plastic surgery, both cosmetic and reconstructive, is seen as tremendously empowering in the trans community. As Schrock et al. have already pointed out, remaking the transsexual body has been illustrated to also affect transsexuals’ subjectivities in terms of confirming their authenticity as women as well as shaping the feeling of happiness, pride, and confidence.

The discussed videos testify to the importance Carmen places on the facial feminization in her identity project. No other trans celebrity discusses their transition quite so openly. It is for this reason that people see Carmen as an important role-model. User MissChillChick comments under the “Dark Circles Treatment” video: “You’re brave, thank you for keeping it 100 with us. Most celebrities just keep it shush and have us guessing. Love you Carmen.” This user’s comment additionally points to the lack of relatable trans celebrities already discussed in chapter two. Caitlyn Jenner came out as transgender after having fully transitioned. By the time Laverne Cox became famous, she already had transitioned to woman. Neither Jenner nor Cox talk about the details of their transition openly. Carmen, on the other hand, became famous *because* she unreservedly discussed her sex change. Carmen Carrera is unique in that she publicly revealed every detail of her careful body construction.

4.5.4. Bottom Surgery

Three years into her transition, Carmen published a video announcing the last step in her transition to woman: “I am going into the next chapter of my transition – the final chapter” (“Friday July 26 2013”). Having been on female hormones for three full years, and having undergone top surgery and facial feminization procedures, Carmen decided to remove her penis as the culturally most potent marker of her manhood. The penis as a source of inauthenticity is tolerated by some transsexual women and loathed by others. Carmen has meanwhile made clear that she is “100% woman” (“Carmen Answers your Facebook Questions”). Despite repeatedly saying that having a vagina does not make you a woman, Carmen did remove her penis and undergo a vaginoplasty in the attempt to achieve the embodiment that most truthfully corresponds to her core identity. Having a body that truthfully reflects one’s perceived identity is tremendously important in increasing confidence and feelings of authenticity. Bottom surgery is encouraged within the transsexual community as a final step towards achieving the embodiment of the gender one identifies with. It is important to remember, however, that transsexual women do not perform femininity by having

the right genitals, they perform it by having the appropriate secondary and tertiary sex characteristics. Consequently, bottom surgery is not as rigorously enforced by the community standards as top surgery. Even though surgery is seen as a step towards embodying womanhood, it is not seen as a necessary step by everyone. To quote an interviewee from the study done by Schrock et al.: “If you’re not a woman before you go to Montreal [for surgery], you won’t be one after they hack it off and turn it inside out,” (MtF Jenny 329). Carmen echoes this sentiment in saying that “being 100% woman does not necessarily require a vagina, or uterus, or the need to bear children. [This is] because we want to give respect to the women in this world who cannot have kids” (“Carmen Answers your Facebook Questions”).

Due to the limitations of modern medicine, many transsexuals prefer to postpone their bottom surgery or not to remake their genitalia at all. The remaking of genitalia is still connected to a degree of risk. To a question by one of her Facebook fans why she postponed her bottom surgery for so long into her transition, Carmen replies:

It is very simple, babe. Imagine that you can’t [orgasm] for the rest of your life. That’s a risk. I don’t know if you’ve seen the video on YouTube of male-to-female gender reassignment surgery but, it’s kind of invasive. [...] You can go either way [...] either everything is successful, and you can climax and lubricate or not. That’s the risk. It’s fifty-fifty. [...] For a while I chose not to get bottom surgery ‘cause I was afraid of the risks. (“Carmen Answers your Facebook Questions”)

Carmen’s gender reassignment surgery went “very successfully” (“Carmen Answers your Facebook Questions”) and she has since been described as 100% woman. She has gone a long way from ‘assigned male at birth’ to having her birth certificate changed to ‘female’. As Rubin observes, however, “the capacity to fulfill a childbearing role remains the physical and hegemonic criterion for adult womanhood” (99). Choosing to be open about her transition and about the fact that she is a *transgender* rather than a *biological* woman has made Carmen vulnerable to online harassment. Despite successfully retraining, redecorating and remaking her body to match her core gender as female, Carmen Carrera’s status as female is being challenged by parts of the cisgender community. Cyberbullying is an everyday occurrence in the transgender community and Carmen is often told that she will never be a real woman. A YouTube user Some One comments under “Dr. Simon Ourian”: “No matter how many surgeries you do, you will always reveal that you’re really a dude [...]”. “HOW CAN A MAN... THAT IS MENTALLY DISABLED BE THE FACE OF WHAT WOMEN SHOULD REALLY LOOK LIKE”, user Stefanie Barazza asks in the comment section of the “EN ROUTE” video. Carmen is aware of such and similar questioning of her femininity. Despite her appearance clearly implying the potential for giving birth there are

limits to the transition. To people saying “You will never go through what a woman goes through. You’ll never menstruate. You’ll never give birth”, she admits: “I get offended, because that’s one of my biggest insecurities. I wish I could menstruate. I wish I could have kids, but the fact that I can’t should not give you the right to dismiss me. I love my body despite resenting nature for bringing me into existence as male” (“Elite Model Carmen Carrera”).

Embodying womanhood through retraining, redecorating and remaking her body along the normative gender ideals has obviously brought Carmen a long way in her identity project. As the negative comments on her social media sites illustrate, however, embodiment of normative womanhood is only one aspect of a successful transition. For her identity project to be successful, Carmen needs to also narratively establish herself within the heterosexual matrix and have her gender identity recognized by other subjects.

5. Transgender Self-Construction

Self-constructed, embodied, and socially constructed experiences of gender and sexuality are integrated into the narrative of transgender identity. Nagoshi et al. emphasize strong internal connections between the continuously changing individual identity elements in their three-part identity theory. In the course of their interviews, it became clear that the narrative of transsexual identity is strongly affected by both the embodied and the socially constructed part of identity. The authors quote McCam and Fassinger (1996), who noted that “identity formation for sexual minorities, bisexual and transgender individuals included, occurs in a context of pervasive environmental and internalized homophobia” (116). As negative comments on Carmen’s social media channels testify to, misgendering is a problem trans individuals face on a daily basis. The context of social oppression towards LGBTQ+ individuals, according to Nagoshi et al., foregrounds “the necessity of agency to resist this oppression,” (116). The self-constructed aspect of trans-identity embodies the active resistance to oppression. Self-fashioning is closely connected to choosing and embracing one’s preferred identity, but also includes the active performance of chosen identity that enables transgender individuals to transition into the gender they identify with.

LGBTQ+ individuals do not have their gender or sexual identity fixed by conventions. Leslie Feinberg refused to be defined as either woman or man; Kate Bornstein famously declared: “I know I’m not a man – about that much I’m very clear, and I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m probably not a woman either, at least not according to a lot of people’s rules on this sort of thing” (*Gender Outlaw* 8). Claims such as these are necessarily political because they go to the heart of the debate as to which bodies count as legitimate political subjects. A recent post on Instagram in

which Carmen calls out her followers to vote against Republican candidates in the 2018 mid-term elections goes to illustrate the importance of individual agency in resisting the social oppression and defending one's right to self-construct. In this context, self-construction takes many forms, ranging from personal empowerment to claim one's non-normative identity, to subversion and modification of heteronormative ideals as well as using narratives of identity to stabilize and normalize the transgender identity.

An important aspect of Carmen's self-fashioning is being acutely aware of the socially sanctioned gender components that she is either duplicating or rejecting as part of her identity-project. A lesbian participant in the study by Nagoshi et al. explains: "Whether [LGBTQ+ individuals] are duplicating gender components that match their physical body, or whether they're trying to reject some of that, you'll find that they are very aware, very analytical, and very conscious of those categories that they are trying to reject or fit into (*Gender and Sexual Identity* 120).

Carmen Carrera took her self-constructivist agency a step further than most transsexuals. Although she could easily "pass" as a biological woman, Carmen constantly draws attention to her transgender status. She has not only reinvented Christopher Roman as trans woman Carmen Carrera, but also empowered herself to publicly claim and assert her non-heteronormative identity. This brings us back to the article by Katrina Roen and the question whether Carmen can be categorized within the Either/Or or Both/Neither position to gender identity. She seemingly operates (transitions) within the man-woman binary. She has repeatedly told reporters and fans that she wants to be recognized as a woman; yet, Carmen's public assertion of her non-heteronormative identity as well as her increasing attempts to change her personal definition of which bodies count as female brings her much closer to the trans position of Both/Neither which has, as its ultimate goal, the expansion, subversion and abandonment of categories such as "transsexual", "man" or "woman".

An interview-based study done by Cashore and Tuason points to different narratives of agency shared by bisexual and transgender individuals whose gender and sexual identity has been denied them by a society based on a heteronormative gender binary. Consistent with the study's findings, Carmen actively draws attention to the fact that she is a *transgender* woman. She acts as an advocate for her own and rights of other transgender people; she acts as a role model for transgender women within and outside the US. Carmen uses her exposure on social networks to affirm her transgender identity. She takes part in infomercials and documentaries educating and informing people on transgender issues. She uses her social networks to reclaim the identity that

parts of society are denying her, and in the process, changes the definition of what counts as a *woman*, a *man*, *heterosexual*, or *gay*. Carmen rattles at the very foundations of gender binaries when she declares that “being 100% woman does not necessarily require a vagina, or uterus, or the need to bear children” (“Carmen Answers your Facebook Questions”). This is true in a way. Many women cannot have children or do not want to have any. Others have had their uterus removed. All these women, however, are still recognized as female. This is not surprising since, in an everyday social setting, gender attribution is rarely based on the presence of genitalia. Genitals are typically hidden. What it takes for a successful gender attribution are the more clearly discernible secondary and tertiary sex/gender characteristics.

Unlike heterosexual cisgender individuals who do not necessarily need to self-construct or even question their gender or sexual identity, Carmen and LGBTQ+ individuals are forced to put great effort into their self-fashioning. Instead of slipping into the available socially constructed identities, trans individuals actively modify, question, and subvert them. By self-constructing their identity, they resist both environmental and internalized homophobia and transphobia.

5.1. Carmen Carrera’s Instagram Construction

“In the past 10 years, I’ve been three different people. In the beginning, I was a confused gay person, then I was an androgynous drag queen, and now I’m a woman who just wants to live. I’ve had a lot of experiences,” Carmen reveals, in a 2016 interview for *Self* magazine. The early experiences of non-conforming to normative gender identity and expressions led Christopher Roman to self-construct a gender and sexual identity that is empowering and resists heteronormative social constructs. Performing as a drag queen was a first step in Christopher’s transition to Carmen. Carmen Carrera was born when Christopher finally started giving expression to the feminine side that he always identified with.

A quick look at Carmen Carrera’s Facebook, Instagram and YouTube channel shows that she is involved in a great deal of self-promotion on her social media platforms. Most of the videos and photos featured here show Carmen herself. Carmen’s self-constructivist approach to identity is evident as soon as her social media channels are no longer being viewed as representational of who she is. Carmen’s Facebook page, official YouTube channel, and verified Instagram account are highly curated collections of images and videos consciously chosen by Carmen to present her in a certain light, as a certain type of woman. Instead of simply reflecting who Carmen is, these channels actively produce Carmen at the same time as they present her.

Carmen establishes herself as a fully rounded, relatable trans role model by providing her social media followers with both a personal, intimate story of her struggles as a transgender woman and the high-femme glamour and charisma displayed in her work as a burlesque performer and swimwear model. The personal videos, being for the most part confessional, create an appearance of authenticity and as such confirm Carmen as authentically female. These videos combine with images of Carmen's public displays of femininity to form a fully rounded image of womanhood. Sequences from reality TV, Facebook and YouTube videos, and Instagram images show Carmen as fierce and vulnerable, both fully woman and a woman in the process of becoming. Carmen frames herself through her appearances in different channels, at the same time revealing the physical and narrative construction of her femininity. "When you go through a transition like this, your body, your face is always changing. So, in an industry where you're being paid to sell either a product or take a photo, you know you have to learn your angles," she says for CNN. The different threads of Carmen's trans identity are drawn together and consolidated into a unified subject by her social media following. In a true self-constructivist manner, however, it is Carmen who ultimately decides which aspects of her identity to disavow and which to reveal. Carmen Carrera, as represented in her social media channels, is a result of calculated decisions regarding the tone, style, and setting of the photo and video material as well as its editing and cutting.

Carmen uses Instagram as her primary social media channel, which is why my analysis of her presentation of womanhood will mainly focus on her Instagram presentation. Following Pham (2015), Tanner et al. (2013), and Schmeichel et al. (2017) I view selfies and self-promotion on social media as a sign of agency and a means of self-fashioning. Carmen's presentation on Instagram most clearly illustrates her active performance of femininity. Whereas self-promotion could be viewed as objectifying the posters and as a cry for external validation (Menkes 2013; Ryan 2013), Pham notes that there is a great deal of agency in posting self-promotional material on social networking sites. She notes that the poster:

has unprecedented control of the frames of vision within which they are seen. They make choices about when to take a selfie or fashion blog style outfit photo; where to position the head, face, and body in relation to the camera; which blog platform, HTML tags, and hashtags to use; how to caption, crop, and otherwise edit the image; and when to share it online or whether to share it at all. (Pham 224)

Following the approach of Schmeichel et al., and Pham, it is assumed that the details in Carmen's images are available for analysis only because she intended them to be. Furthermore, it is expected that Carmen's social media followers experience the cues of her gender performance in the same

or similar ways as they were viewed and analyzed in this paper. Pham's insight into the posting routine testifies to the tremendous possibilities of virtual self-creation on social media. Through her photo and video postings Carmen actively situates herself within the matrix of heteronormative femininity to which she wants to belong.

A casual look at Carmen Carrera's official Instagram profile reveals a woman performing high femininity. Carmen's photos show her doing sports, partying, attending premiers, posing in the privacy of her home or for professional photographers. A combination of her makeup and sartorial practices produces Carmen as an exaggerated type of femininity. Despite her claims that women come in all shapes and sizes, that a woman does not have to have a vagina or big breasts, the ideal of a sexy, curvy Latina is clearly pursued on Carmen's SNSs, Carmen herself being of Puerto Rican-Peruvian origin. The work of Małgorzata Martynuska has previously illustrated how the US media frames the Latina body as "oversexed as well as sexually available", connecting it to seductive clothing, putting emphasis on female breasts, hips and buttocks "to indicate sexual desire and fertility" (73). Same or similar image of sexualized femininity is actively produced in Carmen Carrera's own social media channels.

Carmen never posts photos of herself dressed in gender-neutral clothing. Her sartorial presentation and preferences have already been discussed in chapter four. All publicized visuals featuring Carmen Carrera show her in what can safely be described as distinctly feminine attire. A strong pattern of accentuating her feminine figure and revealing as much of her body as possible can be found in her clothing choices. This tendency was already fully present when Carmen was participating in *RPDR*, as one of her most common critiques from the judges was that she was relying on her body too much and that she was „resting on pretty“. It can be stated that all of her sartorial practices, both professional and private, shown on her SNSs produce Carmen as a highly sexualized kind of woman.

Similarly to cis women performing the Southern Lady femininity in the study by Schmeichel et al., Carmen's editing of her photos produces a sharp contrast between herself and the background. Despite many of her photos showing Carmen working out, in none of the photos does she appear blurred. The background is typically out of focus, putting emphasis on the figure in the front. Such editing foregrounds Carmen herself. Doing sports is yet another opportunity to emphasize her femininity. There are no visible elements of motion or spontaneity in Carmen's Instagram presentation. All the photos are carefully staged, and Carmen is purposefully poised in all of them. Carmen appears at angles and in positions which emphasize the culturally most gendered parts of her body – her hips, wide thighs, legs, and cleavage.

In her instastories, videos, and many of her photos, the camera is often positioned above eye level, focusing viewer attention to her cleavage. In these, as in many of her YouTube videos, the focus is on her breasts. Many of Carmen's instastories shot from a high angle additionally imply a level of closeness and familiarity. In this way, Carmen's video-making technique is successfully establishing a relationship of trust between herself and her social media community. Establishing trust and an affective connection with her community is a crucial strategy since her identity project is contingent on her fan's recognition of her as a woman within a heterosexual matrix. In other photos, Carmen is using low-angle shots which, psychologically, have the effect of making the subject look strong and powerful. These photos are used to emphasize her legs and thighs (see figure 6). She is producing herself as a strong female figure. In the photos where her body is not in focus, Carmen draws the viewer's attention to her long hair and carefully done face. Her hair is experienced as a valuable attribute of her femininity. In the photos, it is usually carefully placed, cascading on one side, exposing the other bare shoulder. In both her interviews and her social media videos, Carmen calls the viewer's attention to her hair by repeatedly readjusting it and running her fingers through it.

Carmen is wearing makeup in most of her photos and videos. Her makeup, however, is rather subdued; she is using gentle nude colors to achieve a "natural look" appearance. Her lips are usually slightly parted, accomplishing the impression of sensual femininity. In cases when she is not wearing makeup, photo filters (Instagram's Aden, Crema, Rise, Sierra) or photo editing tools (e.g. Facetune) are used on the original photos to conceal any irregularities in the skin tone and texture. The filters and tools used soften her features, further feminizing her appearance.

The posing, makeup, clothing and cutting/editing of the photos and videos work together to establish Carmen as a hyperfeminine woman in her social media channels. Both her endorsement of traditional feminine appearance and beauty standards as well as markedly gender-normed clothing in her social media presentation clearly establish Carmen as a woman within a traditional male-female gender binary.

5.2. Carmen Carrera's Name

Names, like makeup, clothes, and physical appearance, play an important role in articulating the gender one identifies with. Choosing a new name is among the first and most important steps in transsexuals' transitions. It is at the same time one of the most potent signals of transsexual self-fashioning. Carmen Carrera is the name Christopher Roman chose for himself as a tribute to his 'two mothers'. "I chose the name Carmen Carrera for two reasons: Carmen in honor of my

wonderful mum, and Carrera after Angela Carrera, the first drag act I ever saw at Escuelita. [Angela] became like my drag mother and with my two friends, Tiah and Natalie, we became the Carrera family” (“Born in a Man’s Body”).

As the research by Hagström, Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn (qtd. in Vanderschans 3-4) shows, a name is perceived as conveying an array of information about a person, ranging from their gender, ethnicity, and race, to religion, class, and age. A given name indicates gender assigned at birth and does not adequately convey the transgender identity one actually identifies with. Relying on the work of João de Pina-Cabral and Charlotte Hagström, Arielle Vanderschans explores the relationship between transgender individuals and their given and/or chosen names: “For some people the concept of their name fitting their true self is never questioned; their name fits who they are. For others, there is a discord between their name and who they are. This is often the case for transgender individuals, resulting in a search to find a name that fits their true essence” (2-3). Transsexual individuals, according to Vanderschans, “describe an intense attachment to their name once they have found it” (6).

For the present thesis, the work of Charlotte Hagström proves valuable in giving insight into the importance of chosen names. Hagström explores the significance of the name in the virtual world. She claims that the act of (self-)naming marks the birth of her interviewees’ online presence. By the same token, the act of choosing a different name within the transsexual community is a highly performative act marking a clear and deliberate break with the gender assigned at birth. Names play a crucial role in embodying the *essence* of transsexual individuals and, being a public sign of gender, they also facilitate the correct gender attribution by others.

In July 2015 *Vanity Fair* featured Caitlyn Jenner on their cover with the title “Call me Caitlyn”. This was the first time Caitlyn Jenner appeared in public after having fully transitioned to female. The symbolic importance of her name could not be made more obvious. Featured on the *Vanity Fair* cover, with “Call me Caitlyn” written across the page, Caitlyn tells the readers – ‘I am Caitlyn. This is how I choose to be recognized.’ Every time Carmen Carrera starts her YouTube or Facebook videos saying “Hey everybody, it’s me, Carmen”, she effectively does the same – she affirms her identity as a woman.

Names facilitate a smooth transition because they both embody and perform transsexual identity. Names, according to Jane Pilcher are “at the nucleus of our individual identity and of our family affiliation, as well as our social and civil-legal identities” (2). Carmen chose a name charged with symbolism. In Latin and Spanish her name means song and garden, respectively. She chose a female name with religious allusions to the Virgin Mary (Our Lady of Mount Carmel). In popular

culture the association to the main character of Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen* locates Carmen Carrera within the discourse of passionate femininity and tragic female beauty. On a more personal level, Carmen adopted her mother's name, thus establishing her connection to childbearing and motherhood. The connection with motherhood is further strengthened by the name's association to the Roman goddess Carmenta, (Grimal 89) a goddess of childbirth and prophecy, protector of mothers and children, and patron of midwives. Carmen's name is clearly not a simple identifier; she purposefully chose a name that actively constructs her identity by fixing it within the discourse of sensual femininity, childbearing and motherhood.

Like many transsexuals, Carmen views her birth name as a form of oppression society has imposed upon her. By choosing her own name, Carmen empowers herself in opposing the heteronormative regulation of gender. Deciding on a name that adequately expresses one's core gender and personality thus becomes a form of active resistance and an important part of the self-constructivist aspect of transsexual identity. Choosing one's name amounts to controlling how one is perceived in a social setting.

5.3. Bodily Self-Construction

Growing up with three other women as the only man in the family, Carmen claims she identified as female from an early age. For Christopher, behaving like a boy was a performance, whereas acting "like a girl" came naturally and was an expression of his core gender. Carmen Carrera the drag-queen was Christopher's "female spirit [...] trying to deal with [the body he] had" ("Elite Model Carmen Carrera").

Eventually, Carmen explains, "I didn't want to act like a woman anymore — I wanted to become one. I went to a doctor, and he prescribed what I needed. Literally the day after we finished filming [RuPaul's Drag Race], I decided it was time to transition" ("Show Girl"). Carmen's body modifications along the normative female embodiment are an excellent example of the interconnectedness between embodiment, self-fashioning and social construction. This topic has been discussed in the previous chapter. What might be of greater interest for the chapter on self-construction are the instances in which Carmen decided to *modify* and *subvert* society's understanding of what constitutes an ideal female body. These are the instances in which Carmen actively resists conforming to society's norms regulating gendered embodiment.

In the beginning of her transition Carmen changed her body and outward presentation strictly according to the stereotypical idea of female embodiment. However, the longer she's been part of the "female community" the clearer it became to her that women come in all shapes and

sizes and that there is no right way to perform femaleness: “I used to feel like, I had to be the perfect woman. My hair had to be perfect, I had to smell perfect, my makeup perfect, or else I would not be able to go out and I would be way too insecure to function. It [was] an immense amount of pressure to put on yourself. [However,] There is no perfect. There is no perfect” (qtd. in *Self*).

Carmen still performs hyperfemininity in her professional work as a burlesque artist and swimsuit model. In order to be an integrated member of society, clearly recognized as female, Carmen has to follow society’s basic norms of gender expression. Privately, however, she changed the definition of the female ideal she strives to achieve. In June 2016, five years after she started her transition to female, Carmen declared: “I will not try to fit society’s mould of what an attractive female should look like.” And then she explained: “Some people will never accept me for the woman that I am, for the woman that I’ve become, and I just choose to continue on and keep going” (“Carmen Carrera Answers Your Facebook Questions”). Claims such as this one show a strong commitment to establishing transgender identity based on self-construction and self-determination.

In 2012, Carrera had her first breast augmentation surgery. As I have already discussed, breast surgery is seen as an accomplishment in the trans community, as a step closer to feminizing one’s body. Four years later, however, Carmen has reversed her most important body-feminizing surgery. In a video explaining why she wants to remove her breast implants she reveals: “I used to think that I have to get my breasts done, I have to get my face done to look like a girl or I will not be accepted” (“Elite Model Carmen Carrera”). She realizes that she is being judged by the trans community for going reductive on her transition but puts her own ideals of femininity above the standards of the trans community or society’s expectations.

As Rubin’s research illustrates, being recognized as their inner gender is hugely important to both female and male transsexuals. When they did not receive the recognition they so desired, transsexual men in Rubin’s study behaved in the most stereotypically masculine ways. Conversely, if transsexual individuals are recognized as their preferred gender they feel comfortable enough to deviate from the dominant gender norms. Carmen’s fans and social media community provide her with the necessary validation of her identity as female so she can self-construct as a non-normative type of female. She only decided to do her breast reduction surgery once she clearly established herself as a woman. She is nonetheless hurt when people tell her she will never be a woman because she will never go through what a woman goes through, she will never menstruate, she will never give birth. “I get offended, because that’s one of my biggest insecurities,” she admits in

“Elite Model Carmen Carrera”. Five years into her transition, however, Carmen feels empowered enough to challenge the very foundations of sex and gender binaries by claiming that “being 100% woman does not necessarily require a vagina, or uterus, or the need to bear children” (“Carmen Carrera Answers Your Facebook Questions”). Her words echo Virginia Prince 40 years earlier declaring that “it is perfectly possible to ... be a woman without having sex surgery” (Ekins and King 82). Carmen’s friend Melina confirms the importance of the self-constructivist aspect of transgender identity in eventually admitting: “breasts are like the most beautiful thing about woman. [But] I came to understand that having breasts does not make you a woman” (“Elite Model Carmen”).

Carmen recognizes that there are limits to body feminization. She wishes she could menstruate and have children but realizes that, at the moment, she has reached the limits of sex reassignment surgeries. Whereas at the beginning of her transition the feminine ideal towards which she was striving were the voluptuous and curvy J.Lo and Kim Kardashian, she eventually decided to create and follow her own ideal of femaleness. Carmen adapts her ideal of femaleness and femininity to her own lived experiences and, in the process, modifies and subverts normative ideals of what constitutes a female body.

5.4. Narrative Self-Fashioning

Within the context of self-fashioning, narrative self-identification is an important form of transsexual identity work. According to Schrock and Reid, who researched how transsexuals use narratives of their sexual experiences¹⁹ to craft their identity, “narrating a self involves selectively emphasizing, ignoring, and interpreting often-contradictory biographical experiences in ways that produce a coherent story” (75). Narratives are used to make sense of Carmen’s identity as female and stabilize it within the heteronormative context. These narratives are carefully crafted stories whose ultimate aim is to confirm Carmen’s identity as female. There is the need to explain and validate ‘strange’ life choices. The most important of these narratives will be examined below. Schrock and Reid confirm the importance of the narrative construction of transsexual identity when they notice how members of transsexual support groups “create, adopt, and affirm a standard repertoire of stories, including stories about early childhood crossdressing and denial narratives, that help group members construct transsexual identities” (76). In order for narrative self-

¹⁹ Also, “sexual narratives”.

identification to contribute to the project of self-fashioning, however, there needs to be an audience willing to listen to them. In their telling, these narratives constitute a self.

5.4.1. “Wrong Body” Narrative

The ‘wrong body’ narrative is the dominant narrative in the accounts of transsexual identity formation. Research done by Prosser (1998), Rubin (2003), Schrock et al. (2005), Nagoshi et al. (2012), and others, points to the recurring story of transsexuals feeling trapped in the wrong body. These people feel strongly that their gender identity is at odds with their biological sex. As Rubin’s interviewees confirm, the feeling of incongruency is followed by a strong dislike for one’s genitals and secondary sex characteristics. The wrong body narrative is actively used in the transsexual community to legitimize the transition and justify the break with the gender identity assigned at birth. “There is an urgent need [among TS]”, Rubin explains, “to construct a biography that legitimizes a seemingly strange life choice” (93). Carmen herself admits that she did not know she was transgender until the age of 25. This, however, does not prevent her to narratively establish herself as transgender in hindsight; as having always been a woman trapped in a man’s body:

I was only seven when I knew I was different, but not because I thought I was gay. That would have been simple to understand. I just knew I couldn't relate to being a boy and, eventually, being a man. I had male cousins but I didn't really connect with them because they were too aggressive. I wanted to sit and be pretty. I remember praying in the fourth grade saying, ‘God, please make me a girl tomorrow’. (“Born in a Man’s Body”)

Childhood stories of having to embody one’s assigned gender are consistently framed as a conflict between core gender and sexed material body. Often, as Carmen herself does, transsexual women point to qualitative differences of how they and their male significant others embodied and performed gender. Carmen points out her difficulty in connecting with her male cousins. This feeling of difference would consequently be used as a justification for her transition. In another interview she explains how she was very close to all the popular girls at school. Carmen consolidates her identity as female by comparing herself to her male cousins and female friends and stating that, already at a very young age, she experienced her body and her gender profoundly differently from what was culturally expected from her.

Yet, the wrong body narrative is also a highly disputed narrative among medical and academic professionals. Sally Hines illustrates the dispute within trans academia by, on the one hand, quoting FtM Jay Prosser who explains that “transsexuals ... deploy the image of wrong embodiment because being trapped in the wrong body is simply what transsexuality feels like” (61). On the other hand, in her work Hines refers to Sandy Stone, who insists that many

transsexuals use the ‘wrong body’ narrative in their interviews with medical professionals so they can gain access to the desired HRT and SRS (“Empire Strikes Back”). Consequently, the wrong body narrative is necessarily controversial because it is unclear whether it is a genuine experience or an internalized story primarily aimed at medical professionals.

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler strongly argues against the diagnosis of gender identity disorder (GID). Within GID, the ‘wrong body’ narrative is seen as inextricably linked to the mental health of transgender patients. Butler acknowledges that keeping the diagnosis “facilitates access to a variety of medical and technological means for transitioning” (75). On the other hand, Butler argues, to be diagnosed with GID is to be found sick, wrong, abnormal. GID, according to Butler, “has effectively broken the will of many people, especially queer and trans youth” (77).

When discussing the process of getting her birth certificate changed, Carmen mentions “a lot of paperwork, a lot of evaluations, a lot of ridiculousness that went into it” (“Trans Advocate”). GID and its pathologizing nature is clearly rejected by Carmen (calling it “a lot of ridiculousness”), who realizes how accepting GID would effectively undermine her personal autonomy and medicalize her transgender identity. In this light, it becomes even more interesting to see how Carmen resorts to the wrong body narrative without falling into the trap of pathologizing it. Her YouTube channel provides valuable insight into the process. Carmen’s videos deal with a variety of elective cosmetic surgery procedures – breast augmentation, cheek feminization, surgical and non-surgical rhinoplasty, dark eye circles treatment, breast implants removal. All these surgeries, even the bottom surgery, are framed within the context of exercising her personal autonomy. In this way, the ‘wrong body’ narrative, often used to pathologize transgender individuals, is presented through the prism of personal autonomy and liberty.

Despite the purported feeling of inhabiting the wrong body, young Christopher learned early in life that he cannot express his femininity outside the home: “When I was in school or outside the house, it was always an act, it was always a cover-up -- and I grew up with a lot of frustration” (“In the spotlight”). Once Christopher left his hometown for New York and got introduced to a community that accepted and encouraged gender bending, he felt comfortable enough to start expressing his femininity and aligning his body to what he felt was the accurate reflection of his core gender identity: “I felt good dressed up as a woman in public. It was a wonderful release for me” (“Born in a Man’s Body”).

5.4.2. Body-Naturalizing Narratives

One of the most important techniques transsexuals use to deal with the limitations of surgical transition is the understanding that “biological” women and men come in all shapes and sizes. By comparing herself to “biological” women, Carmen further naturalizes her body. She points out that women assigned female at birth come in vastly different bodies. Some of them have big bottoms, some have big breasts, some cannot have or do not want to have children. By placing herself within a multitude of these different female bodies, Carmen naturalizes her own body as female.

Only seemingly contradictory to the ‘wrong body’ narrative is the persistent narrative of the naturalness of Carmen Carrera’s body. Despite a number of corrective surgeries featured on her official YouTube channel, the term *natural* is often used by Carmen to describe her body. In “Carmen Carrera on Joe Budden”, she explains that she has always had a naturally feminine voice. Carmen, however, does not only describe her voice as ‘naturally’ feminine. Despite her sex reassignment procedures, she has continued to insist that her female body is for the most part natural as well. On Australia’s *Sunrise* on 7 morning show Carmen tells the host David Koch: “My hips are my own. They are probably the most feminine part of my body. My body is my own – my legs and my hips. I did not have any corrective feminizing surgery on my body except breasts” (“Carmen Carrera on Australia’s Sunrise on 7”). Carmen repeated this argument five years later. After having removed her breast implants in 2015, in a 2017 video, “Fashion Week Prep”, Carmen replies to the commenters calling her fake – “[to those saying] ‘oh Carmen, you are so fake, you are all surgery’ – No, actually, I’m not. I’m mostly 100% natural, aside from the fact that I need to monitor my hormone levels, which keeps me feminine.” Hormones are seen as the most effective way to change the body’s secondary sex characteristics along the lines of normative gender. Compared to SRS, HRT is also seen as the more natural way to transition to the desired gender. When discussing the changes brought about by HRT, Carmen prefers to describe her body in terms of *natural* and *her own*. She does not claim that she did not affect the gendered changes on her body. Rather, the narrative of naturalness refers to the transitioned transsexual body that is perceived as a natural and truthful reflection of her ‘inner’ gender. For Carmen, it was her male body that was unnatural because it did not accurately reflect her core gender identity.

Commenting on a non-surgical nose job procedure in “Dr Simon Ourian Non-Surgical Nose Job”, Carmen remarks: “I do not want a new face. I want my face and what it would *naturally* look.” The theme of naturalness is also evident in Carmen’s use of makeup. Despite the fact that

Carmen applies makeup in both her private and professional life, she aims for a natural, subtle, and understated look. When used by Carmen, the term *natural* is rather vague. Its intended meaning appears to be the opposite of ‘achieved through medical procedures.’ The insistence on the naturalness of one’s body is deeply rooted in transsexual self-construction, since the narrative which describes the transsexual body in terms of *natural* is consciously used to legitimize the female identity Carmen claims for herself.

5.4.3. Narratives of Sexual Desire

Gender identity and sexual desire exist in a complex interplay. Research by Hines (2007), and Nagoshi et al. (2010, 2012) illustrates that for many transsexuals sexual identity is a relational process. Identity and desire “are continually negotiated within an intimate context with others” (Hines 113). Butler explicitly states that “it would be a huge mistake to assume that gender identity causes sexual orientation or that sexuality references in some necessary way a prior gender identity (*Undoing Gender* 79). Whereas medical professionals presume that after their transition most transsexuals would generally enter heterosexual relationships, transsexual life stories show that this is often not the case. Some men transition to be women interested in women. Other transwomen chose men as the object of their desire, even though as men they were attracted to women. Some trans individuals are attracted to both men and women and view their sexuality as fluid. Others describe themselves as omnisexual or pansexual.

In order for their gender identity to be appropriately acknowledged, transsexuals feel enormous pressure to fit within the heteronormative constructs of both sexual and gender identity. If gender and sexuality, however, are taken to be fluid, then there is an urgent need, felt by most transsexuals, to stabilize and narratively fix them. Sexuality and sexual narratives are often used by transgender individuals to establish desired gender identities that fit the socially sanctioned heterosexual matrix. For many transgender individuals, the connection between gender and sexuality is an important part of their identity construction. Rubin observes that becoming lesbian was a significant step in the transition for over half of the female-to-male transsexual participants in his study. Research done by Devor (1989), and Dozier (2005) confirms the importance transgender individuals place upon sexual partners and relations as part of their identity project, since for many transgender individuals the sexual object choice influences their role taking as well as gender identity.

The narrative of heteronormative sexual attraction is used for the purpose of establishing Carmen as female. In an explicit self-constructivist fashion, Carmen rejects homosexuality as her

sexual orientation. Carmen understands that for her to be recognized as a transwoman she needs to disassociate herself from gay men. Having men as her sexual object choice does not make her gay. On the contrary, she uses the heteronormative connection between gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation to establish herself as female. Carmen uses her sexual relations with men to affirm her female gender identity. She narratively constructs her womanhood by utilizing the connection between gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation. She does this by understanding desire within an exclusively heterosexual matrix. In such an understanding of desire, *feminine* is attracted to *masculine* and vice versa. She insists that she is a woman because she is attracted to men. Similarly, she is establishing herself as a woman by pointing out the fact that she is the preferred sexual object choice of heterosexual cis men. Since heterosexual cis men are attracted to women and since so many of them are attracted to her, it then follows for Carmen that she is a woman. Carmen narratively includes herself within the heteronormative conception of romantic and sexual attraction. By doing so, she claims that her identity as a trans woman is not much different from that of *biologically* born women.

Carmen, however, did identify as a gay man for most of her life: “I was 19 when I started dating my first boyfriend, José. I was really in love and we had a full physical relationship. He identified as gay and I thought, ‘Well, I’ll have to be gay’” (“Born in a Man’s Body”). Sexual encounters with men *prior* to her transition necessarily complicate Carmen’s self-fashioning project. These experiences, however, are aptly framed in such a way that they effectively disaffiliate her from same sex desire.

I didn’t know who I was. I was born male but was attracted to men. So, what did that make me? And since there weren’t really any public figures who represented the trans community, I figured, ‘Why not be gay?’ I [asked], ‘Man, what do gay people do? What do gay people sound like?’ Then I spent my early 20’s playing a gay male in New York City. But I still didn’t feel like me... felt like it was a part. (“6 Questions with Transgender Model”)

Carmen frames her being a gay man as a role she was playing, a result of ignorance. She discusses the difficulties of dating gay guys and the disconnect in her own and their personalities. Growing up, knowing only straight and gay, she identified as the latter only until she realized that there is an identity category that much better expresses her experience. As soon as she started identifying as a transgender woman, Carmen redefined her gay sexual experiences as essentially heterosexual. She was unsuccessful in dating gay men because she felt neither gay nor a man. According to this narrative, on the inside, she has always been a heterosexual woman interested in men. As it happens, in her interviews today Carmen uses gay attraction (or lack thereof) to establish herself

as female. In relating a story of a man, who upon discovering she was transgender, replied to her that he was not gay, she says: “But what does it have to do with gay? I’m a woman. And I know gay guys sure as hell aren’t attracted to me” (“6 Questions With Transgender Model”). Carmen once again frames desire within the heterosexual matrix. In relating this story, she not only disaffiliates herself from gay men who are obviously not attracted to women but, at the same time, narratively underscores her female gender identity.

Sexual narratives such as Carmen’s are the evidence of trans agency. These narratives play an important role in transsexual self-fashioning. Carmen uses her agency to fit her sexual desire and encounters into the culturally sanctioned heterosexual identity she wants to embody. She selectively emphasizes, ignores and reinterprets sexual stories for her identity project. In her search for authenticity, she modifies her material body, changes her gender expression, and reinterprets often-contradictory life experiences to construct her identity as a woman.

5.4.4. Narrative of Motherhood

The narrative of motherhood as constructed by Carmen both encompasses and transcends the narratives of sexual desire discussed previously. Carmen has been trying hard to narratively establish herself within the discourse of motherhood for the simple reason that motherhood is seen as the cultural epitome of femininity. The connection between motherhood and Carmen’s name has already been discussed. It is by no means a coincidence that Carmen decided to use her mother’s name as her own. Carmen describes her mother as a big beauty inspiration but, the fascination with her mother goes further than that. In an interview where she is describing the effects of hormones on her body Carmen says as much: “I looked in the mirror and, slowly, I was morphing into my mother” (“Born in a Man’s Body”).

So far this thesis has discussed different processes by which Carmen establishes herself as a heterosexual woman. In the first ever transwoman’s wedding broadcast on television, Carmen also establishes herself as a wife and a mother. In the sixth season finale of the VH1 TV show *Couples Therapy*, Carmen married her long-time partner Adrian Torres. In a ceremony that has been described as touching and subtle (Reese) Carmen and Adrian became husband and wife. Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, Carmen became a step-mother of two girls. Biologically, Carmen cannot give birth. She admits that this is one of her biggest insecurities. By marrying her partner Adrian, Carmen effectively bypassed the problem. She came to incorporate not one but two epitomes of femininity. She became a wife, and a step-mother of her husband’s two daughters. In an interview with *OUT* Carmen describes her life after the wedding:

Right now, we're focused on the kids. [We are] working together to make sure the kids have a really good childhood. We are teaching our kids about awareness [...]. We're preparing them for the future. Being a parent is a different kind of rewarding feeling. You're setting someone up for success in the world. Hopefully we'll have more kids.

There is a strong underlying connection between Latina femininity that Carmen is attempting to embody and the idea of being a mother. After her wedding on *Couples Therapy*, Carmen aptly narratively establishes herself within the discourse of motherhood. Values of normative femininity – romance, happiness with a male partner, marriage – all these find their outlet in the *Couples Therapy* wedding ceremony. In her interviews after the show, Carmen put a strong focus on her step-daughters and her new role as a mother. She is aware of the importance the nucleus family unit has in heterosexual society. She uses her televised white wedding with Adrian to situate herself within the heteronormative family unit. By embodying the ideal of female domesticity, Carmen strengthens her claim to womanhood. Three years later, Carmen and Adrian are in all probability not a couple anymore. This, however, does not prevent Carmen to ever so often mention her daughters and remind the world that she still is and will continue to be a transgender mother.

Carmen Carrera's public transition is compelling for the various ways in which she managed to reject the social conventions that were restricting her gender identity, tying it to her "biological sex". "I am not a man," she insists. "Doesn't matter if I was born man or not. You cannot consider me a man. I am transgender" ("Carmen Carrera – Friday July 26 2013"). Carmen developed a sense of identity independent from social expectations. More importantly, she empowered herself to publicly claim and assert that identity despite the pressure to stay within the boundaries of her assigned gender. This active self-construction is what makes her a role model for thousands of her social media fans. The transsexual narrative that understands gender as performance enables trans individuals to actively construct their identities by performing it in a social setting. Often the construction relies on fitting into the societal expectations for the target gender and sometimes it relies on the rejection of it. Being "trapped in the wrong body", Carmen needs to modify her physical body and her gender expression to be recognized as the gender she personally identifies with. Carmen effectively chose to perform womanhood. In order to achieve the recognition she so desires Carmen subversively utilizes the heteronormative ideals of what constitutes femininity. She changed her name, her physical body, and her sartorial presentation to perform female. She adjusts and modifies her biography to narratively establish herself as a woman. Self-construction, in this sense, is an indispensable aspect of the transgender identity project.

6. Transgender Social Construction

Nagoshi and Brzuzy could not dismiss the feminist and queer view that gender roles are socially constructed. The authors emphasize the importance that gay, lesbian and transgender participants in their study place on social environment as a formative influence on their gender and sexual identity. According to Nagoshi and Brzuzy, gay, lesbian and transgender participants are more likely “to have thought about the socially constructed and embodied aspects of gender and sexual identity, [...] and about their own strategies for self-constructing their gender and sexual identities in the context of living in a social environment that defines and enforces norms of gender and sexual behaviors and appearances” (14). On the one hand, the term “social construction”, as used by Nagoshi et al. refers to the pressure society exerts upon trans individuals to conform to socially enforced expectations regarding normative gender identities, gender expressions, and gender roles. The essentializing force of social construction makes it difficult for transsexual women to act out their gender outside the socially desirable gender and sexual scripts. Biologically male Christopher Roman, who does not identify with the gender assigned at birth, is forced to reinvent himself as transgender woman Carmen Carrera strictly according to the social norms defining femininity, exposing the interconnectedness between embodiment, self-fashioning and social construction in the process. “Social construction”, on the other hand, relates to the importance of intersubjective recognition in the trans identity project. In order for transsexual women to successfully transition to the desired gender, they need to be recognized as women by their surroundings.

Social construction of transgender femininity is reflected in Carmen Carrera’s self-identification as a woman, her personal relationships, choice of profession, sartorial presentation, and her choices regarding her body modification. Previous chapters have illustrated how social norms regulating femininity have influenced Carmen Carrera’s embodiment of her gender as well as provided guidelines in her self-fashioning project. The present chapter on social construction will primarily focus on the importance of transgender people’s dialogue with significant others as well as the external recognition as a constitutive factor of transgender identity. In an interview for *NBC News* Carmen Carrera explains the importance she places on society recognizing her gender: “Holding my birth certificate [changed to female] for the first time made me feel powerful. I felt like this is the only validation I’ll ever need” (“Trans Advocate”). Having her birth certificate changed to female gave Carmen the highest official confirmation of her womanhood.

Intersubjective recognition, the chapter will illustrate, is the process that confirms and completes Carmen Carrera's transgender identity project.

In his *Self-Made Men* Rubin is aware of the importance significant others have for the transsexual identity project: "A self needs others to recognize its authenticity. [Transsexual] lives are a search for recognition of the innermost self" (15). In a similar vein, Shotwell and Sangrey emphasize the relational nature of all identities in claiming that personal identity is never only personal but, is a product of "communities and networks of relation that a person participates in and that make her up; it is constituted through histories, affiliations, political work, and love" ("Resisting Definition" 71).

By exploring Carmen Carrera's interaction with the fans on her social media networks and the validation of her gender she receives in mainstream media, this chapter will illustrate how Carmen's identity as a transgender female is crucially shaped by the recognition received from both the queer and the mainstream heterosexual cis community, eventually leading to her being officially recognized as a woman.

6.1. Construction of Trans-Femininity on Social Networking Sites

Social media has played a tremendously important role in Carmen Carrera's identity project. However, within feminist social media circles, selfies, and generally images and videos featuring the posters themselves, have been fiercely debated (Pham 2015). Such online self-promotion, in which Carmen has been engaging since she started her transition, has been highly controversial. Authors such as Menkes (2013) and Ryan (2013) see selfies as vain self-promotion and a sign of desperate need for external validation. Selfies, according to these authors, objectify women and reinscribe them within the traditional heteronormative binary. As a quick look at Carmen's Instagram self-presentation illustrates, it appears that Menkes and Ryan are not necessarily wrong. In both her videos and photos, Carmen often displays a highly feminine performance. Despite subverting some aspects of the normative gender binary, she is ultimately trying to establish herself as a woman within the traditional man-woman dichotomy. More importantly for the present thesis – Carmen's online self-promotion points to the strong need for external validation from her social media followers.

Vanity on social media as manifested in Carmen's selfies, however, should not be viewed as detrimental to her identity project. On the contrary, this twenty-first century vanity, according to Claire Tanner, Jane Maree Maher, and Suzanne Fraser is "intertwined with relationality and responsiveness to others" (*Vanity: 21st Century Selves* 153). In their study of dating sites, and

personal blogging, where Carmen could easily be situated, the authors claim that the practices of online self-promotion serve social needs. Efforts to promote one's personality, image, and life to gain attention are "created in the hope of *enhancing connection* with others" (157). As such, "relational vanity" is, in their words, a model of "good vanity" (157).

Carmen describes the present moment as "a ground-breaking time in [trans] awareness" ("Carmen Answers FB Questions"), pointing to the unparalleled connectedness achieved through social networking sites. As a competitor on the reality TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* she became part of the mainstream media, but her career really took off only after her social media fans launched a petition on Change.org to make Carmen Victoria's Secret first transgender "angel". It would not be wrong to say that Carmen Carrera's social media fans have made her into the celebrity she is today.

Social media channels, it has been repeatedly emphasized, have strong transformative potential. Term "spreadable" is used by Henn et al. to refer to the content that is actively shaped by the social media consumers. The content is remixed, reframed and reconstituted by members of the audience (290). Since Carmen's social media channels predominantly feature Carmen herself, I would like to argue that Carmen Carrera is her own content, and that she is shaped, reframed, and reconstituted through active involvement of her fans. The petition on Change.org is only the most salient example of SNSs transformative potential.

Julia Yudelman, on the other hand, points to the deeply performative nature of reality TV (RTV). In "'RuPaulitics' of Subjectification" she insists that "conceiving of reality TV as a performative phenomenon is especially relevant for analyzing *RPDR*, given the highly performative nature of the series and of drag itself" (19). Having already illustrated the similarities between the project of *RPDR* and Carmen's own project of trans-identity construction (see chapter 3.3), I would like to argue that it is perfectly possible to view Carmen Carrera's exposure on her social media channels as a form of reality TV. After all, both RTV and social media "focus on real people playing themselves" (Hall 516), and both forms have the potential of creating emotional engagement²⁰ between the fans and the individuals featured, through confessionals and personal stories (ibid. 516). Once the connection has been made between reality TV and Carmen Carrera's social media activities, it is possible to frame Carmen's exposure on social networking sites as "a performative phenomenon that captures, modifies, reorganizes, and distributes powers of

²⁰ Chelsea Dagget refers to the emotional engagement as "an affective connection".

transformation” (Bratich 67). Such understanding of Carmen’s social media activities not only means that she is being transformed *as* she is featured on her SNSs²¹, but also entails a radically important role attributed to her social media followers. “Seemingly passive viewers [are turned] into laboring subjects, whose participation alters both programming outcomes as well as their own place in the televisual medium” (ibid. 68).

Following Rubin (2003), Shotwell and Sangrey (2009), and Nagoshi et al. (2010, 2012), this thesis understands the transgender identity project as a deeply relational one and recognizes the significance of intersubjective recognition for Carmen Carrera’s identity project. Carrera has taken her social media fans through every stage of her transition to woman and has repeatedly emphasized the importance of her social media fans’ support. “Your love and support make me stronger and keep me going” (“Friday July 26”). The importance of Carmen’s social media following, clearly, goes beyond simple support in her transition. The recognition of her womanhood on social networking sites is an essential part of Carrera’s *becoming a woman* in the first place. Carmen is constructed and validated as a woman through the interaction with her family, friends and fans. A Facebook Live video posted on September 19th 2018 demonstrates the profound significance Carmen places on her relationship with her social media following. “What’s up with my Facebook followers? What do you guys like? What do you do? *How do you perceive me*, I wonder?” (emphasis added). While she initially appears to be showing interest- in a meaningful connection with her Facebook fans, her final question reveals that what she is ultimately interested in is the recognition of her own authenticity as woman. Carmen values the affective connection with her social media following. However, she values it for the simple reason that being *perceived* as a beautiful woman at the same time establishes and confirms her womanhood. Appropriate perception of her performance of femininity is critically important for her self-fashioning project.

Such understanding of transgender identity aligns with Erving Goffman’s understanding of identity as a performance. In his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman explains identity through the metaphor of a performer on a stage. Identity, according to Goffman, is an act of performance which asks that “when an individual plays a part, [he/she] implicitly request [his/her] observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. [Audience] are asked to believe that the character they see actually possess the attributes [he/she] appears to possess” (10). Goffman’s understanding of identity is valuable in the analysis of Carmen as a

²¹ The phenomenon referred to as “spreadable” by Henn et al.

transsexual woman because it allows me to frame her within concepts of stage, performance, observers, and co-participants. Carmen uses her social networking sites as platforms on which she performs femininity, asking her social media following to believe she possesses the attributes necessary to be recognized as a woman.

The perception of Carmen as a woman is thus the key to her becoming one. Even though she embodies the cultural ideal of femininity, Carrera's status as a woman is dependent upon her social surrounding. Without the active participation of her SNSs community, who act as co-participants in her identity project, it would not be possible for Carmen to fully transition to the desired gender identity. Carmen Carrera introduces herself as an actress, swimsuit model, and a burlesque dancer. It is no coincidence that Carrera's work situates her within highly feminine professions. "Models represent women," Carmen explains in "Elite Model Carmen Carrera". It appears only natural to explore Carmen's identity project through Goffman's understanding of identity as an interaction between a performer and their observers/co-participants when literally all professional work done by Carmen is performance related and intended to be viewed by an audience. Carrera's work has a profound effect on her being seen and constructed as a Latina type of female. Carmen places herself firmly within the frame of Latina femininity as described by Martynuska in "The Exotic Other". Here the author establishes a connection between popular representations of Latina femininity and expressive dancing. This connection is utilized by Carmen to situate herself within the desired ideal of hyperfeminine expression. Her gender performance on the runway or the dance stage is making it possible for Carmen to communicate her femininity to her social media followers and the wider society. Conversely, being part of a highly feminine world of women's swimwear modelling is naturalizing her gender and legitimizing her femininity.

Across Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, hundreds of thousands of Carmen Carrera's fans accept and recognize her for the woman that she presents. User kiana Elizabeth comments under an interview with Carmen: "Carmen your [sic] such a great example of authentic. Your [sic] beautiful woman ... Cuz [sic] you enjoy and you should be a Victoria secret model, the models VS are amazingly beautiful and you should have a good shot" ("Carmen Carrera on Alicia Menendez"). Bria Kitty writes "Hi you are prettier than J.Lo," under a video of Carmen Carrera at the GLAAD Awards. In the comment section of a video in which Carmen explains why she is considering removing her breast implants, M.Smith comments: "Carmen Carerra [sic] is so perfect, I'm going insane over her. She's smart and mature and powerful and sexy woman of color." These YouTube users not only accept Carmen's performance of femininity as a sign of her womanhood,

but by comparing her to celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez (see Bria Kitty's and M.Smith's comment) these commenters clearly align Carmen with sensual Latina femininity.

A quick look at the comments under either Carmen Carrera's Instagram or Facebook posts shows how skillfully Carmen utilizes the visual economy facilitated by these social media platforms to achieve the recognition of her female identity. "So amazing to see you, a beautiful women [sic] a succesful [sic] wife and Good hearted Mother of two lovely awesome daughters," Facebook user Khushi Sinha writes. The user recognizes Carmen's womanhood as the embodiment of what Emily Skidmore calls "the norms of white womanhood", most notably "domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality" (271). By calling her "beautiful" the user confirms Carmen's alignment with idealized femininity, but more importantly, referring to Carmen being a wife and a mother of two daughters, Khushi Sinha additionally locates Carrera within the frame of domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality. Instagram user volkoffalexi writes "You are a beautiful goddess sent from heaven"; "You are very beautiful and sexy woman xoxo," hartneufeld comments under another photo of Carmen. "My boyfriend thinks you're hot, and you are hot" sarniia writes confirming Carmen's (heterosexual) sex appeal. In order for Carmen's self-fashioning project to succeed, she not only needs to visually and narratively construct herself as a woman, but, in Goffman's own words, needs an audience who would "believe that the [woman] they see actually possess the attributes [she] appears to possess" (10). The previous comments illustrate that hyperbolic displays of femininity have firmly established Carmen as female within her social media community. User sarniia not only recognizes Carmen as a woman, but by positioning Carmen as a sexual object choice of her own male partner, she naturalizes Carmen's femininity and strengthens her claim to heterosexual womanhood. Carmen's SNSs community recognize her multiple and intersecting female identities – Carmen is seen as a woman, a Latina, a mother, a successful female entrepreneur. Through her fans' active involvement in her identity project, she emerges as a complex, convincing and multi-dimensional subject.

Carmen's exposure on SNS, however, also has negative effects on her self-fashioning. Anonymous cyberbullying is a regrettable side effect of social media use. When it comes to transsexuals and other LGBTQ+ individuals, cyberbullying is highly detrimental since these people self-construct their identities and often find empowerment in the online world of SNSs and internet fora. Carmen details her experiences of cyberbullying: "As I transitioned, I posted my feelings in a YouTube diary. It was cathartic, but I also had to deal with the ugly side of being transgender. I'd try not to read the comment section and it infuriated me if people said, 'Oh, you fooled me.' I'm not trying to trick anyone. I'm not a man pretending to be a woman. I am a woman"

(“Born in a Man’s Body”). In 2013, two years into her transition, Carmen uploaded an emotional video to her YouTube channel addressing the cyber bullying she had been going through as a result of her being openly transgender. In the video she discusses wildly inappropriate comments some SNS users posted on her Facebook and Instagram channels. “It’s starting to bother me. I’ll post pictures of me [...] with the kids, with my mom, and some people would tag me, and tag their friends on my images, saying ‘Oh my God, can you believe this is a man?’ [...] I get pissed off [because of that]” (“Friday July 26, 2013”). It seems contradictory when Carmen later says that people “can do whatever they want with her pictures *privately*” (my emphasis), but that it is a completely different thing when they post on her fan pages and her Instagram. In reality, however, it makes perfect sense. Carmen Carrera’s identity project takes place predominantly on and through social networking sites. Negating Carmen’s gender identity on platforms that she is using to gain recognition of her authenticity as woman is highly detrimental to her identity project. These heteronormative comments are both naturalizing gender and denying Carmen her claim to a female identity. Carrera is aware that there are people who will never accept her for the woman that she is, and the woman that she has become, but ultimately concludes that “real recognize real,” and that she will not have her gender identity questioned by “inauthentic” people (“Friday July 26, 2013”). By calling her critics inauthentic she attempts to neutralize the negative effect on her identity project while at the same time framing her own gender identity as an authentic expression of her inner core.

6.2. Construction of Trans-Femininity in Mainstream Media and Reality TV

Carmen Carrera’s interaction with her fans is a valuable means of establishing her womanhood. However, social construction of Carmen’s identity should not be limited to exposure on her own social networking sites. She managed to use the huge media attention, acquired through the petition on Change.org to make her Victoria Secret’s first transgender angel to solidify her claims to heteronormative femininity on a much broader scale. By adopting normative ideals defining femininity, Carmen became part of the mainstream media conversation. The public narrative of Carmen Carrera’s femininity has been carefully fashioned around her feminine body, her adherence to heteronormativity, and the fostering of family values. This chapter will proceed to explore how mainstream media produced Carmen Carrera as a heterosexual woman through her representations on television and reality TV.

Carmen Carrera has been produced as a woman in mainstream media ever since her first appearance in non-scripted television. On May 4, 2012 Carrera appeared in an episode of the ABC

news program *Primetime: What Would You Do?* In the episode that was also her coming out, she played a transgender waitress in a diner harassed by Kevin, an undercover actor playing a customer, and prompting other guests to come to Carmen's defense. The program introduces Carmen to the TV audience as a "beautiful young waitress who's about to serve up something beside a turkey club" ("What Would You Do?"). In a single introductory line the producers not only establish Carmen's womanhood, but by describing her as "beautiful", also assert her desirability as a woman. As Kevin learns that Carmen used to be a man, he becomes verbally abusive and starts throwing transphobic slurs at Carmen causing other guests at the diner to come to Carmen's defense. The audience at home watch strangers coming to defend Carmen's right to womanhood. "She is a woman. [...] People do it. That's their preference if they wanna do it," an older female customer tells Kevin. Michael, another customer says: "Let her be who she is. [...] It's okay to be whoever you wanna be. This is America." "She is beautiful. [...] Take your narrow mind somewhere else," a third customer comes to Carmen's defense. The program relies on the diners' sense of common decency to strengthen Carmen's claims to womanhood. By setting an abusive transphobic customer against a beautiful young waitress, the show's producers force the diners into defending Carmen's right to be a woman. Questioning of Carmen's womanhood is made difficult for either the diners or the audience in front of the TV screens because that would directly align them with Kevin, an excessively abusive customer. It is clear that the episode's heroes are the three diners who stand up in defense of Carmen. The importance of the episode can not be overstated. It both established Carmen as a woman in mainstream TV and, more importantly, effectively condemned putting her transgender femininity in question.

The Young Turks news show continues the project of establishing Carmen as a woman. In the "TYT Supreme Court" segment of their online show, Ana Kasparian, Cenk Uygur, and Jesus Godoy discuss whether Carmen should be part of the Victoria's Secret show. While images of Carmen posing for photographers are shown to the viewers, Ana Kasparian introduces Carmen: "The woman in question is very beautiful. Her name is Carmen Carrera. I can't get over how beautiful she is. I'm a little jelly" ("The Young Turks"). Kasparian describes Carmen in terms which make sure that Carmen's body is made intelligible as female to the viewers. Carmen is not described simply as a trans woman. She embodies all the physical qualities of idealized femininity to the point that Ana, a biologically born woman, is jealous of her. During the interview, it is made clear that the Victoria's Secret show features only the most beautiful of (biological) women. Ana's co-host Cenk continues to produce Carmen as a hypersexual woman by aligning her to the Victoria's Secret supermodels: "She has all the qualifications. She is beautiful. She could model

lingerie perfectly. She is gorgerous. [...] And by the way, she has fully transitioned if you're curious." In heteronormative society, trans women's identity is most successfully confirmed by heterosexual men. Ana's male counterpart Cenk validates Carmen's womanhood by describing her as "beautiful" and "gorgeous". By adding that she has *fully* transitioned, Cenk indicates to the male viewers that Carmen has undergone bottom surgery and that her body is an acceptable object of heterosexual desire.

Not unlike Cenk, David Koch, the host of Australia's "Sunrise on 7 Morning Show", describes Carmen as "a long-lost Kardashian sister" and the woman who "could take the reins from Miranda Kerr, Heidi Klum and Gisele Bündchen as the next Victoria's Secret angel." It appears that it is primarily Carmen's body that makes her intelligible as female to the assumed male viewer. Establishing Carmen as a permitted object of heterosexual male desire is the principal means of producing her as a woman in the heterosexual matrix. Her exoticism does not stem from the fact that Carmen is transgender, but from the fact that she is Latina. Carmen's exotic body, and especially the fact of its curviness, is referenced in Koch's connecting Carmen to the Kardashian sisters. Koch both aligns Carmen's body with an idealized femininity and affirms her desirability as a woman by putting her on a par with the Kardashian sisters, and models Kerr, Klum, and Bündchen.

Carmen may physically present as a woman, however, in "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual'" Emily Skidmore explains that the fully transitioned body does not necessarily guarantee society's recognition of one's womanhood and points to the importance of the embodiment of domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality in transsexual identity projects. I wish to argue that the VH1 reality television show *Couples Therapy* played a crucial role in establishing Carmen as a heterosexual woman in mainstream television. The sixth season of *Couples Therapy* features Carmen Carrera and her long-term partner Adrian Torres alongside four other celebrity couples receiving relationship counselling from marriage and family therapist Dr. Jenn Mann. In the course of ten episodes, the show frames Carmen as a sensual, domestically-orientated, curvy Latina in a heterosexual relationship. The show's fashioning of Carmen as a woman culminates in her wedding to Torres in the season six finale. The success of the show's construction of Carmen's womanhood can be traced back to its delicate introduction of a transsexual participant in a way that assures both the viewers and other participants of the unchallenged dominance of patriarchal gender norms.

It is a well-established fact that "reality" TV is really made in editing. The producers of reality TV shows have a range of techniques at their disposal to manipulate both the participants

and the events in order to achieve the desired outcome (see “Manipulative Editing”). *Couples Therapy* introduces Carmen Carrera to its viewers as an actress and model. Throughout the show, Carmen is being referred to as “she” and “her”. Even the male cast members who have expressed their confusion regarding Carmen’s sex (e.g. Joe Budden) are never *shown* referring to Carmen any other way but using female pronouns. The editing of the episodes is significant in making sure that Carmen is seen as unquestionably female. Episode two, “Enter the Drama”, is centered around two groups of participants – female participants (Carmen, Big Ang, Janice Dickinson, and Jaclyn Stapp) on the one side, and male cast members on the other side. Scenes showing female cast members are contrasted by scenes showing male participants. The clear division along the lines of binary gender evident in these sequences obviously establishes Carmen as “one of the girls”. To further emphasize Carmen’s femininity, many of the segments showing Carmen and Adrian are organized as back-and-forth cuts between Adrian lifting weights and exercising on the one side, and Carmen sitting in front of the mirror brushing her hair or putting on makeup, on the other side. There is a clear intention here on the part of the producers to highlight Carmen’s femininity by contrasting it to Adrian’s overstated displays of masculinity. The most illustrative instance of *Couples Therapy* producers’ intention to produce Carmen as a woman, however, is certainly the decision to have her and Adrian marry in the season finale.

There is a clear intention on the part of the producers throughout season six of *Couples Therapy* to place Carmen within the normative structure of heterosexual marriage. Early in the season, as the viewers are watching the first three couples at the house, they hear Carmen’s voice explaining that the reason she is in the show is the need for resolution, she is “not getting any younger” and she “wants to have a happy marriage” (“The Journey Begins”). The show produces Carmen within the heterosexual norms as the viewers become aware that her primary motivation to enter the show is heterosexual marriage with Adrian. “So you’re a mom?”, Janice Dickinson asks Carmen in their very first conversation. “A step-mom”, Carmen replies. Unfortunately, she explains, she cannot have kids of her own because she is transgender. By showing Carmen’s allegiance to domesticity and patriarchal norms the show clearly establishes her within heteronormative conventions.

However, in order for Carmen to be able to marry Adrian and participate in the heterosexual marriage convention, the show’s producers need to make sure that she is seen as undoubtedly female and clearly intelligible as heterosexual. Throughout the season, Adrian is the key figure in establishing Carmen as a woman. In the first episode, “The Journey Begins”, Adrian is introduced as a heterosexual cis man, father of two daughters who left his high school sweetheart in order to

be with Carmen. By having Adrian introduce himself as a father of two daughters, the producers establish him as an undoubtedly heterosexual man. This is important insofar that his heterosexuality will legitimize Carmen's womanhood throughout the rest of the season. "For me, Carmen is a hundred percent woman," Adrian explains ("Enter the Drama"). This statement carries tremendous weight since in the show Carmen is produced as a woman through her relationship with Adrian. Heterosexual cis man Joe Budden parallels Adrian's statement when he says: "I wanted to tap [Carmen]." Statements such as these naturalize Carmen's femininity and frame her body as desirable to heterosexual male viewers.

Carmen is being confirmed as a woman throughout the season by other cast members who acknowledge her femininity. "There was nothing manly about you as a guy. You were a girl as a guy", Neil Murphy exclaims looking at Carmen's pre-transition photos in the "Let's Talk About Sex" episode. More importantly, however, Carmen's womanhood is acknowledged by the medical community represented by Dr. Jenn Mann. After a private session in the episode "Enter the Drama", the psychotherapist accepts Carmen's femininity as a natural expression of her gender. Dr. Mann, however, is not the only medico-scientific authority who acknowledges Carmen's womanhood. In the "Gene Therapy" episode, producers invite a biomedical engineer, Jeremy Bluvol, to test the couples for their biological, psychological and hormonal compatibility. Dr. Mann explains to the cast members that the show prides itself on exposing its participants to cutting edge scientific tools and experiences. Mr Bluvol tested the cast members' DNA to look at "predictive elements of a relationship" and issues of their compatibility. In this scientifically backed analysis of their relationship, Adrian and Carmen achieved a high score of 78% compatibility. The episode is significant in the season's overall construction of Carmen as a heterosexual woman in effectively providing Carmen and Adrian with the scientific approval for their relationship. Having consistently framed Carmen and Adrian as the most compatible couple in the mansion, in the "Let's Talk About Sex" episode, *Couples Therapy* producers finally had Adrian propose to Carmen. In a clichéd scene that seems like every romantic's idea of a marriage proposal, Adrian literally gets down on one knee, offers Carmen an engagement ring and asks her if she would marry him.

In the season finale, an episode fittingly titled "Love Is the Answer", Carmen marries her long-term partner. "I am the luckiest bride. I've got the white dress, I've got the perfect husband, I've got the beautiful kids," the viewers hear Carmen say with the wedding preparations in full swing. Against the backdrop of the wedding music, surrounded by friends and family, the viewers watch as Carmen, dressed in white, is being led down the aisle by Neil Murphy. "My dream was

always to walk down the aisle in a white dress,” she later admits (“Love Is the Answer”). *Couples Therapy* producers situate Carmen within a highly normative embodiment of heterosexual femininity by means of a traditional wedding ceremony completed with the exchange of rings and vows (see figure 7). The performative nature of the wedding ceremony in the show is doubly formative as it produces Carmen as a wife *and* female at the same time.

Through the embodiment of normative femininity, domesticity, and heterosexuality Carmen was able to both frame herself and be framed as the woman that she always felt she was. The name of the episode points to an important aspect of transgender identity construction. Assigned male at birth, Carmen identified as a woman from an early age. She modified her body, gender roles, and gender expression accordingly. These changes, however, were not enough to complete her identity project. For her identity project to succeed, she needed to be recognized and loved as a woman. Carmen only truly becomes a woman through marriage with a heterosexual cis man. The *Couples Therapy* project of establishing Carmen as a heterosexual trans woman is concluded in the season six climax scene, as Dr. Jenn Mann, standing in front of the couple, wraps up the wedding ceremony: “I now pronounce you Mr and Mrs Adrian Torres.”

7. Conclusion

I was not aware of the importance of Carmen Carrera as an advocate for and a role-model within the trans community, neither was I aware of her extraordinary life journey when I first encountered her in May 2014.

As I was hurrying across Vienna’s Sigmund Freud park to one of my lectures, I noticed two boys whispering among each other and pointing to a billboard in front of them. I couldn’t see what they were looking at from where I was but, I could clearly see that they were both worked up by whatever it was they were seeing. One of them took out his phone and took a photo of the poster. They continued talking between each other, throwing occasional glances in the direction of the billboard. When they saw me watching them, they turned around and walked away. Naturally, I got curious. What was it that got them so excited? I continued my walk, passed the billboard and turned around to have a look. There was a poster on the billboard announcing the 2014 Life Ball. Life Ball’s theme in 2014 was “Garden of Earthly Delights” and the event was promoted by posters of Carmen Carrera standing in what was supposed to represent the Garden of Eden, with a male figure lying on the ground in front of her. The text on the poster read: “I am Adam. I am Eve. I am Me.” The somewhat cryptic text became clearer when one looked at Carmen. A naked woman surrounded by Eden’s luscious foliage, with heavy breasts, long free-falling hair, a flower in her

hand and - a penis between her legs. The poster provoked a rather big controversy in Austria's capital. The following weeks saw many of the posters vandalized - thick layers of black paint covered the abominable appendage. Campaigns asking for the removal of the posters were launched on Twitter and Facebook and the Austrian FPÖ party filed an official complaint against the Life Ball organizers citing moral decadence.

Even though trans identities have increasingly been in the public eye since the early 2010s, it was this encounter with Carmen that first drew my attention to transgender bodies and identities. The connectedness achieved through social media networks as well as the growing positive representation of transgender individuals in the mainstream media have meanwhile made visible the ever-larger number of trans individuals. I found it gripping how social networking sites and television representation are able to both affirm and challenge the construction of transgender femininity. I also noticed that despite the importance of SNSs in the lived experiences of trans individuals there were no articles exploring this profound connection. My thesis aimed at filling this academic gap.

This thesis has approached Carmen Carrera as a case study of how exposure in mainstream media and social media networks allows for the formation of transgender identities. In the course of my thesis I have illustrated how transgender identity is being performatively established through its (self)representation on reality TV and SNSs by relying on transgender identity theory by Nagoshi and Brzuzy as well as selected works from identity and media studies.

Consistent with Nagoshi and Brzuzy, I explore embodiment, social construction, and self-fashioning on RTV and SNSs as constitutive aspects of transgender identity. The chapter on transgender embodiment thus illustrates the importance transsexual individuals place on the body as the source of their identity. Following the work of Schmeichel et al. I demonstrate how transsexual embodiment of the core gender takes place through retraining, redecorating and remaking of the body. The self-constructivist aspect of Carmen Carrera's transgender identity has been approached through an analysis of her self-representation on SNSs and a select few interviews. Chapter five of my thesis has illustrated how transgender agency is closely connected to choosing and embracing one's core identity, but also how the active performance of a chosen identity through bodily and narrative self-fashioning enables transgender individuals to transition into the gender they identify with. My analysis of transgender identity construction concludes with chapter six which explores the significance of intersubjective recognition and social construction as the third and final aspect of transgender identity. Relying on the work done by Rubin, Shotwell and Sangrey, and Goffman, the first part of the chapter explores how the

performance of Carmen Carrera's trans-femininity is dependent on an audience who would recognize her as the woman she claims to be. Part two of the chapter relies on the performative/transformative aspect of reality television and analyzes how mainstream media has produced Carmen Carrera as female by creating a complex narrative around her feminine body, her adherence to heteronormativity, and the fostering of family values.

Carmen Carrera's physical and psychological transition from a gay man to a straight woman has taken place largely in and through media representation in the short span of eight years. It would be valuable for further research to return to Carmen as a vocal representative of the trans community in say, eight years, and explore how the representation of transgender individuals has evolved even further. Additionally, it could be of interest to explore Carmen again as a case study for the changes in communication that are being brought on by the ever growing number of SNSs, as well as their technological development and how these, as of yet unforeseeable, changes would affect the formation of not just transgender identity, but identity in general.

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Acknowledgements of Illustrations

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Figure 2. Carmen at DragCon. *Instagram*, 30 Sept. 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BoVAFK1AAzh/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2018.

Figure 3. Carmen Modelling Swimwear. *Instagram*, 9 Nov. 2018, www.instagram.com/p/Bp8hQUNA6tL/. Accessed 24 Nov. 2018.

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Figure 5. Carmen's Current Use of Makeup. *Instagram*, 5 Nov. 2018, www.instagram.com/p/BpzmYcjgVv3/. Accessed 12 Dec. 2018.

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Illustrations



Figure 1. Carmen in the 2014 Life Ball Poster

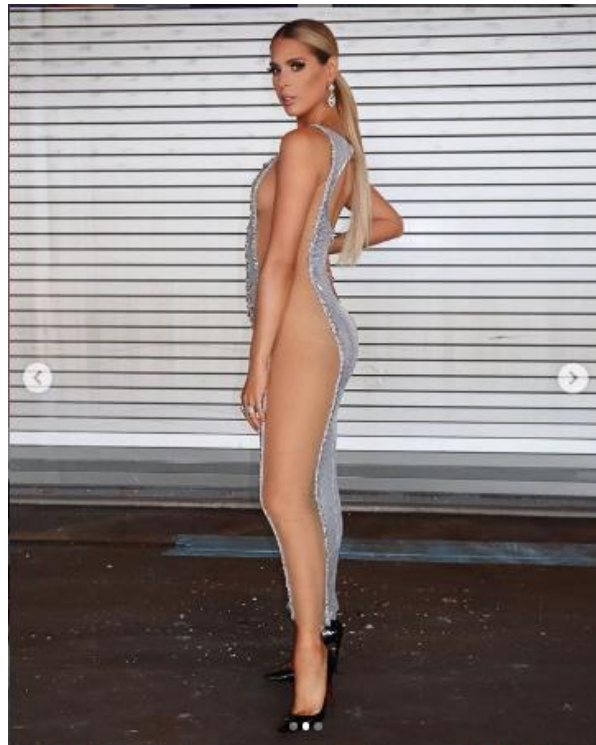


Figure 2. Carmen at DragCon



Figure 3. Carmen Modelling Swimwear



Figure 4. Carmen's Burlesque Outfit



Figure 5. Carmen's Present-day Use of Makeup

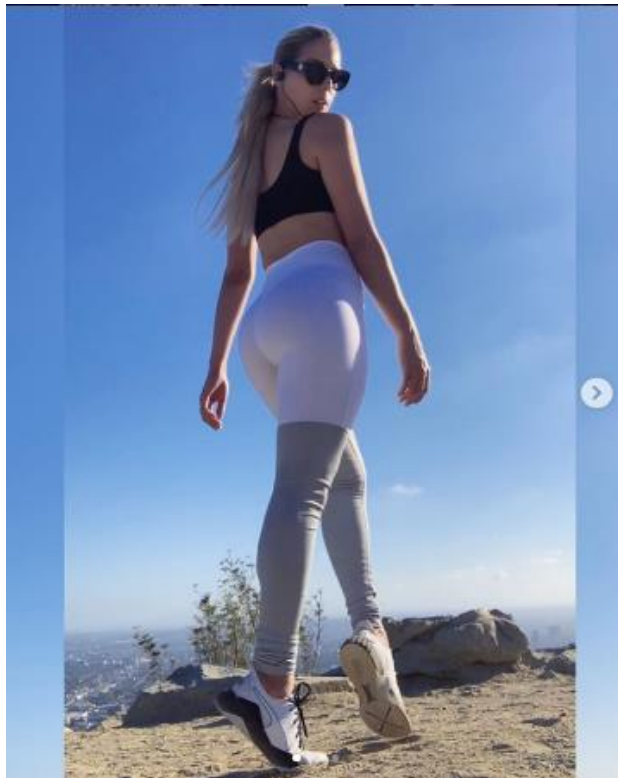


Figure 6. Low-angle Photo of Carmen



Figure 7. Carmen's Wedding on *Couples Therapy*

Abstract

In view of the importance of social media networks for the creation and strengthening of the transgender community, “Carmen Carrera: Queer in Paradise – Trans-Femininity in Social Media and Reality TV” explores how trans-femininity is portrayed and performatively constructed on reality TV and social media networks by focusing on the transitioning of American television celebrity and male-to-female transgender activist Carmen Carrera.

This thesis has approached Carmen Carrera as a case study of how exposure in mainstream media and social media networks allows for the formation of transgender identities. My thesis examines textual and audio-visual material featuring Carmen Carrera with an emphasis on her transition path, her body, beauty, and sexuality. The analysis of transgender identity construction is based on Julie L. Nagoshi and Stephan/ie Brzuzy’s transgender identity theory. My analysis relies primarily on videos and photos uploaded by Carrera on her official social networking sites. My thesis approaches both reality TV and social networking sites as productive spaces that not only reflect but actively create transgender identities. Consistent with the transgender identity theory, my thesis analyzes trans identity construction in the context of its representation on social media and reality TV, by focusing on transgender embodiment, self-fashioning and social-construction, respectively.

Zusammenfassung

„Carmen Carrera: Queer in Paradise – Trans-Femininity in Social Media and Reality TV“ analysiert die Darstellung und die performative Erzeugung von Trans-Femininität auf sozialen Netzwerken und im sogenannten „reality TV“.

In Anbetracht der außerordentlichen Bedeutung von sozialen Netzwerken für den Zusammenhalt und die Stärkung der transgender Gemeinschaft, bezieht sich die Arbeit auf die amerikanische TV-Berühmtheit und transgender Aktivistin Carmen Carrera. Carrera wird als Fallbeispiel für die Formation von Transidentität durch die Veröffentlichung und Darstellung im Fernsehen und in den sozialen Medien behandelt. Meine Arbeit analysiert sowohl textuelles als auch audio-visuelles Material mit einem besonderen Fokus auf Carreras (Um)wandlung von Mann zu Frau, ihren Körper und ihre Sexualität.

Die Analyse der Transidentitätskonstruktion basiert auf Julie L. Nagoshi und Stephan/ie Brzuzys Transidentitäts Theorie. Ich beschäftige mich in der Arbeit hauptsächlich mit Fotos und Videos, die von Carrera selbst auf ihre sozialen Netzwerke hochgeladen wurden. Die Masterarbeit betrachtet sowohl „reality TV“ als auch die sozialen Medien als „productive spaces“ (wrtl. produktive Orte), welche Transidentitäten nicht nur abbilden, sondern aktiv erzeugen. Im Einklang mit der Transidentitäts Theorie, analysiert diese Arbeit die Formierung von Transidentität im Kontext ihrer Darstellung auf den sozialen Netzwerken und im Fernsehen, der Fokus liegt hierbei auf transgender Verkörperung, Selbst-Gestaltung sowie auf der sozialen Konstruktion von Identität.