

Ethno-Graphic Gatherings of Nonbinary Visual Narratives on TikTok

by

Raey Costain (they/them)

B.A., University of Victoria, 2020

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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We acknowledge and respect the lək'wəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Supervisory Committee

Dr Andrea Walsh, Supervisor

Department of Anthropology

Dr Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier, Member

Department of Anthropology

Dr Margo Matwychuk, Member

Department of Anthropology



Figure 1. Drawn close (@samson.josephine)

### Abstract

This thesis is an exploration in graphic anthropology alongside a digital community of nonbinary people on the social media app, TikTok. Nonbinary visibility is a complicated and still poorly understood set of experiences largely due to a lack of thoughtful representation in both academic and non-academic circles. This work applies comic-style drawing to gather nonbinary visual narratives as they are shared digitally. In doing so, this work contributes to an understanding of what it might mean to ‘look’ nonbinary.

Between September 2021-May 2022 I conducted a digital ethnography on TikTok. I applied comic drawing as my primary mode of notetaking and communicating about my experiences. I also recruited 5 nonbinary social media mutuals who each contributed 1-6 video clips to my project. Informed by these video clips and my own auto-ethnographic experiences on the app, I created a collection of comic style drawings. Selections of these drawings were shared on social media (@enbyanthro) and through an interactive documentary housed on my project website ([nbvisualnarratives.ca](http://nbvisualnarratives.ca)).

Throughout my work here, I consider drawing as a process of gathering - of bringing together and being together. As I gathered individual nonbinary narratives through my drawing method I connected those stories to broader dialogues about being nonbinary. The ethnographic gatherings discussed here are made up of both personal narratives and shared experiences, brought together through the process of drawing.

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to all nonbinary people who feel unseen.

## Introduction

While isolating during the COVID-19 pandemic I found myself, like many, turning to social media for a sense of community. My iPhone became a near-permanent fixture in my hand, and I spent many hours peering through the screen, looking for signs of life. What I found was TikTok.

In developing this project, the ubiquity of digital technology in everyday life became a productive opportunity to explore visual narratives, mobile filmmaking, and comic-style art in relation to nonbinary identities. I specifically wanted to explore how comic drawing can be used to mediate and gather nonbinary visual narratives communicated through mobile filmmaking on TikTok. Here I use the definition of mediation that is “to give shape, to allow and constrain at the same time” (Grasseni et al. 2021, 16) and I consider gathering as a process of bringing together and being together.

Sometimes ridiculed as an internet trend, the term nonbinary (and the attached politicized identity) has become more commonplace over the last decade (Young 2019). The term itself, and its coinage dating to the 1990s, is usually attributed to political activist Riki Anne Wilchins. However, experiences of gender that do not correspond to the gender binary are neither new nor limited to Euro-Western society.<sup>1</sup> While nonbinary is not a trend, many nonbinary people have turned to social media as a means of finding community and creating self-representation. This mode of online visibility may contribute to the erroneous idea that nonbinary as a concept is a fad that does not translate to the offline world (Young 2019, 65).

This research rests on the foundational assumption that gender nonconforming people have always existed, and nonbinary is simply another, newer way to describe this experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Barker, Meg-John and Jules Scheele. *Gender: A graphic guide*. (Icon Books, 2019): 18-19. These authors note several examples of gender beyond the binary from around the world including Hjjira (India), Toms (Thailand), Machi (Chile and Argentina) and Two-Spirit (North America). These identities are culturally specific and should not be absorbed into the nonbinary umbrella category considered in my work, but these examples are offered to further destabilize the gender binary as normal and natural.

As an apparently unrecognizable gender experience (Barbee and Schrock 2019; Darwin 2017), the visual dynamics of nonbinary identities are complicated and under-researched. This thesis is developed around the idea that while nonbinary genders may not correspond to a specific visual, nonbinary people do experience a complex visuality in relation to their identities. Exploring this visuality is productive in advocating for nonbinary lived experiences and in developing new modes of digital ethno-graphy.

This latter is the central contribution of my work. Throughout my digital ethnography I have drawn comics, created and collected videos, and curated a webcomic style interactive documentary (i-doc) around my work. Through my drawing/gathering process which is central to each of these three components, I have explored how graphic anthropology and the visual sensibilities of comic drawing can contribute to understanding social media lifeworlds and experiences of life beyond the binary. Gathering nonbinary experiences has been an opportunity to critically consider self-representation on social media, and the role of public anthropology in nonbinary advocacy. I have shared selections of my comic drawings on social media and created the i-doc in the hopes of increasing visibility for the nonbinary community that supported and collaborated in my research. Both the methodological and advocacy components of this work take up drawing as a means of slowing down and thinking alongside community.

In this work, I have created drawings not only to pass narratives from one medium to another, but they are also used to temporarily give tangible, manageable shape to the ephemeral stream of content on TikTok. The purpose of gathering these narratives is not to create a cohesive or homogeneous idea of what it is to be nonbinary but is rather to collect an unfinished and dynamic assemblage of nonbinary representations. As I draw, as a nonbinary person, I gather and am gathered into shared digital experiences. This method allows me to study *with* nonbinary people, rather than conducting a detached study *of* nonbinary identities.

This document begins with an acknowledgement of my position as a nonbinary researcher. Following this, I present a review of relevant literature in Chapter 1. In the first subsection of Chapter 1, I identify a queer starting point for this research and overview three main themes in queer feminist literature that ground my study: learning and doing gender, challenging binary thinking, and the linked ideas of passing privilege and nonbinary invisibility. In the second subsection, I review three recent graphic publications which provide an introduction to sharing queer gender stories and experiences through drawing. In the third subsection, I outline five potentials from the literature on queer, visual, ethnographic research: ethnographic drawing, queer drawing, comic drawing, digital ethnography, and queer ethnography. In the fourth subsection, I identify the aspects of public anthropology most suited to the kind of queer exploration I have taken up here.

In Chapter 2, I outline my methodology and approach to queer, digital ethnography on TikTok with a particular focus on my digital drawing/gathering method.

In Chapter 3, I present a selection of the drawings I created throughout this research and explore how the personal narratives shared by my research collaborators engage larger dialogues about nonbinary gender(s). I also reflect on my research process and the development of the i-doc and social media content.

In Chapter 4, I offer a conclusion to the research at hand and suggest several directions for future work.

As you read this document, I invite you to look queerly. By this I mean, look without categorizing or assuming binary associations, look with an appreciation for the unfinished/unfinishable. Consider how the text elements of the comics form drawings impact the way you may see the persons and narratives drawn out here (or not). As I will explore in my work here, comics are set up for the interplay between word and image. These elements are not separate, each in their own domain; in comics, images and words are imbricated,

mutually supported, and in that overlap there is a potential to shift the meaning of both. The drawings you will see are not inherently or essentially queer but they have the potential to be queered, and to queer your understanding. The reader/viewer has an active role to play here.

This work is a gathering, and you are invited to join it.

### A note on terminology



Figure 2. Nonbinary terminology

The term nonbinary has been accepted by some as an umbrella term that describes all gender identities that exist apart from the gender binary of man/woman. Terms that may be included under this umbrella include genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, and numerous others. However, as nonbinary has become a more commonly used term, some feel it has been made into a distinct third gender that is no longer open to the real diversity of gender experiences. Because of this they prefer to use specific terms and reject the so-called

umbrella. Nonbinary may also be considered a transgender identity by some, while others choose not to use the trans label because of its binary history. Online communication adds further complexity to terminology. Shorthands like enby, nby, nb, and n-b are used alongside, and sometimes in place of nonbinary. While I use nonbinary as an umbrella term in this paper, some of my sources employ other terminology. Understanding the variations of nonbinary terminology is necessary to engage with nonbinary communities on TikTok.

### **Researcher Position**

I came to terms with my nonbinary identity on TikTok in 2020. Although I have known my sense of gender was fluid for most of my life, I didn't name myself as nonbinary before then. The autobiographical content I was witnessing from other TikTokers demonstrated to me that some of my individual feelings were in fact shared experiences. This realization, combined with the support I was receiving from my digital friendships, encouraged me to become bolder in sharing my identity publicly.<sup>2</sup>

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic I found myself turning to social media as a window out into the suddenly silent world. I've worked in communications in the past, managing social media platforms for nonprofits and small businesses, but I've kept my own social media presence small. I've never liked the idea of being on display, particularly not in a world so lacking in basic decency and kindness as social media. When I joined TikTok in June 2020 it was a form of distraction and escapism. I was worn down by boredom and isolation and the constant stream of seemingly disconnected and often confusing videos that my friends were sending me piqued my curiosity. As a child of the Internet Age I've watched my fair share of cat videos on Youtube, but TikTok is a slightly different animal. On one memorable day a friend sent me a video of a dog skateboarding, followed by one of a person

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<sup>2</sup> While I identify myself as nonbinary/agender, I acknowledge that I also occupy a privileged social position when I am outwardly perceived as a white woman.

in a t-rex costume dancing in roller skates, and finally a deeply emotional tribute from an Indigenous woman who was raising awareness for MMIWG2S - all in the space of about five minutes. That stuck with me. The speed and brevity of the content in combination with the jarring shift in emotion and tone caught my attention. I downloaded the app.

I noticed very quickly that the algorithm was quite intuitive. I hadn't arrived on the app with any expectation of finding a particular 'side' of TikTok and I had no specific type of content in mind, but within a day my content feed (called the For You Page or FYP) was clearly catered to my tastes (which are varied). And there I found it. Community. Not a unified, consistent community, but still, an opportunity for connection when one was sorely needed. I started making videos with no plan in mind for my content, and no desire to be any kind of 'influencer.' I simply brought an openness to connect. And from that point of connection, this work gradually came into being.

I've described one entanglement here - that I embraced my nonbinary identity on the app I am now using to explore nonbinary narratives. Another tie is the way that I am employing comic drawing for this project. My character appears in many of the comics I've drawn as field notes, and in the comic gatherings drawn around myself and my collaborators. As a nonbinary person myself, I consider my own experiences in my ethnography and have not attempted to distance myself either from my community or from the products of my work. This project is necessarily subjective, challenging the idea of a distant, unbiased observer. I believe that this work depends on its subjectivity.

## Chapter 1: Review of the Literature

### 1.1 Start Queer

Queer anthropology is not, and cannot be, a particularly well-defined corner of the discipline. Queerness is a potential. As Eve Sedgwick wrote in 1993, queerness may be thought of as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (8, emphasis original). Although this definition (if it can be called that) still resonates with more contemporary discourses around queerness, a queer theoretical approach is not restricted to questions of gender and sexuality (Boyce et al. 2018). In anthropology, queering may be a tool in interrogating norms and power dynamics in a number of topics that deal with lived experiences of marginalization and otherness (Boyce et al. 2018).

As this project engages nonbinary gender, ethnographic drawing, mobile filmmaking<sup>3</sup>, and public anthropology there is an extensive body of literature that could inform this research. Due to the constraints of this paper, I have elected to focus on works that support the visual and improvisational aspects of gender, the queer potentials of ethnographic drawing and interactive documentary methods, and the uses of public anthropology as it may relate to transgender advocacy. Queer anthropology may be a suitable umbrella to encompass each of these approaches as “anthropology as a discipline and ethnography as its principal methodology, [...] are so centrally concerned with describing lived everyday lives, in ways that are - or at least can be - particularly attuned to life worlds shaped by marginality and otherness” (Boyce et al. 2018, 844). While some of the works here do not identify themselves as queer, I highlight the elements of these works that lend themselves to queering.

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<sup>3</sup> Schleser, Max. "Connecting through mobile autobiographies: Self-reflexive mobile filmmaking, self-representation, and selfies." In *Mobile media making in an age of smartphones*, pp. 148-158. Palgrave Pivot, New York, 2014. Schleser defines mobile filmmaking as self-reflexive and autobiographical film that is shot on mobile devices.

### **1.1.1 Learning and Doing Gender**

Although approaches to theorizing gender vary extensively, the idea of gender as a process or performance rather than a fixed reality has been taken up many times. In their landmark 1987 paper, West and Zimmerman suggest that gender is something that is done and redone on a daily basis. Rather than a natural or inherent characteristic of self, gender as something that is continuously done allows a measure of flexibility and improvisation. Gender is also not done in isolation. West and Zimmerman (1987) describe gender as an interactive “product of social doings” (129). While the social dimension of gender continues to be an important element of understanding gender experiences (Barbee and Schrock 2019), this original treatise on doing gender did not account for gender beyond the binary. West and Zimmerman (1987) write, “Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological” (137). The binary assumption of this work, however, is not seen as a complete barrier for applying the idea of doing gender to nonbinary experiences. In a virtual ethnography of the social media app, Reddit, Darwin (2017) applies the idea of gender as an everyday doing to a genderqueer community. In this study, subjects appear to share their process of doing gender with the goal of receiving an assessment (what West and Zimmerman (1987) might call ‘accountability’) from their genderqueer peers (Darwin 2017).

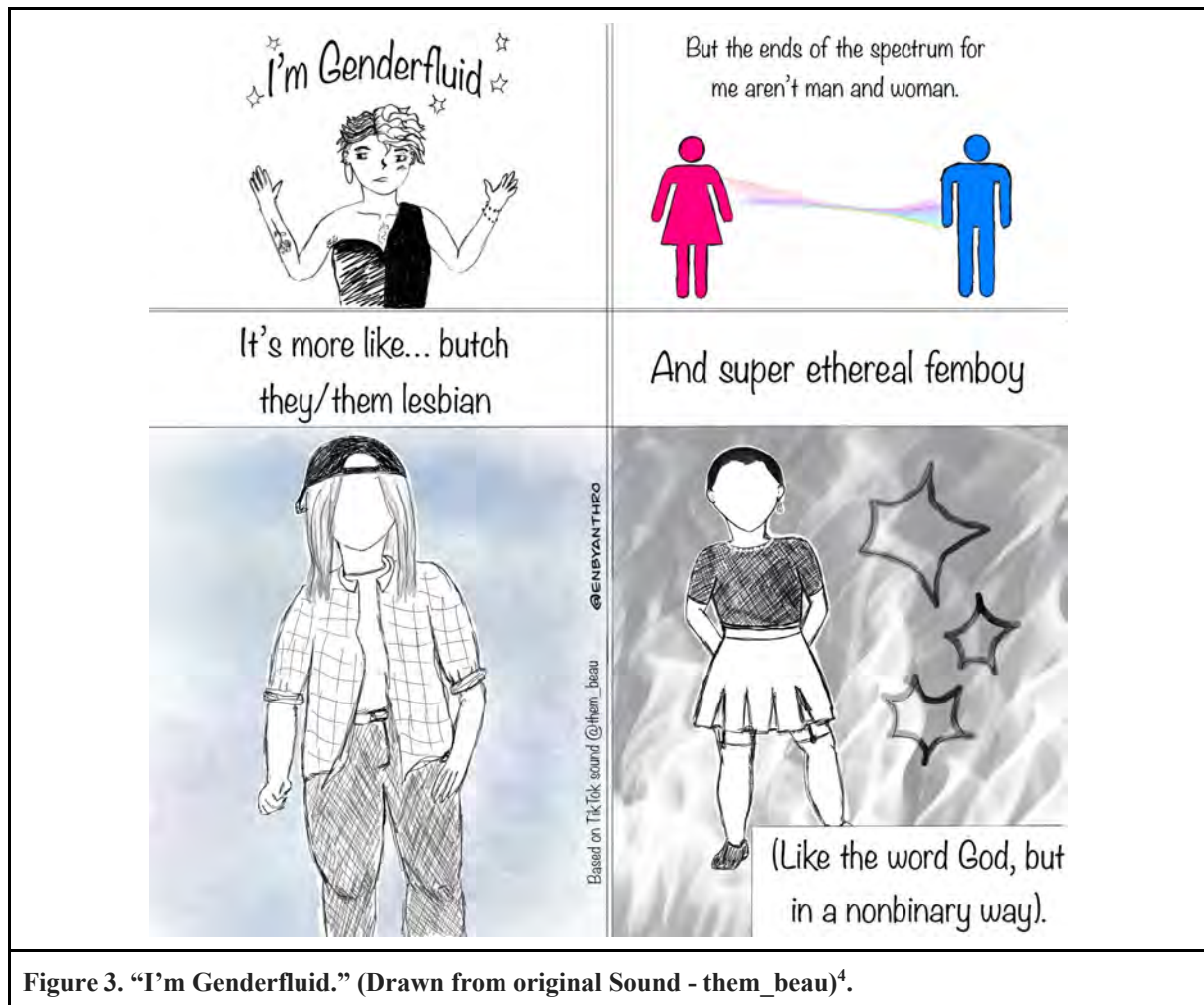
Although a cis-normative audience might view the way these individuals do gender as a failure, within the genderqueer community gender expressions are judged by a different standard. Genderqueer visibility may be the result of a haphazard and dynamic melding of masculine and feminine traits (Barbee and Schrock 2019; Darwin 2017). As such, doing genderqueer is not necessarily fully separated from the binary, it is simply not rigidly held within it. Regardless, “doing gender beyond the binary” (Darwin 2017) complicates the

argument put forward by West and Zimmerman (1987) because the system of accountability and social control is fundamentally altered.

Genderqueer people may be subject to accountability from their peers *and* from cis-normative society - as such they may be successfully doing gender by one standard and failing by another. The failure of nonbinary people to do gender in a binary way may actually be received as a greater measure of success by nonbinary peers if the goal of doing nonbinary gender is to challenge and confuse binary expectations (Barbee and Schrock 2019). Doing nonbinary gender challenges the “interactional scaffolding of social structure” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 147) including the naturalization of gender categories that is set up by doing binary gender. As shown by Darwin (2017), this does not mean that West and Zimmerman’s (1987) theorizing on doing gender cannot be applied to nonbinary experiences, but the theory must be stretched to accommodate the layers of social control and accountability that exist outside of the binary. In stretching this foundational theory, gender might be thought of as a practice that is done, but also one that is redone (Darwin 2017) and undone, as Barbee and Schrock (2019) suggest in their writing on un/gendering which I return to below.

### **1.1.2 Challenging Binary Thinking**

In their recent book, *Life Isn't Binary*, Iantaffi and Barker (2019) argue that the gender binary which restricts and suppresses diversity in gender experiences is the product of broader binary thinking. They demonstrate how binary thinking may be present, not only in relation to gender (man/woman) and sexuality (gay/straight) but also in relationships (platonic/romantic), bodies (abled/disabled), and emotions (good/bad) (Iantaffi and Barker 2019). The authors suggest that while binary thinking may rely on an either/or mentality, nonbinary thinking is less oppositional and allows for greater possibilities (Iantaffi and Barker 2019).



In exploring and challenging the binaries that crop up in each of the categories noted above, Iantaffi and Barker (2019) also remain wary of the creation of a new binary between binary and non-binary people. However, this new binary is difficult to avoid. Existing as non-binary is not just a matter of creating a new category because “as soon as a new identity - or way of understanding ourselves - emerges, it quickly becomes defined in opposition to the thing that it’s not” (Iantaffi and Barker 2019, 76). This oppositional, binary thinking fails to account for the dynamism of lived experiences. As will be discussed further in the next section, there is no singular nonbinary experience and so, despite its name, nonbinary is not a closed category that directly opposes the binary. It is the assumption of an oppositional

<sup>4</sup> View the original Sound here <https://www.tiktok.com/@enbyanthro/video/7034358318231538950? t=8T8YVvx553G& r=1>.

binary that creates one. The drawing shared above (Figure 3) is an example of how binary thinking continues to be present even in nonbinary dialogues. The idea of there being two defined ends on a spectrum undermines the fluidity this TikTok audio (hereafter referred to as a Sound) is hinting at.

Language, in this case the English language, may be one of the most obvious ways in which binary thinking is routinely enforced. Young (2019) writes that, “language is an institution nonbinary and genderqueer people are forced to engage with regularly, and which has historically been built and maintained by a cisgender, binary-thinking majority” (44). One of the major debates about nonbinary language in English right now is whether or not the singular ‘they’ pronoun is grammatically correct (Young 2019). The assertion that it is not, is frequently used as an excuse to disrespect or invalidate nonbinary people. Regardless of whether or not the singular ‘they’ pronoun is correct, this debate creates the impression that proper grammar is more important than an individual’s wellbeing and autonomy (Young 2019, 53, 58). The so-called pronoun debate is representative of the kind of social resistance that nonbinary people face on many fronts while navigating a binary world. When pursuing queer research, language and the binaries it imposes becomes an important point of consideration.

### **1.1.3 Passing Privilege and Nonbinary Invisibility**

Binary thinking is also present in how visual gender expression is perceived. Explorations into the visual experiences of nonbinary people have demonstrated that in breaking with gender norms, nonbinary individuals do not have an existing gender stereotype to tap into that will allow them to ‘pass’ (Barbee and Schrock 2019). Passing, or passing privilege, refers to the ability of an individual to present and be accepted as their gender (Barbee and Schrock 2019). Many of the medical interventions associated with transitioning such as surgery and hormone therapy are geared towards the eventuality of passing as one of the

binary genders. However, this concept relies on the confirmation of stereotypical gender ideals which are often exclusionary (Young 2019, 31). As such, passing has been criticized as a restrictive and potentially harmful goal that not everyone can reach (Young 2019, 111-112). Passing also puts an inordinate amount of responsibility on the shoulders of the individual. As Kat Gupta writes, “To ‘pass’ puts the burden of intelligibility on the person who seeks to ‘pass’: if we are not interpreted correctly, it is because we have failed to make our meaning clear. [...] I reject the implication that failure to be read - failure to be seen - is our fault” (Smith et al. 2020, 36).



Figure 4. “The point of being trans is...” (Drawn from original Sound - wow\_its\_ian).<sup>5</sup>

For nonbinary people, passing might not be possible at all because there is no shared understanding of what it is to be nonbinary, or what nonbinary looks like (Barbee and

<sup>5</sup> View the original Sound here <https://www.tiktok.com/@enbyanthro/video/7061380906010840325? t=8T8YFFjajFV& r=1>.

Schrock, 2019; Young 2019; Barker and Scheele 2019). A participant from a 2019 study phrased it like this, “There’s no foolproof way to present as nonbinary because you can’t pass as something that people don’t recognize” (Barbee and Schrock, 578). Passing requires an informed audience that can recognize gendered visual cues, but most gendered visuals are binary. Some nonbinary people have responded to this problem by mixing binary gender cues together to create a kind of un-gendered representation that can’t easily be read as either man or woman. This strategy uses the assumptions held by a binary audience by “balancing corporeal signs of one category (e.g., breasts or facial hair) with accoutrements of another (e.g., vests or skirts)” (Barbee and Schrock 2019, 588). As noted in the discussion above about doing gender beyond the binary, the impact of the binary is not done away with entirely but is rather turned to accomplish a different purpose.

Although failing to pass for nonbinary people may result in dysphoria from being misgendered or gendered binarily (Barbee and Schrock 2019), passing may not be a privilege at all but rather a price one pays for belonging. As noted above, passing requires adherence to socially accepted and recognizable gender norms which can erase individual experiences of gender even as they confirm social experiences of gender (Young 2019, 111). Passing may be a process of un-queering because it reaffirms a norm rather than challenging it. Siebler (2016) writes, “On an individual level, certainly the person who is passing is infiltrating a system of power in a way that would typically lock them out, but the system is not disrupted by this assimilation. In reality, passing and assimilating leads to further codification of the systemic norms” (72). In failing to pass, then, nonbinary people may remain queer and un/gendered (Barbee and Schrock 2019), but not passing also presents a challenge to the very idea of ‘looking’ nonbinary. This is a challenge I take up again in Chapter 3.

The topics raised in this subsection have not been dealt with exhaustively, but they provide a necessary introduction to the context within which this work has emerged. The

ideas of visibility, passing, pronouns, and binary thinking will all be returned to iteratively in my work here.

## 1.2 Visual Gender Narratives

The link between gender and visibility is often explored through the idea of gender expression but visual gender narratives may extend beyond how individuals personally present their gender. Three recent graphic publications provide a useful starting point for exploring potential ways of communicating visual gender narratives. These are not the first or only queer graphic publications<sup>6</sup> but they deal particularly well with genderqueerness. The sources reviewed here demonstrate how graphic sources can be turned to the purpose of education, advocacy and personalising gender experiences. In connection to graphic anthropology, these types of publications may present a path forward for communicating with audiences outside of academia. Particularly when sharing findings with the communities that contribute to and are represented in ethnographic work, accessible communication is paramount and is often not found in academic writing (Westmoreland 2021). I have structured the following as miniature book reviews in order to identify the merits and challenges of each graphic approach.

To begin with an educational graphic source, *Gender: A Graphic Guide* by Meg-John Barker (they/them) and Jules Scheele (they/he) provides an overview of primarily Western thinking about gender. Beginning with an account of “Gender Across Space and Time” (Barker and Scheele 2019, 7) this source taps into recognizable pop culture visual stories like Dr Who and Wonder Woman as well as using recognizable but unnamed visuals to demonstrate change in gender norms over time. For example, in discussing how gender is connected to capitalism and the wage gap, the source presents a graphic of a 1960s era

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<sup>6</sup> The first openly gay character in a comic strip, Andy Lippincot (Doonesbury) debuted in 1976. However, gay representation should not be confused with queer representation. Trans and genderqueer characters did not regularly appear until the 1990s and continue to be underrepresented.

feminine secretary working on a typewriter and contrasts it with a graphic of a masculine figure in a suit working at a laptop (Barker and Scheele 2019, 11). This visual relies on a certain amount of recognition from the reader to make sense of it as it is not directly described in the accompanying text. For someone familiar with this kind of imagery the difference between the lipstick, pin-curl, dress-clad secretary and the tech-savvy entrepreneur is marked. As the text works through masculinities, femininities, nonbinary experiences, and the idea of a genderless future (Barker and Scheele 2019, 152) it continuously uses visuals that are based in Western sensibilities. I describe this not as a dismissal of the text but as a potential limitation on readership based on the visual language it uses. However, graphic communication relies on a shared visual language between the artist and the viewer (Eisner 2008) and so this limitation may not be avoidable.

One of the strengths of *Gender: A Graphic Guide* is that it clearly shows how the literature around gender has been built up by Black feminist authors and speakers like Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks. Quotes by these individuals are accompanied by drawn headshots which bring the writers closer to their words and solidify their presence in the text for the reader. Although drawn in black and white, this text shows extensive diversity.<sup>7</sup> Diversity is also present in the visual representations of gender identities. In the section on nonbinary gender, the authors provide a visual of a group of individuals who all identify as not-on-the-binary in some way. Although these individuals vary in terms of body type, aesthetic, disability, and race, they all stand together under an umbrella as the text defines nonbinary as “the most common umbrella term for people who experience their gender as neither male nor female. A diverse range of experiences fit under this umbrella” (Barker and Scheele 2019, 114). In not creating a specific visual type to represent nonbinary genders, the

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<sup>7</sup> Ayo, Darryl. “How To Be Black in Comics.” (*The Nerds of Colour*, 2015). This essay (originally a series of tweets) explores some of the challenges of drawing dark-skinned and black characters in black lines on white paper.

authors contribute to an understanding of nonbinary as a diverse gathering of identities but this graphic also highlights the significance of text in informing the viewer/reader. Without the text, this group might be seen differently if viewed through a binary lens. The kind of communication that is enabled by the integration of visuals and text in the graphic novel form shows great potential in confronting the assumptions a viewer might bring about nonconforming identities.

As part of its advocacy/educational stance, this source demonstrates how nonbinary thinking is not only beneficial for nonbinary people but also presents opportunities for society at large. Understanding the ways that gender experiences may fall between, beyond, and apart from the binary can remove the oppressive opposition between masculinity and femininity. For instance, in the section on masculinities, Barker and Scheele (2019, 48) address some of the ‘rules’ of masculinity which include suppressing emotion and proving manliness through violence. This kind of masculinity is defined as a closed category in opposition to femininity and any behaviours or feelings that don’t fit the masculine category are feared and repressed. An understanding of the potential openness and fluidity of gender may destabilise the oppressive binary rules that lead to toxic masculinities and femininities. In taking this approach, this text not only advocates for trans and nonbinary people, but also for a general openness to gender beyond the binary.

*Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe (e/em/eir) provides a more intimate view of a non-conforming gender experience by exploring the author’s own personal narrative. The graphic novel is introduced as a project that was originally scrapped because it was too personal a recount of the author's gender-related ‘demons’ (Kobabe 2019, 6). Kobabe has drawn moments from eir life as e navigates coming out, changing pronouns, dating, teaching, and developing a personal aesthetic and visual presence in the world. Combining conversations, experiences, and mental reflections, the resulting graphic narrative offers a deeply human

connection to the reader. There are several places where the graphic stands on its own, accomplishing something that text alone could not. Kobabe (2019) acknowledges this directly in recounting a story of a pap smear gone horribly wrong due to intense dysphoria - e writes “What my body told me was that this intrusion of the outside world into my internal physical being was wrong on a level too deep for words” (129) but without the drawing of the event as e experienced it internally, the recounting of the experience would be much less impactful. Kobabe’s graphic communication in this example demonstrates the agony of dysphoria with an immediacy that would not be possible with text alone.

Although *Gender Queer* does potentially offer representation for nonbinary people, it is unapologetically an individual narrative. Kobabe is drawn as a white, asexual, androgynous, genderqueer person and because of this, eir narrative may not provide representation for all nonbinary people. However, e does relate a similar experience to some other nonbinary experiences reflected in the literature (Barbee and Schrock 2019) in that e wants people to be confused about eir gender, and the purpose of eir transition was to achieve fewer gendered traits and become more androgynous (Kobabe 2019, 175). While this may be an important narrative for some, un-gendering through androgyny is not the route that all nonbinary people take, and it is not a route that all nonbinary people can take.

*Gender Queer* uses personal narrative to communicate an individual experience, but the narrative also maintains an educational or advocacy component. The idea that nonbinary people owe it to each other to be visible, to educate, and to share their experiences in order to make space pervades this work. The story concludes with Kobabe wondering if e should be giving eir pronouns to the kids e teaches comic drawing. Is it a waste of the students’ time, or is it an opportunity to give young nonbinary kids representation? As e tidies eir classroom e reflects on what it might have meant for em to see a nonbinary adult when they were young. As e turns to face the empty room e decides, “Next time. Next time I will come out” (Kobabe

2019, 239). The idea that nonbinary people must always advocate and educate about their own identities has been met with a kind of weariness by some who simultaneously want to carve out space for their identities and are exhausted by the constant politicization of their lives (Smith et al. 2020). Kobabe's personal narrative shows, from the inside, why a nonbinary person might choose not to speak up or declare their identity and highlights the pressures they might experience in relation to disclosure.

*Across a Field of Starlight* by Blue Delli quanti (they/them) brings forward stories of diverse gender through a fantastical storyline of space travel and intergalactic conflicts. Unlike the two other publications reviewed here, *Starlight* does not directly advocate for or educate about diverse gender - the power of the narrative is that it simply includes gender experiences beyond the binary as a fact of life. The story follows a friendship that unexpectedly develops between Lu, a resident of the reclusive utopian Field Compound, and Fassen, a cadet from the Fireback Brigade. The Firebacks are posing a resistance to the Ever-Blossoming Empire, a robot society that threatens to impose a restrictive and authoritarian mode of being over all people.

Throughout this narrative, there are several references to transness, both visual and in the text. Lu and Fassen are both referred to with they/them pronouns by other characters. One of Fassen's superiors is a trans-masculine person who uses he/him pronouns, wears his hair long, binds, and takes hormones. Another of Fassen's Fireback comrades uses she/her pronouns and is tall, broad-shouldered, and bearded. By presenting these characters as they are, without fuss, diverse gender experiences and expressions are not flagged as atypical or as the only aspect of identity. While the Field Compound and the Fireback Brigade resist Blossom's forcible sameness in very different ways, they are both concerned with the way that the Empire threatens to limit individuality. This reads as an allegory for oppressive cis-

normativity and the way that trans and nonbinary people take up different strategies of resistance.

Through the graphics, this narrative also reinforces a message that pervades communication about nonbinary genders - that is no singular visual expression of nonbinary identity. Fassen and Lu have different life experiences, different body types, different skin colours, dress differently, wear their hair differently but they both use they/them pronouns and are not binarily gendered by other characters. In building a narrative around this friendship, *Starlight* offers a glimpse of nonbinary life as a holistic and vibrant experience that does not parse out gender from the other elements of identity. As with the other publications, there is a component of advocacy in this work although it is less direct. In the Author's Note, Delliquanti states that the underlying concept of the book is "small choices made by small people that inspire others to think about their lives differently until together they all create the momentum toward a better world" (2022, 345). The author was also influenced by the idea of utopia, a place where everyone might have their needs met no matter who they are or how they identify (Delliquanti 2022, 344). The link between trans/nonbinary experiences and left-leaning politics is beyond the scope of this work but as I have briefly written elsewhere<sup>8</sup> there is a socialist and anti-capitalist political undercurrent that drifts through many nonbinary dialogues.

The visual narratives accounted for here by no means encompass all visual gender narratives, but they do present an introduction to writing and drawing about gender beyond the binary. These publications address queer stories and themes for the purpose of communication and advocacy, which may require a different kind of drawing than when drawing is used as a research method. The graphic novels/sources I have reviewed here are complete, finished works while the ethnographic drawing approaches I review below take up

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<sup>8</sup> Costain, Raey. "[Fieldnote excerpt: Trans Identities on the Left.](#)" Nonbinary Visual Narratives. (2022).

drawing in-process. As the work at hand balances drawing for communication with drawing as inquiry, I attempt to take lessons from both.

### **1.3 Queer, Visual Ethnographic Methodologies**

#### **1.3.1 Ethnographic Drawing**

Ethnographic drawing has made a resurgence in recent years.<sup>9</sup> Between the early 2000s and the present, there have been a number of publications exploring how ethnographic drawing may be turned to a new kind of anthropology (Ingold 2011; Taussig 2011; Causey 2017; Hendrickson 2008, 2019; Kashanipour 2021; Westmoreland 2021). Although strategies for applying drawing to ethnographic inquiry vary, there are 4 main themes that emerge from the literature on graphic anthropology and ethnographic drawing and are particularly relevant to my work here. These themes are: 1) Drawing to observe, 2) Drawing to slow down, 3) Drawing to navigate, and 4) Drawing to improvise.

- Drawing to observe

Drawing has been suggested as a method that refines the sense of sight (Causey 2017, Hendrickson 2008) and “serves as a pathway to becoming more attentive” (Westmoreland 2021, 69). This assertion is echoed by others who describe the benefits of drawing in anthropological research not only as a means of developing observations of the outer world but also as a process of understanding the inner world of the researcher (Kuschnir 2016; Taussig 2011). Drawing as a method offers a kind of clarity to observation in developing one's visual intelligence (Grasseni et al. 2021). However, the purpose of drawing in ethnography “is more than representing visible reality. Rather it is about resembling the reality as we both sense and make sense of it” (Bonanno 2019, n.p.). Taussig (2011) suggests that the strength of drawing is precisely that it does not accomplish the same work as a

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<sup>9</sup> Soukup, Martin. "Photography and drawing in anthropology." *Slovenský národopis* 62, no. 4 (2014): 536-543. Soukup outlines how ethnographic drawing was overtaken by photography in the mid 19th century. Ethnographic drawing was taken up again, to new purpose, in the 2000s.

photograph in capturing a moment. Drawings are “intimate, they are sketchy, they are suggestive, they are metaphysical” (Taussig 2011, 15).

The sense of fragmentation that may accompany or characterize a drawing, the challenge to reality, is what makes it useful. Taussig (2011) writes, “In pointing away from the real, they capture something invisible and auratic that makes the thing depicted worth depicting” (13). Whether it is emotion, imagination, ‘punctum’<sup>10</sup> (Hendrickson 2008) drawing can assist the observation and experience of more than what is objectively real and freely seen. In fact, Taussig (2011) suggests that attempts at realism in ethnographic drawing are a “betrayal” (15) of the potential of drawing. This resistance to realism and perfection encourages thinking about drawing as a process, rather than drawings as finished, bounded products. As Galman (2019) writes, “The value is in the process of making it, feeling it, and ending in a messy place of something that is true, but also more than true” (n.p.).

- Drawing to slow down

Kashanipour (2021) writes that “drawing is more or less the art of slowing down. [It is] a creative and heuristic way to think attentively” (81). Thinking attentively via drawing can be an opportunity to question and deconstruct normative ways of defining and describing things (Kashanipour 2021, 87) “[cultivating] a practice of divergent thinking” (Westmoreland 2021, 68). Drawing can also be a means of ceding authority and meeting subjects and collaborators where they are (Kashanipour 2021). In seeking a dynamic of reciprocity, the public, iterative, and explorational nature of drawing can lead to new ways of thinking and “becoming engaged mindfully with people and their lifeworld” (Kashanipour 2021, 85). Kashanipour (2021) also views drawing as an ‘antidote’ to the speed of technology-mediated interactions. Slowing down through drawing may promote a more respectful kind of knowledge

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<sup>10</sup> Hendrickson, Carol. "Visual field notes: Drawing insights in the Yucatan." *Visual Anthropology Review* 24, no. 2 (2008): 117. Hendrickson describes the feeling of being ‘grabbed’ by a visual, building on Roland Barthes’ (1981) idea of punctum as “the piercing effect of a photograph.” Hendrickson’s reaction to being thus ‘grabbed’ was to draw.

development - as the creator (who may or may not claim the title of artist) thinks and works *alongside* research collaborators, rather than simply thinking *about* a subject (Ingold 2011; Kashanipour 2021). Thinking alongside reinforces the idea of drawing as process work because the dialogues, interactions, and observations that may happen in the field are continuously unfolding.

- Drawing to navigate

Taussig (2011) has explored the many meanings tucked into the term and idea of drawing. He writes,

To draw is to apply pen to paper. But to draw is also to pull on some thread, pulling it out of its knotted tangle or skein, and we also speak of drawing water from a well.

There is another meaning too, as when we say “I was drawn to [them]” [...] Drawing is thus a depicting, a hauling, an unraveling, and being impelled toward something or somebody (Taussig 2011, xii).

Drawing as a method carries with it these many varied meanings as it surpasses the creation of some graphic record. In being drawn on, in, or towards something drawing can also represent a kind of navigation or wayfinding (Ingold 2011). Wayfinding through drawing recognizes an unfinished and incomplete world where “there are no start points and end points. There are only horizons that vanish as you approach them, while further horizons loom ahead” (Ingold 2011, 13).

Rather than following some map laid out over a static landscape (or perhaps, rather than putting a landscape into stasis via a map), following the drawn line requires flexibility (Ingold 2011). Ingold (2011) likens drawing to walking, stating, “Through the close coupling of perception and action, the draughtsman - like the walker - is drawn *into* the world, along paths of observation, even as he draws it *out* in gestures of description and the traces they yield” (17). In being drawn along these ‘paths of observation’ through the process of

drawing, it is possible to maintain a sense of immediacy and changeability in what is being observed.

- Drawing to improvise

Linked to this idea of drawing as navigation, Ingold (2011) views drawing as a means of connecting “movement, observation, and description” into one practice (1). Kashanipour (2021) echoes this idea, stating “drawing itself is not merely about a process but *is* the process itself, one of connecting with the environment” (86). This practice of drawing requires a versatility and responsiveness to a world that is not made but is ever in the making (Ingold 2011). If, as Ingold (2011) suggests, “in a world of materials, nothing is ever finished: everything may be something but being something is always on the way to becoming something else” (3) then to observe the something and then the something else requires the ability to improvise.

Ingold’s (2011) appreciation for the way that things in this world are continuously in motion and incomplete, the way that “living bodies are never made but always in the making” (8) provides a particularly useful opening to draw this method down a queer path. The improvisational potential of drawing resists the urge to freeze and define things the way other methods might, making this method better able to account for “the open mesh of possibilities” (Sedgwick 1993, 8) that can be seen in a queer view of the world. The other three aspects of ethnographic drawing identified here, drawing to observe, slow down, and navigate, also present opportunities to use drawing in a way that challenges normative ways of thinking. In appreciating the more-than-true mess of process drawing (Galman 2019) and the relationality that drawing affords (Kashanipour 2021), in allowing oneself to be ‘drawn along’ (Taussig 2011), applications of this method may assist in exploring identity experiences that are not easily defined. I follow up with the queer potentials of drawing in the next subsection.

### **1.3.2 Drawing Queerness and Queer Drawing**

The application of drawing as a queer method has not yet resulted in a particularly extensive body of literature, but some recent work has shown how drawing as a practice of observation and communication can be queered, and how drawings may act queer. As noted above, graphic communication can be turned towards queer narratives for purposes of education, advocacy, and autobiographical communication - this is what we might call drawing queerness. However, the process of queer drawing, and the production of queer drawings, have been shown to go beyond the queer subject. In this section, I identify three publications that speak to queer potentials in drawing.

- Queer Potentials in Archives

In an analysis of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, González (2021) explores the way that archive material can be assembled queerly in the graphic novel form. In reassembling the story of her childhood and her father's death through drawing, Bechdel uses drawing to turn absence into presence, bringing forward things in the narrative that were buried in real life (González 2021). The layered narrative which moves backwards and forwards through time, repeatedly stopping at significant points such as Bechdel coming out as a lesbian to her parents and learning about her father's death, is an example of how the graphic novel format can create multilinear narratives (González 2021).

González (2021) suggests that *Fun Home* presents two types of archives: an "archive of feelings," and an "archive of the unassimilable real" (101). This last refers to an archive that gathers things that don't fit cleanly anywhere, crossing the boundaries of the living and the dead. These archives are composed of scraps from Bechdel's own childhood journals, photographs, newspaper clippings, and letters. As González (2021) writes, "Bechdel's particular manner of arranging the archives precisely emphasises the ambiguity and instability of identity, thus rejecting any fixed and closed conceptions of the subject" (101). It

is this ambiguity, this “rejoicing in indeterminacy and non-identity” (González 2021, 104) not just in subject, but in form, that constitutes a queer graphic narrative.

- Queer Space

Responding to the challenge of drawing queerly without defaulting drawings that “reproduce existing representations of bodies, genders and sexualities but rework the cultural archive of available representations,” Campe (2011, 1) explores queer drawings through gapping, which is a term borrowed from linguistics. Campe (2011) describes gapping as a means to “designate a strategic use of reduction and omission in drawing that makes space by leaving things out” (2). Gapping does not make things queer but rather images created this way may have the agency to act queer (Campe 2011, 6). Unlike many of the approaches to drawing reviewed here, Campe (2011) is not exploring ways to queer the process of drawing but is rather considering “drawings as material objects” that accomplish a kind of “queer intervention” in the way they are circulated and distributed (2-3). By strategically using space, Campe (2011) is attempting a kind of visual activism that “allows us to look beyond the visual molds of gender representation and imagine something else” (2). Harnessing the creative power of images as queer interventions connects to other approaches to drawing in that it emphasizes liminal, transitory space and recognizes that “*in between* is also the place where meaning is produced and reality is constructed” (Campe 2011, 4). As I will explore further below, the in-between space as a place of meaning is particularly significant to comic form drawing. The blank spaces intentionally set into drawings are part of what maintains drawing as an unfinished and collaborative process.

- Queer Intimacy

Whether it is known as the “gutter” as in comics (McCloud 1993) or as “gapping” (Campe 2011) or simply as negative space, absences are productive in creating a kind of intimacy between the drawer, the drawn, and the viewer. The idea of queer intimacy in drawing

borrows from theory in quantum physics that addresses the phenomena of simultaneous presence and absence (Casey 2016, 1). Casey (2016) writes that, “Queer intimacy [...] proposes a space ‘between,’ an oscillating and unfixed interstice between ideas and matter; a space where relationships remain contingent, ideas and matter provisional” (6). When applied to drawing, queer intimacy is an exploration of the sense of closeness between the drawer and the thing drawn (Casey 2016, 2) but may also address the way that presence and absence characterizes drawing (Casey 2016, 3). Drawing may be a means of seeing what is otherwise unknown and intangible (Casey 2016, 3).

Echoing Ingold’s (2011) assertions of drawing as a process in the making, in a world in the making, Casey (2016) writes that drawings have “the ability to perch on the edge of being and not being” (3). Although not writing specifically about queerness in terms of gender and sexuality, Casey’s (2016) work on queer intimacy in drawing furthers the idea of queerness as a process of unsettling, supporting drawing as a queer method. The type of advocacy through drawing evident in the graphic publications reviewed above is also a possible effect of queer intimacy. As Casey (2016) asks, “if through drawing and looking at drawings we can become sensitive to delicacy in other forms of lived experience, sensitized to other in-between, possible states of existence, might drawing then help us conceive of inhabiting indeterminate states of being?” (7). This statement emphasizes the potential of drawing for learning and advocacy through a queer lens.

### **1.3.3 Comic Drawing as Inquiry**

Comics have been defined in various ways from Will Eisner’s concept of sequential art (Kuttner et al. 2021, 197 qt Eisner 1985) to Scott McCloud’s (1993) slightly wordier definition of “[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (9). While these definitions hint at the kind of structure comics might take, they have been critiqued as “[doing] little to help us understand the world of comics in all its complexity” (Kuttner et al.

2021, 197). In considering what comics might offer in a research practice, Kuttner et al. (2021) approach comics from a sociological standpoint, considering comics to be things that are read and recognized as comics through the use of “semiotic resources” (197) like speech bubbles and gutters between images. The sociological definition goes beyond the idea of sequential art to also consider how comics have emerged from a specific cultural context and so “carry cultural baggage with them” (Kuttner et al. 2021, 197). Examples of this ‘baggage’ are that comics are childish or are only fit to tell superhero stories (Kuttner et al. 2021; Pavlotski 2018). In considering comics-based research it is necessary to consider how comics might be received - both by academic and non-academic audiences.

Despite the varied definitions, there has been a general acknowledgement that the comics form - and graphic communication more generally - is a medium, not a genre (McCloud 1993, Hoover 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the open-ended definitions of this medium, there is no defined method or methodology to guide the use of comics in scholarly work. Comics-based research is simply, “research that integrates the comics form into one or more steps of the inquiry process” (Kuttner et al. 2021, 196). What this means in practice is unfolding continually but there are several potentials of comics-based research that may be particularly relevant to my work.

- Multimodality

The comics form may inherently be multimodal because of the way that images and text play together in this form and “‘interanimate’ each other” (Kuttner et al. 2021, 201). One of the particularly useful aspects of the comics form is the way that it allows for a layering of information, utilizing text and image in tandem (Kuttner et al. 2021). As I noted above, graphic narratives may use the multimodal potential of the comics form to confront the assumptions a viewer might bring to an image. While the interplay between text and image is one of the aspects of comics that particularly lends itself to research, the multimodality of

comics form goes beyond text and visuals to engage a kind of ‘embodied thinking’ (Flowers 2017, 22). Flowers (2017) identifies comics making as a way of “[unifying] the visual and textual with body-sensory perception” (29). The kind of engagement developed by drawing in this way, “affords opportunities for researchers to be more fully present in the ‘multimodal ensembles’ that individuals orchestrate in real-life interactions” (Kuttner et al. 2021, 201). As with many aspects of the drawing method, multimodality is not simply a structure or a format, it is a dynamic and relational process. To return to the potential of drawing to engage both the inner and outer worlds of a researcher (and perhaps their research communities as well) the embodied perception that is encouraged and developed in comic drawing shows how this method can simultaneously gather observations, internal responses, and descriptions.

- Subjectivity

The comics form is necessarily subjective, which may be both a liability and a source of possibility. Particularly when a researcher is creating comics about other people there are some ethical concerns about the potential for visual misrepresentation (Kuttner et al. 2021, 207). Rather than viewing this as a barrier, Kuttner et al. (2021) suggest that the subjective perspective developed and embedded in the comics form is an opportunity for critical, interdisciplinary dialogue. The subjectivity of the comics form also encourages a kind of self-reflection and analysis that can be embedded in the drawings (Kuttner et al. 2021). Kuttner et al. (2021) write, “The creator’s presence is felt in the very lines on the page, whether they come in a brush stroke, a digital vector, or a pen line” (205). As comic-style drawing relies on “amplification through simplification” (McCloud 1993, 30) the things that a drawer chooses to include or strip away indicates what matters to them. This dynamic has been suggested to be part of the authenticity of comics because the drawer is exposed and revealed by what they select and leave out of their drawings (Wadle 2012).

While the choices of inclusion/exclusion may indicate the presence of the drawer, they may also appear as a character in their comics (Kuttner et al. 2021) or may ‘inhabit’ their work in other ways (Flowers 2017). Flowers (2017) describes the way that she impersonates the figures she is representing, acting out motions or poses to figure out how to draw them. In this way she is tapping into embodied, multisensory experience of drawing which allows her to “experience a liveliness in [the] research that carries over into the finished comic” (Flowers 2017, 31). This approach echoes Ingold’s (2011) descriptions of drawing as a relational process of coming into being. Inhabiting the comics puts the creator into relationship with the lines themselves, as well as the physical context of the drawing and the subject (Flowers 2017, 32). This is the potential of the subjectivity of comic work - it emphasises the process of drawing, thinking, and experiencing *with* rather than *about*.

- Vulnerability

Following the subjective nature of comic drawing, and the entanglement of the creator within their drawings, comic drawing potentially creates an experience of vulnerability. Galman (2019) writes that “vulnerability is part-and-parcel of the artist’s life, and often the ethnographer’s” (n.p.). However, vulnerability is not inherently negative. In being vulnerable through drawing and embracing process work, there is an opportunity for connection. A common note raised in graphic research, including but not limited to comic drawing, is that drawing presents an opportunity to slow down, settle into a research context, and begin to build connections with people (Bonanno 2019; Flowers 2017; Kashanipour 2021; Kuttner et al. 2021). Hendrickson (2008, 121) notes that while writing is viewed as a private activity that turns people away for fear of intrusion, drawing invites dialogue. The act of drawing then is nearly as important for comics-based research as the drawings that are produced and the many possible forms they may take. As Kashanipour (2021) puts it, “drawing is not merely about a process but *is* the process itself, one of connecting with the environment” (86).

- Closure

Drawing as a means of connection is embedded in the fabric of the comics form. Perhaps one of the most compelling aspects of comics-as-inquiry for the work at hand is also one of the defining characteristics of the comic form: closure. Scott McCloud (1993) defines closure as the “phenomena of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). When viewing only a piece of something, the viewer can complete it based on their past experiences. This visual sensibility is not exclusive to comics, but the way that it occurs in the comic form creates a particular relationship or “contract” (McCloud 1993) between the person drawing, the comic, and the reader. McCloud (1993) describes comics as “a medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion” (65). The closure doesn’t happen without the reader, and so the comic form draws the reader into the incomplete world presented in the comic. The drawing remains process work and the reader/viewer is part of that process.

With the participation of the reader, there may emerge from the drawing “a continuous, unified, reality” (McCloud 1993). This reality is constructed continuously, and differently, contingent on who is collaborating/reading. In connection to ethnographic drawing, the idea of closure in comic drawing fits well with the kind of unfinished and dynamic potentials of drawing described by anthropologists who draw (Taussig 2011; Ingold 2011). The contract between the one drawing and the reader ensures that comics are continually in the making, the gaps in the narrative can always be filled in differently. I reiterate that the queer potentials of drawing can be found in this method’s comfort and familiarity with the incomplete and undefined and I extend this to include comic drawing. As I noted above, the space left between things, the gaps and the gutter, can be active places where realities can be confronted, challenged, and changed. I will take this idea up again in Chapter 3.

### **1.3.4 Digital Ethnography**

Ethnographic drawing of the sort I have explored here is often described in corporeal or ‘in real life’ (IRL) terms but there may be space for this method in digital ethnographies as well. Although digital ethnography gained new popularity in COVID-19 times, a foundation for this kind of ethnographic approach was already established (Barendregt 2021). Digital ethnography might refer to ethnographies that happen in digital space or on digital platforms (Kozinets 2006), but it might also refer to ethnographies that are mediated by digital technology in some way, engaging both online and offline communities (Grasseni et al. 2021).

Ethnographies mediated by the digital are often multi-sited because of the way they engage both digital and analog worlds (Barendregt 2021). Although the boundaries of a field site may be less clear in a digital ethnography, many aspects of traditional ethnography apply, including the emphasis on the experiences of the researcher as a significant aspect of data collection (Barendregt 2021, 170). However, digital ethnography offers the potential to approach research differently. Rather than viewing the field as a defined, constant space, it can be more productive to consider how the digital field emerges as a temporary assemblage, mediated by the ethnographer (Barendregt 2021).

As I have noted, digital ethnography does not always refer to studies that happen in digital space, but such studies have become more popular in the age of social media and web-based communities. Kozinets’ (2006) netnography is a method that considers the demands and practical requirements of doing ethnographic research online. An underlying assumption of this method is that some online spaces create and allow for the emergence of unique cultures which can be researched and analyzed through participant observation (Bowler 2010). However, not every online space allows for this kind of community, and online spaces are rarely experienced in isolation; digital users frequently engage networks that span

multiple platforms (Lugosi and Quinton 2018). Kozinets (2006) outlines several defining characteristics that are required for an online community to be suitable for the netnographic method. The community must be active (users frequently participating or contributing to it), heterogeneous (allowing for differing perspectives and kinds of content), interactive, and data-rich (Bowler 2010). Even when containing these characteristics, the kind of community that can form in digitally mediated space is not identical to offline communities. As Barendregt (2021) writes, “Life is not more, or less, but differently mediated by using the digital” (174). These communities are also often ephemeral and unstable in their boundaries, meaning that engaging with them requires constant adjustment.

The possibilities of netnography have been explored alongside the various ontological and epistemological turns that have challenged and changed ethnographic methodologies. Of note has been the consideration of a more-than-human netnography. Lugosi and Quinton (2018) use Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) to consider the nonhuman agency of various digital technologies. The relationships and interactions that emerge between technology users and algorithms, for example, can significantly impact netnographic inquiry because they refigure how digital communities operate (Lugosi and Quinton 2018). One substantial refiguration stems from the way that “technology has changed the temporal rhythms of living and thus perceptions of time” (Lugosi and Quinton 2018, 288). The way that time and space are experienced by users of digital technology in turn impact how researchers make sense of digital worlds. The challenges to time and space brought by technology present opportunities to rethink the norms and conventions of ethnography.

### **1.3.5 Queer Ethnography**

Digital ethnography presents an opportunity to rethink how field sites and research communities are approached, and queer ethnography might open this potential even farther for the work at hand. The ever-growing literature on queer ethnography suggests that this

approach is not simply encompassing of ethnographies conducted with queer communities. Queer ethnography also considers how ethnography can be ‘queered’ in methodology and subject (Dahl 2011, Rooke 2009), ethics and reflexive principles (Rooke 2009) and in the binary between method and theory (Weiss 2011). As noted above, ‘queering’ is often conceptualised as a challenge to normativity and a resistance to categorisation. Thus, as with any application of queer theory, the goal of queer ethnography is not to establish a new, guiding framework but rather is to suggest a set of dynamic possibilities that can be adapted and nurtured in future research.

- Authority in Queer Ethnography

Dahl (2011) outlines an approach to queer ethnography that seeks to challenge many of the norms of ethnography. One such norm is the idea of the authority of the objective researcher or the “voyeuristic fantasy of the anthropologist as empiricist” (Weiss 2011, 650). In working with individuals who share her identity, Dahl (2011) was challenged to consider the expertise of her research participants. Acknowledging collaborators as experts of their own experiences, as queer theorists themselves, can queer the work and be a productive avenue for inquiry.

Appreciating the role of emotions and “haptic human connection” (Rooke 2009) also challenges the idea of a distant, empirical observer. Rooke (2009) describes gathering ethnographic data as an “affective process [requiring] a sensory involvement that, in an attempt to convey and make some sense of embodied experience, takes emotions and feelings seriously” (151). Tapping into emotion and forming relationships in the field may create vulnerability, but that vulnerability contributes to a more honest ethnographic presence as the ethnographer becomes known to the community (Rooke 2009, 152).

A final way that queer ethnography can destabilize the authority of the researcher is by respecting and appreciating queer discourses already in place. Weiss (2011) notes that the

kind of discourse that exists in queer minority communities is often far richer and more complex than the academic discourse amongst queer theorists. The “conceptual simplicity” (Weiss 2011, 650) that results from theory and its tendency to categorize is often not representative of the messy dynamism of life on the ground. Approaching queer ethnography with an appreciation for the way that existing community discourses may take the lead in developing knowledge opens new possibilities for the ethnographic method.

- Queer Self and Community

Another common characteristic of anthropological work that may be challenged by queer ethnography is the emic/etic binary or the insider/outsider divide. As Dahl’s (2011) work shows, a researcher’s status is not always straight-forward. They may be an insider in some circumstances, but an outsider in others or this status may shift and change as the research develops. Rooke (2009) suggests that “the ethnographic self is as contingent, plural, and shifting as that of many of the informants we are concerned with” (157) and that this fluid, shifting status requires a kind of navigating, of “journeying without a map” (Rooke 2009, 157). Rooke (2009, 157) calls for an embracing of queer ethnographic experiences which challenge and destabilize the self and the place of research.

Queering perceptions of both self and the research community in this approach to ethnography may also challenge the boundaries and borders of a project. As Dahl (2011) notes, the sense of community that she developed in pursuing her ethnography did not ‘end’ when she completed her fieldwork. That community offered, and in some ways required, a kind of engagement that endured. In this way, queer ethnography may also be thought of as process work because it doesn’t end with a complete product and in some cases may not end at all. When joined with digital ethnography, the uncertain boundaries of queer ethnography may speak to the continually forming digital places and communities a digital ethnographer

engages with. This point of overlap is central to my approach to ethnography which I outline in Chapter 3.

#### **1.4 Public Anthropology and Anthropological Advocacy**

Public anthropology is not a defined or cohesive framework, but it does provide an opening to explore topics related to “issues of social significance” (Benton and Bonilla 2017, 154) - which trans and nonbinary experiences undoubtedly are. The responsibility of anthropologists to comment on contemporary problems and debates is not always clear, but as Scheper-Hughes (2009) asks, “[i]f anthropology cannot be put to service as a tool for human liberation why are we bothering with it at all?” (3).

One of the challenges for public anthropology in the digital age is that even as digital platforms allow anthropologists to reach broader publics, digital forms of communication create potential barriers. How public anthropologists should respond to the idea of going viral or gaining digital popularity and influence has not been widely discussed although it is noted that “we shouldn’t confuse virility with relevance” (Benton and Bonilla 2017, 155). Another challenge with public anthropology is the speed with which communication happens outside of academia. In attempting to understand the context of an issue, anthropologists might wait too long to comment, finding that when they do, “the moment has passed into history” (Scheper-Hughes 2009, 2). This delay also speaks to the question of relevance in digital space. The long form content that typically results from an ethnography may simply be too slow to attain any kind of reach online. Public anthropology may provide a solution for this - not only does public anthropology advocate for turning anthropological methods towards socially significant issues, but it also encourages the reverse effect. Non-academic issues and dialogues can bring a challenge to anthropology as a discipline and encourage change (Scheper-Hughes 2009, 3).

In responding to the need for a different kind of communication in public anthropology, this approach may be an opportunity to refigure the authority of the researcher. Whether by sharing authority and credit with other communicative forms such as journalism (Scheper-Hughes 2009) or revealing vulnerability in communicating unfinished work and ‘thinking out loud’ (Benton and Bonilla 2017) public anthropology may be a practice of thinking alongside research communities and recognizing the expertise of those who may not be counted as authorities in academic circles. In challenging authority and norms of academic communication, public anthropology lends itself to queer work.

### **1.5 Conclusion to Literature Review**

The sources and approaches I have considered here provide an entry point to thinking about nonbinary communities in the digital place of TikTok through the potentials of queer, graphic anthropology and digital ethnography. I have explored how digital ethnography and queer ethnography both present a challenge to typical structures of community and authority in ethnographic research. I have also explored the potential for advocacy in nonbinary stories, graphic communication, and public anthropology.

To close this chapter, I suggest that the unfinished, ‘sketchy’ (Taussig 2011) qualities of ethnographic drawing and the multimodal potentials of comic drawing are particularly suited for exploring queer projects such as the one at hand because they do not impose or require a complete, defined form. The methods of drawing-as-gathering and digital ethnography on TikTok which I have employed in this work and will describe in the next chapter are grounded in the ideals of process work and of getting comfortable in unfinished, liminal spaces that are continuously coming into being.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

In the previous chapter I reviewed some of the significant literature on ethnographic drawing, comics-based research, digital ethnography, queer ethnography, and public anthropology.

Through my engagement with academic literature and non-academic graphic literature, I have suggested that drawing carries the potential to act as both queer inquiry and queer communication. In this chapter I overview the development of my own drawing methodology and approach to digital ethnography, taking up the lessons of the previous chapter. I also overview the methodological foundation for my interactive documentary.

### **2.1 TikTok as Digital Field Site**

The TikTok algorithm is designed to learn individual scrolling patterns and create a feed that will show that individual the content they like. TikTok as a platform reveals a specific ‘field site’ to each user - therefore, even the ‘place’ where my data collection occurred is crafted by my presence on the app. Another researcher exploring a different ‘side’ would likely have a very different experience. For me, TikTok revealed a field site characterized by trans/nonbinary, queer, women-loving-women (wlw), socialist/leftist, decolonial, cottagecore, environmentalist, and mental health support content. Sometimes each of these themes are presented by single creators who have rejected the idea of occupying a specific content niche. Training the algorithm to show me ‘relevant’ content was unavoidable. It automatically begins to learn every user’s scrolling habits, whether they interact with content by liking, commenting, and sharing or not. Watching a video to the end, or watching multiple times, alerts the algorithm that this is content you would like to see more of. Within four hours of scrolling the FYP on the account created specifically for this research (@enbyanthro), most of the content I was seeing was related to the themes noted above. It is possible that I could have avoided training the algorithm had I not created an account and scrolled anonymously as a ‘lurker’ but that type of engagement would not have been productive for this research. In

order to develop connections with nonbinary TikTok users, I had to be present and active on the app. The personalized, algorithm-generated research site that resulted from my ‘hanging out’ in this way was a necessary subjectivity.

## **2.2 Methods**

### **2.2.1 Questions**

This research has two main goals: to communicate nonbinary experiences to academic and non-academic audiences, and to explore a drawing methodology in queer, digital ethnography. Two questions shaped the main data collection component: (1) what does it mean to ‘look’ nonbinary and how are nonbinary people using TikTok to visually share narratives of identity? and (2) how can comic drawing be used to navigate and mediate the fast-paced content stream on social media? A third question emerged through my analysis and self-reflection: what does it mean to look at the world in a nonbinary way and how can the comic drawing method assist this practice?

### **2.2.2 Digital Ethnography and Multimodal Fieldnotes**

Beginning in September 2021, I conducted a digital ethnography primarily using the TikTok app. I began my ethnography by selecting five hashtags that aligned with the original scope of my proposed research: #nonbinary, #enby, #genderdysphoria, #gendereuphoria, and #tattootherapy. I scrolled through the top 100 videos in each category, initially recording basic information - related hashtags, caption, contents, audio, gender expression of the creator - about each video on a spreadsheet. I also created graphs to track major trends. However, upon reviewing this data it became obvious that this process was not capturing the truly significant aspects of these videos and required me to make too many assumptions about what I was seeing. The hashtag categories were continuously shifting and changing as new videos were added and so my careful tracking became obsolete fairly quickly. This initial approach to observation on the app clearly illustrated the ephemeral dynamics of digital

ethnography I noted in the literature review (Barendregt 2021). In place of this quantitative approach, I began to record my impressions and experiences of the videos I was watching through textual and graphic fieldnotes, more specifically through drawing comics. I found that comics were particularly useful as fieldnotes because of the way that the medium is set up for the interplay between image and text as I noted in the literature review (Kuttner et al. 2021). As I began to draw, I followed the direction of Ingold (2011) to follow the line and in doing so felt that I was better able to find my way through my noisy, unsettled field site. Drawing allowed me to navigate TikTok in such a way that I was immersed, but mindfully, resisting the mindless scroll.

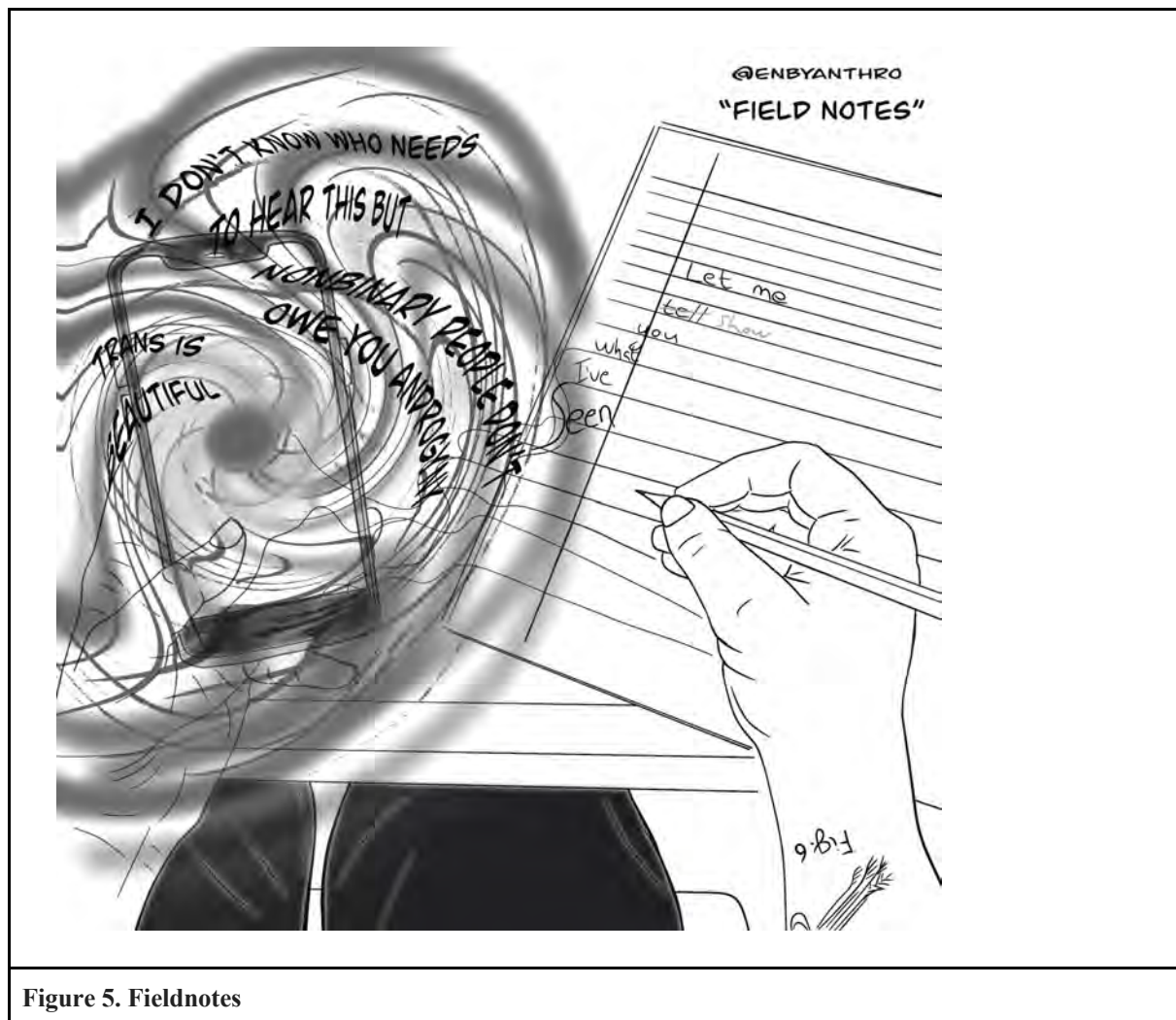


Figure 5. Fieldnotes

Throughout my ethnography, I scrolled the For You Page (FYP) every day for between one and five hours. Rather than trying to note every video I saw, I settled on a more organic approach that would allow me to engage with the content in a similar way to any other TikTok user. The observations I communicate here are translated through my own interference and engagement with the algorithm. Following a period of time on the app where I exclusively scrolled and observed, I began posting content. I also liked, commented, and shared videos that related to my 'side' of TikTok which continued to train the algorithm and allowed me to build community with other queer and nonbinary people. During this time, I was also making friends and building my mutuals list from which I would eventually recruit my collaborators. I maintained my established scrolling habits throughout this time, tracking the popular trends and Sounds used by my community and taking notes.

My fieldnotes are housed in several places which reflects the online/offline nature of this research. Many of my daily observations and reflections are handwritten and hand-drawn in an analog notebook. These notes are often the result of free-writes, stream-of-consciousness style work that allows me to avoid editing and shaping my experiences. I also keep digital notes in the Notes app that is shared between my iPhone, iPad, and MacBook. These digital notes are typically brief and immediate, recorded as I move through my offline life (although I also drafted several key concepts of this work in the Notes app while waiting at the laundromat - further suggestion of the overlaps between the digital and analog worlds). Other forms of digital notes I keep include the Procreate app where I produce and archive my comic drawings and the Photos app where I store the exported drawings alongside screenshots and saved videos collected during my ethnography. Although these digital notes are sorted into folders that are separate from the rest of my devices' media contents, the materials gathered and produced as a part of this research exist in and around the materials of my daily life.

My graphic field notes include drawings of popular TikTok Sounds, conversations I've had on the app, my own experiences as a nonbinary person, and my reflections on my research process. Although primarily oriented to video, TikTok is a multimodal platform. Audio clips (referred to on the app and here as Sounds) present an important point of connection between users. Trending Sounds will be used repeatedly, with users creating their own videos lip syncing or otherwise reacting to the audio. Throughout my field research on the TikTok app I found that Sounds and the videos they inspire were a significant way that nonbinary creators communicated shared experiences. Each Sound drawn out here was created by and for trans and nonbinary people. Considering how these Sounds shape the context of this work is an additional opportunity to center this work on nonbinary voices. On an app characterized by mimicry and repetition, these Sounds act as significant examples of the kinds of dialogue this work has emerged alongside. As I noted in my literature review, existing community discourses can fundamentally shape a queer approach to ethnography.

Over the course of my ethnography, I wrote several blog posts developing my initial thoughts and impressions about my methods and theoretical approach. This part of the website mostly functioned as a personal record of my project not dissimilar to a notebook, however it also became an opportunity to share my project in-process. As noted above in the literature review, open, conversational pieces of writing may invite dialogue which is one of the goals of public anthropology (Benton and Bonilla 2017). Making my research process publicly available potentially exposed me to critique and increased my sense of vulnerability as I worked through my ethnography. Rather than viewing this vulnerability as a barrier, I used it as a productive opportunity to shape the kind of content I would make and the kinds of interactions I would have with other users. Working through imposter syndrome as a first-time researcher and the challenges of graduate school became an opportunity to develop rapport with other TikTok users.

### **2.2.3 Recruitment**

While my observations and conversations that occurred in comment sections proved to be a significant source of information, I also worked with several direct collaborators who produced original content for this project. With one exception, collaborators were recruited for this project from the ‘mutuals’ list connected to my research account on TikTok, @enbyanthro. On social media, mutuals or friends are accounts who you follow and who follow you back. Throughout my recruitment process I adopted the approach of friendship-as-method (Edirisingha et al. 2017; Tillman-Healy 2003) building digital relationships with many of my collaborators that do not necessarily end with this research. This approach seeks to prevent my work from being extractive as I am not simply appearing to collect data and then disappearing. My collaborators are part of my digital community and I hope that we will continue to interact and support one another after this project.

Most of my collaborators are people I met while ‘hanging out’ on the app. In order to create a presence on the app and build rapport, I participated in trends, reviewed and explained some of my sources, and shared my own autoethnographic experiences as a nonbinary person on TikTok. My goal was not to establish myself as an expert on gender or on anthropology but was rather to show up as a learner and engage with my collaborators as the experts of their own experiences.

I recruited 5 collaborators on TikTok and 1 on Instagram.<sup>11</sup> These collaborators were all individuals who self-identified as nonbinary and regularly created and posted original content. I sought out smaller accounts (less than 10k followers on average) because I found that these creators were more receptive to individual conversations. As smaller creators on an app of millions, these individuals were also less likely to be centred and heard in other

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<sup>11</sup> My sixth collaborator was unable to contribute original videos within the timeframe of this project due to their health. Because of the timing of this issue I was unable to find, connect with, and recruit another collaborator. This experience is representative of the kind of challenges that might emerge during a digital ethnography.

conversations on the app. By working with smaller accounts and keeping my own account small (~1k followers), I sought to challenge the typical measure of value on social media which is based on numbers. I was more interested in the quality of our conversations and connections than in going viral. As I will explain further below, my viral videos were not necessarily productive for this project.

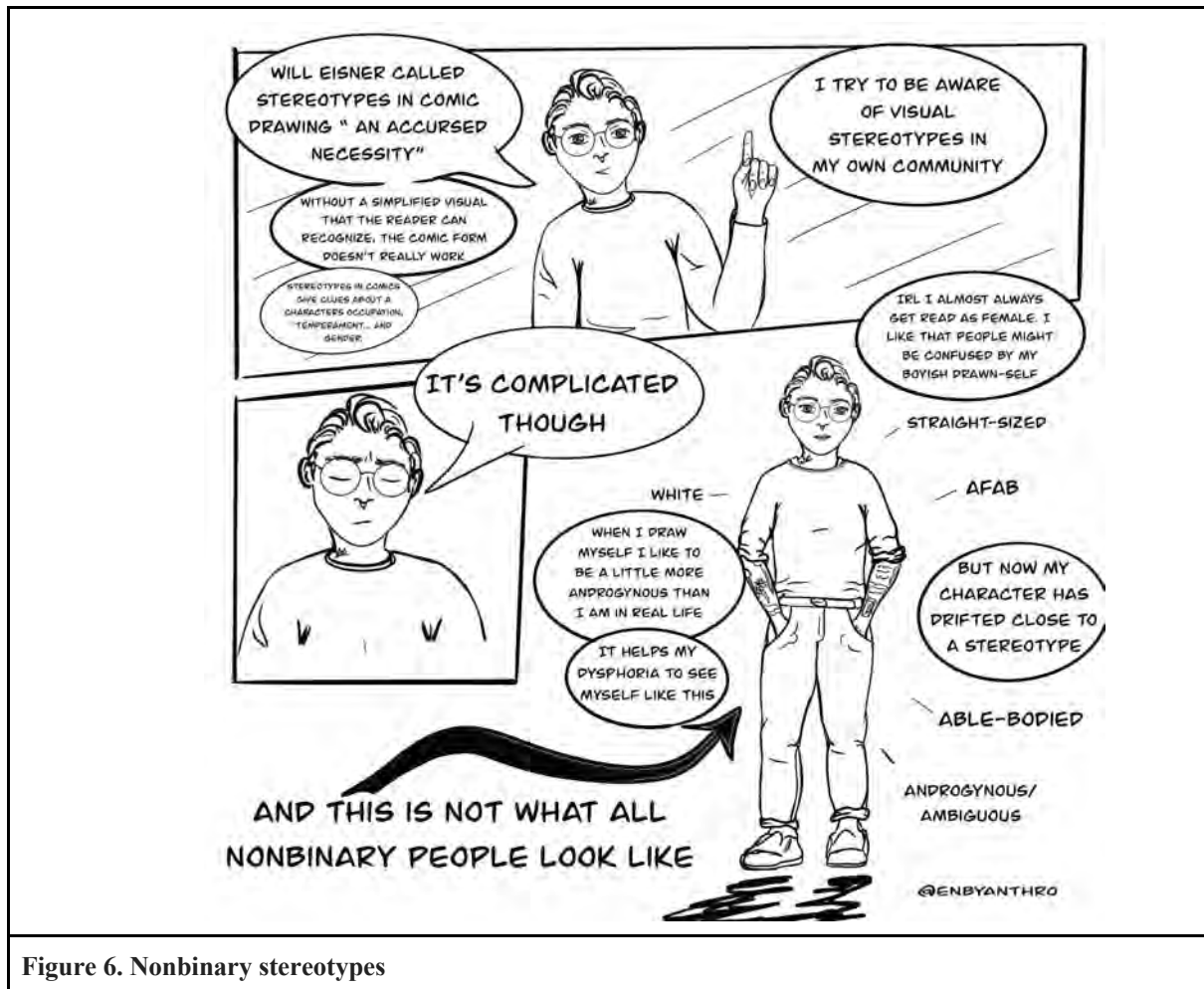


Figure 6. Nonbinary stereotypes

Throughout the recruitment process I remained aware of a common nonbinary stereotype on TikTok which is that nonbinary people are skinny, white, androgynous-presenting, and assigned female at birth (AFAB). This ‘woman-lite’ stereotype as it is sometimes called on TikTok erases the diversity of nonbinary lived experiences. Although I did not want my work to reinforce this stereotype, I did not seek out collaborators based on their assigned gender, race, or weight as I think this would be tokenizing and inappropriate. I

recruited based on the online friendships and connections I developed. The individuals drawn into this project each present their own unique experience of being nonbinary, engaging and disrupting the androgyny stereotype and replacing it with their personal stories.

### 2.2.4 Interviews

Each of my collaborators were asked to create 2-4 videos in response to my prompt videos. In my videos I asked several questions, drawn out in comic form or simply spoken to the camera.



Figure 7. The online/offline question

I directed my collaborators to use the stitch feature or the Q&A reply feature on TikTok to respond to my videos with their own. The stitch feature allows one user to respond to another, ‘stitching’ a few seconds of the original video as an intro for the response video. The Q&A feature allows creators to ask and answer questions in video form. Replying to a video using either feature links the two videos together so that viewers can navigate easily between the question and response. I include a combination of my original prompt videos, the collaborator response videos, and my drawn responses in the webcomic-style interactive documentary (i-doc) created around this project. Several collaborators chose to make more than four videos and one chose to create one longer video answering multiple questions. I did not restrict these choices, choosing to acknowledge the way that collaborative, queer research might resist or move beyond my original plans. The structure of the TikTok app and its available features may have placed limits on the kinds of videos my collaborators made, but I did not try to control how they used the app or formatted their videos either. As my collaborators completed and shared their videos publicly on their profiles, I drew comics gathering their responses and our interactions. After showing my drawings to my collaborators for review and revision, I posted the comics back onto my own TikTok and Instagram profiles. Posting these drawings and making videos about my process allowed me to connect further with my community.

The asynchronous interviews enacted through my video prompts and my collaborators’ responses presented a number of challenges and opportunities. Perhaps the most obvious challenge is that this kind of communication did not allow dialogue synchronously. I followed up with my collaborators in the comments or as a direct message, but some of the productive side conversations that might emerge from a face-to-face interview did not occur. Because of the way that technology mediated these conversations there could also be long stretches of time waiting for content to be made and posted which

could create difficulties related to the time constraints of this work. This challenge presented an opportunity to think about the complexities of social media communication, which is often disjointed, maintaining a different relationship to time than offline communication.

One of the opportunities of these asynchronous interviews was that they afforded my collaborators more control over their contribution. I did not ask my collaborators to disclose their filming process and so I don't know how many takes each video required, but the format allowed the opportunity to make the videos however they chose. Another benefit of this method was that it allowed my participants and I to work within our own time frames and avoid some scheduling issues. As we were not all located in the same place, this approach removed the potential obstacle of different time zones or general availability.

An unintended productive result of posting my interview questions publicly was that it allowed responses in the comment section from TikTokers who did not want to film themselves but did want to share their thoughts. Although these comment responses were often less extensive than the video responses from my collaborators, they often echoed or challenged the other narratives I had gathered. This layering of communication that could occur on and around my videos added a certain richness to the interview. The results were not dissimilar to an in-person group interview - not all participants participated to the same extent but in the end, they were all part of the gathering. Comment sections also allow a measure of anonymity which can be used strategically in both negative and positive ways - a point I develop further in Chapter 3.

### **2.2.5 Digital Drawing**

Many of the anthropologists who draw that I have noted here prefer an analog drawing process - a pencil or pen on paper. Causey (2017) rejects even the technology of a mechanical pencil, preferring old-fashioned graphite. Taussig (2011) approaches ethnographic drawing as a piece with handwritten ethnographic fieldnotes wherein "the drawings [...] fold organically

into the writing of the notebook” (21). He contrasts this organic melding with photography which “lies in another sphere altogether with a lot of technical junk between you and the world” (Taussig 2011, 21). Hendrickson (2019) describes the way that the tactile connection between ballpoint pen and notepad forms a kind of dance. She relies on ‘tactile vision’ to draw when she can’t physically see the page, experiencing drawing as an embodied practice that is attuned to and aware of the real-world materiality of her notebook and pen line (Hendrickson 2019, 199).

While I understand the value (and affection) that these drawers hold for their analog implements, in my digital research I embrace the ‘technical junk.’ As I have noted above, my fieldnotes do not all occupy the same space - whether they are analog or digital. And yet, I don’t feel that my notes are disconnected. My approach to digital drawing and notetaking - not in place of the analog but tangled up with it - forms a similar kind of connection to the one that exists between my tactile and digital worlds in daily life. In both situations, my digital devices (iPad and iPhone) mediate a kind of passage between worlds. My analog drawings and notes often feel farther removed from my research context than my digital work. The place or field site where I spend most of my time observing and hanging out is digital, and so it feels very natural that much of my notetaking is digital as well.

Digital drawing is an exercise of making that remains fluid and alive. I can easily add to and move the lines around the page, drawn along by my observations and reflections. Although the exported drawings such as the ones included in this document may appear to be static, a dynamic, multilayered, process version still lives in the Procreate app (which may be very well named). I am not only drawing *in* the digital, but I am also frequently drawing *for* the digital as many of my drawings are intended to be shared on social media. The square canvas I typically draw on is formatted for Instagram, my signature is also my social media handle (@enbyanthro), and I frequently include phrases or references to social media

dialogues. When representing my collaborators, I often draw them in ‘selfie view’ because that is how they appear on my screen - the camera angle and the frame are significant to how I know them. Each of these things act as indexes of a sort, leaving a residue. As Hendrickson’s (2008) waterlogged and salt-stained field notebook speaks to her Yucatan field context, the digital indexes I’ve noted mark my drawings as being created in this specific digital context of Instagram and TikTok.

### **2.2.6 Drawing/Gathering**

My main approach to drawing as a method is centered around the idea of gathering. Returning to some of the basic definitions of the word, to gather is to “bring together and take in from scattered places or sources” but gathering is also to “come together; assemble or accumulate” (Oxford English Dictionary). I consider both of these definitions as I conceptualize drawing/gathering as a relational process of holding on loosely to living narrative fragments. It is this process of gathering that allows me to mediate, “to give shape” (Grasseni et al. 2021, 16) to my ephemeral digital field site and community. I also return to the idea of thinking and drawing *with*. As I noted in the literature review, “Thinking *with* the drawn subject involves attentive thinking - becoming engaged mindfully with people and their lifeworld” (Kashanipour 2021, 85). Not only am I gathering narratives in drawings, but I am also joining a gathering of nonbinary lifeworlds online. Developing and employing the drawing/gathering methodology was integral to answering the second guiding question of this project - how can comic drawing be used to navigate and mediate the fast-paced content stream on social media? The drawings I share and discuss in the next chapter are the results of exploring this methodological question.

Drawing as gathering re-engages the four pillars of ethnographic drawing I outlined in the literature review: 1) Drawing to observe, 2) Drawing to slow down, 3) Drawing to navigate, and 4) Drawing to improvise.

Throughout my fieldwork my drawing/gathering process took several forms. I typically would make several quick sketches while I scrolled the FYP each day, using the drawings to find my way through the compelling aspects of videos and Sounds that caught my attention. The FYP itself is continuously populated with new videos, meaning that it is always becoming and is never still. Scrolling the feed can be linear - moving from one video to the next - but it is also possible to move between videos through links, tags, and comment replies. To observe and draw while exploring the feed requires improvisation and flexibility because the boundaries of a video/topic/story can continually change as new videos are uploaded. The sketches of my observations as I explored remained rough, acting as mental notes I could later draw up into more defined comics. While the initial drawing adopted the navigational/wayfaring potentials of the method I explored in the lit review (Ingold 2011), drawing these sketches into comic form was a process of refinement, analysis, (Kuttner et al. 2021) and slowing down (Kashanipour 2021). I would often watch videos several times over while drawing which literally slowed the stream of content on TikTok and allowed me to layer my observations iteratively. Drawing up comics also allowed me to bring in specific phrases and scripts from my digital field site, integrating text into the drawings and utilizing the multimodal potential of comics I identified in the literature review.

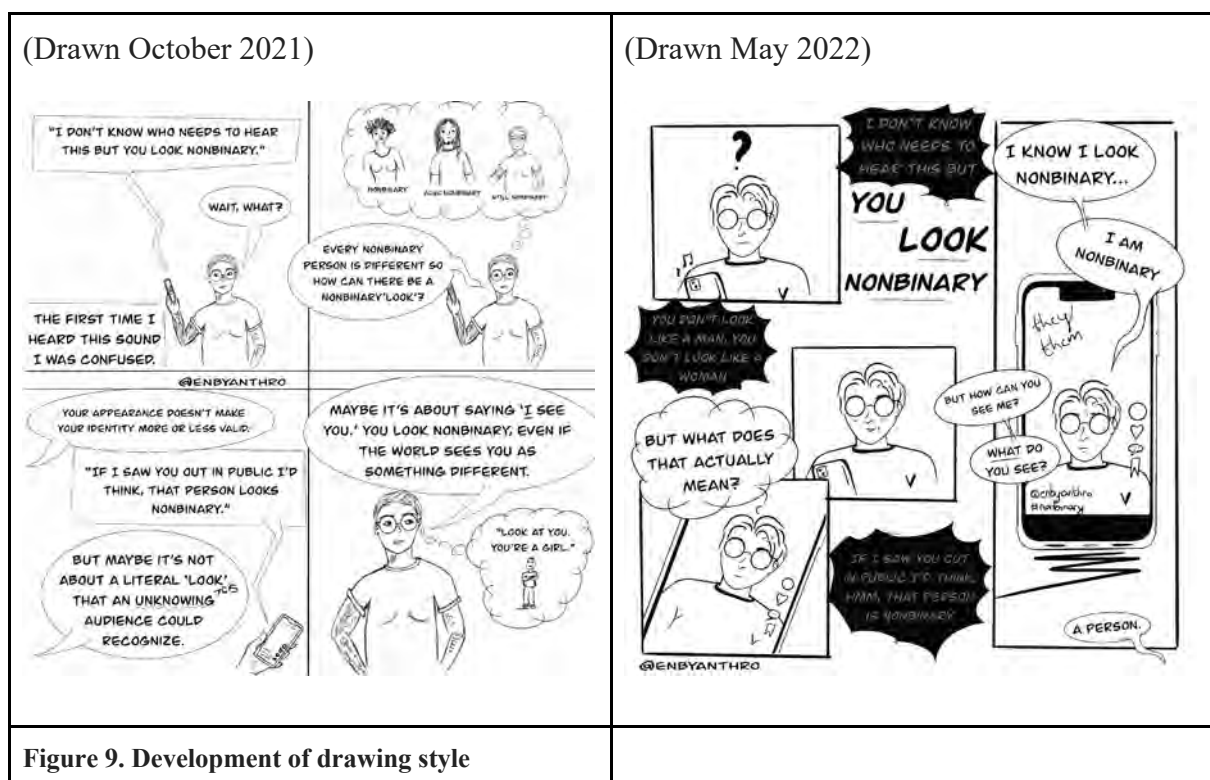
I followed a similar strategy in drawing/gathering narratives from my direct collaborators' videos as I did in my explorations of the feed. The initial sketches I made would indicate one or more central visuals around which the rest of the drawing would emerge. In drawing up the comic I would integrate the voices of my collaborators, using their words to form the text elements of the comics. I also layered in visuals from the social media archives/profiles of my collaborators as this content was typically how I got to know them and their lifeworlds.



**Figure 8. Digital/analog drawing process**

Finally, I employed what I think of as ‘attentive imagination’ to bring together narrative pieces that I can’t objectively see. For example, when my collaborators tell stories that contain visuals without sharing those visuals directly with me, I imagine how that piece of the narrative looks. While it was not important for this work to create a single, cohesive narrative that would connect each comic, I did consider how comics operate as communication, particularly on social media. In comparison to other strategies of queer drawing (Campe 2011), my method may give in to some conventional forms of representation. For example, while Campe (2011) has chosen to draw disembodied and sometimes unclear subjects in order to create queer interventions, my drawings contain recognizable characters (myself and my collaborators) in a more complete form. As my approach to drawing has dual purpose - to support my research and to act as representation - I chose to queer my drawings through the interplay between visuals and text, and the interplay between the drawings and the viewer, rather than through the omission of recognizable form.

The selection of drawings shared here are revealing of my process and continuous engagement with existing forms of graphic communication. My choices to employ strategies associated with comics form drawing such as gutters, borders, and speech bubbles were often made based on my own learning and development as a drawer/person who draws. I did not begin this work as an artist, but as an anthropologist. I was more interested in how drawing might lead me towards connection and understanding, than how I might produce art through drawing.



Eventually developing a more defined and ‘finished’ (though still dynamic) comic style was also part of my pursuit of connection. The polished drawings typically received more engagement when shared on social media than the rougher sketches. Although I maintain sketching as a significant part of my research process, drawing for the purpose of communicating with a broader audience has slightly different requirements. Throughout this project I continued to read and explore graphic communication in many forms including graphic novels, webcomics, and graphic animations. As my familiarity with this form

increased, I began to play with the structure of my drawings, using comic sensibilities to explore the narratives I was gathering. My process was not formulaic. Each drawing emerged organically based on what I could see/hear in the videos I was observing. The pace, tone, and content of the videos informed how I drew. As with any practice, my abilities changed over time - a development that can be tracked through the assemblage of drawings I created over the course of this research.

As I developed my approach to drawing for this project, I continuously revisited the ethics of representation. Kuttner et al. (2021) note that “the highly visual nature of comics, combined with the heavy hand that creators have in developing the visuals, opens up a wide space for issues of visual (mis)representation” (208). The sketchy and unfinished nature of drawing which I have previously identified as a strength of the method (Taussig 2011) also presents a liability. Kuttner et al. (2021) suggest that rather than striving for a singular guiding framework to oversee issues of representation in comic drawing, we should instead seek “a healthy culture of accountability and critical dialogue” (208). Following this directive, I don’t suggest that I have found the perfect solution for representing my research collaborators, but I took up several strategies to guide my drawing and to seek accountability from my community.

I did not draw people on TikTok without their consent. My direct collaborators consented to be drawn when they joined the project and I also sought consent from other TikTokers in comment sections. Throughout my project, I sent my drawings to my collaborators to review and asked them to share their perspectives on my work and to tell me if they’d like to see their drawn-self presented differently.<sup>12</sup> This was also an opportunity for them to review how their words appeared in the drawings as I incorporated quotes from their

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<sup>12</sup> My process of sharing the drawings and asking for feedback developed over the course of my project. I typically shared the drawings over Instagram or email as TikTok does not allow external media to be sent through direct messages.

videos as speech bubbles and text boxes. My relational approach to drawing emphasizes the idea that drawings are continually in the process of becoming and so the work can be corrected or redirected at any time. Receiving feedback from my collaborators and community is part of the context I used drawing to navigate. Because the interactive documentary incorporates the original videos created by my collaborators, there is also an opportunity to compare the drawings I created with the videos/experiences they are based on. Bringing the drawings and videos together reveals my process of selection and refinement as I draw/gather.

Another strategy I took up as I navigated the responsibility of representation is that I frequently used my own comic character as a focus to explore Sounds and trends on the app. However, drawing myself was not necessarily a neutral practice. As I noted in the previous section (see Figure 6) my character may fall into the androgynous nonbinary stereotype. Consistently drawing that character might contribute to misunderstandings of what nonbinary looks like, as might my video presence on the app. This is not an issue that was fully resolved in my work but is rather something I will continue to engage with and consider as I draw in the future as a nonbinary person.

The public-facing aspects of my research also created opportunities for accountability. As I noted in the previous section, I made videos asking questions for my collaborators to respond to. I also made several videos describing my project plans, sharing my experiences in grad school, and reviewing some of my sources. All of these videos were publicly available which aided in my recruitment process and also alerted my mutuals and followers to the fact that I was doing research on the app. Sharing the drawings I created back onto TikTok and Instagram also gave my mutuals and followers the opportunity to view and comment on my drawings. It is my goal that these drawings will continue to be active sights/sites that invite dialogue, even beyond the bounds of this project.

### **2.2.7 Interactive Documentary**

In order to share the results of my research back to my community I put together an interactive documentary (i-doc) from the videos and comics created throughout my ethnography. Interactive documentary refers to nonlinear, user driven documentary. An i-doc can be composed of multiple different kinds of media and does not adhere to a set form (De Musso 2021). The media components are loosely assembled in a way that requires active interference or engagement from the viewer in order to produce a narrative. The ensuing narrative is changeable and dynamic, presenting a different version depending on who is accessing it. I-doc's can be thought of as multilinear because there are endless possible combinations of stories that can emerge from the assemblage of media (De Musso 2021). The creation of an i-doc's iterative structure can also impact how research is conducted, challenging the conventional order of operations in data collection, analysis, and dissemination (De Musso 2021).

A challenge of maintaining an i-doc is that it typically must be hosted online which requires continuous management (De Musso 2021, 154). However, this challenge may actually be a productive point of inquiry when thinking about this kind of communication because it highlights how the i-doc has a different relationship to time than a typical documentary film (De Musso 2021). The possibility of obsolescence and the need for continuous engagement is necessary to maintain the possibility for improvisation as viewers navigate the content. For this project, the continuous engagement required to maintain the i-doc connects to the idea of friendship-as-method. If the i-doc is successful as a kind of community gathering, maintaining it will be part of my continued participation in my community.

The video footage in the i-doc created for and from this project was collected via mobile filmmaking - video shot on mobile devices (Schleser 2014; Berry 2017). Mobile filmmaking as a narrative strategy is particularly geared towards autobiographical

documentary because of the way it seamlessly integrates into everyday life (Schleser 2014). Although mobile autobiographical media such as selfies are highly subjective and individual, this media is designed to be shared on digital platforms including social media which ties the media into broader relationships (Schleser 2014). In this work, I not only considered how the mobile video produced by my collaborators connected to broader stories and shared experiences about being nonbinary on TikTok, I also considered how this approach to filmmaking created my digital field site. As I created content about my project, I was also collaborating in creating the place of TikTok, alongside the other users of the app, and perhaps the app itself. TikTok, as it is continuously formed by the creation and circulation of user videos, is very much a “world in the making” (Ingold 2011). Although I was frequently working alone in my offline setting, I was drawn deeply into a digital relational space that guided how I worked. Berry (2017) explores the idea of “Networked Co-presence” (310) to describe the way that the feeling of being seen and perceived online impacts individual behaviour. While individual choices of representation in mobile photography and video may communicate whatever a person chooses, “creative expressions are overlaid with social relations” (Berry 2017, 310). This dynamic of co-presence shaped many of my choices and experiences as I pursued this research.

The orientation of mobile media toward sharing requires individual mobile filmmakers to navigate “mobile media ecologies” in addition to learning new technology (Berry 2017, 308). Applying the concept of ecology - which refers to the surrounding environment that shapes and is shaped by those who live within it - further reveals the relational aspect of mobile filmmaking (Berry 2017, 309). Considering mobile filmmaking alongside ethnographic methods focuses less on the technology of the smartphone and its potential for filming and editing, and more on the “emergent socialities and visualities” that are mediated by this technology (Berry 2017, 309). Although tied to social media, these

emerging socialites are not exclusively digital as mobile filmmaking is coming to be associated with more mainstream offline communities (Berry 2017, 309). Berry (2017) suggests that the camera phone has much broader parameters than revealed solely by the digital, because the materiality of this technology continues to connect people even as they move around separately in physical space. The socialities created through mobile filmmaking then engage community in both digital and physical environments and the ‘mobile ecology’ which shapes these socialities is similarly bridged across the virtual and tangible.

### Chapter 3: Discussion

In the previous two chapters, I have introduced some of the important literature on ethnographic drawing and connected this methodological approach to queer anthropology and digital ethnography. I have also overviewed my own drawing method which hinges on the relational concept of gathering.

In this chapter, I present selections of the drawings I created throughout my digital ethnography and offer a narrative analysis of these drawings in relation to broader social stories about being nonbinary such as the androgyny stereotype and gender-neutral pronouns. I have organized the following discussion into three main themes, 1) Imagining Nonbinary, 2) Doing Nonbinary Online, and 3) Looking Nonbinary. These themes emerged as I sought to address the first guiding question of my work here (see section 2.2) which asks, “What does it mean to ‘look’ nonbinary and how are nonbinary people using TikTok to visually share narratives of identity?” I conclude this chapter with an analysis of the interactive documentary (i-doc) and the dissemination of research. The i-doc houses the original video data from my digital ethnography and is the significant public-facing aspect of this work, alongside my comic drawings.

In the following comics, I have gathered many narrative fragments about being and looking nonbinary on social media - narratives which suggest many queer possibilities ranging from specific, embodied experiences to more abstract ideas. Throughout my discussion, I consider the personal, individual narratives shared by the TikTokers who contributed to this work in relation to broader narratives about being nonbinary. I have turned to popular TikTok Sounds, hashtags, and trends, to identify some of these broader narratives but these stories are also suggested and supported by the works of other nonbinary scholars who I have previously introduced in my literature review (Smith et al. 2020; Young 2019) and with whom I will engage again here. To refer back to the relational idea of my drawing

method, I am gathering these existing narratives together with the stories shared by my direct collaborators and my own autoethnographic experiences as a nonbinary TikTok user. In this way, drawing/gathering is not only my method for data collection, but it also forms a significant part of my data analysis. In this, I am following the lead of Kuttner et al. (2021) who suggest that “the very act of creating comics can be a process of analysis. Sketching, drawing, redrawing, and inking are processes of refinement and choice” (199). My choices as I create comics from the videos shared by my collaborators are an opportunity to draw connections between these individual narratives and shared experiences.

Drawing in a queer, nonbinary way requires more than a nonbinary subject. As I noted in the literature review, queer drawing and drawing queerness are not formulaic processes. The visual sources I overviewed (see section 1.2) all deal with representing queer and nonbinary stories in different ways, demonstrating that there is no singular aesthetic or approach to drawing queerness. The literature on queer approaches to a drawing methodology (see section 1.3) reinforce the idea that drawing queerly is not a consistent or essentialized process. In order to draw queer stories, it is important to centre the understanding of queerness as a possibility but not an established form. The process of drawing, and the connections created when drawings are shared, are part of the meaning that my drawings contain. They are temporarily visible nonbinary visuals, dialogues, Sounds, and online friendships mediated and gathered through my drawing method.

### **3.1 Imagining Nonbinary**

One of the stories frequently repeated between nonbinary TikTokers is that “nonbinary people don’t owe you androgyny.” I heard and saw this refrain repeated many times throughout my digital ethnography on my own videos and others. The connection between androgyny and nonbinary identities has been explored by others (Barbee and Schrock 2019; Galupo, Cusack and Morris 2021; Smith et al. 2020; Young 2019). As I noted in the literature

review (see section 1.1) and in my recruitment process (see section 2.2) the idea of androgyny is weighted with complex dynamics of race, class, disability, and assigned gender (Young 2019). Iantaffi and Barker (2019) also bring up this issue, saying “the visible face of non-binary gender tends to be young, white, slim, masculine-of-centre or androgynous, educated middle class, and not disabled” (77). Those who don’t have the privilege associated with those traits might reject an androgynous identity (Iantaffi and Barker 2019). However, androgyny has also been connected to survival and quality of life for some nonbinary people (Galupo, Cusack, and Morris 2021) which makes the connection complicated. When TikTokers repeat the phrase, “nonbinary people don’t owe you androgyny,” what they are saying is that there is no one correct way to present gender (or un/gender) as a nonbinary person. Assuming a correct way to present gender, whether androgynously or not, simply reinforces gender as an imposed and unwanted frame. As LJ (they/them) has written in the essay, “Who Needs Gender?” “I already feel not man enough and not woman enough. I don’t need society telling me I’m also not non-binary enough” (Smith et al. 2020, 67).

Dialogues critiquing or complicating androgyny on TikTok significantly informed my comic drawing and the questions I asked of my collaborators in part because they seem incomplete. While the idea that nonbinary people do not owe their audience androgyny (or anything else) may be liberating, it does not really explore the complexities of nonbinary visuality when presented as a soundbite. In order to follow up with this dialogue, I asked my collaborators to consider, “When you hear the term ‘nonbinary’ what visuals come to mind?” I also asked, “When have you felt happiest or most content with your appearance as a nonbinary person?” The following comics explore some of the responses to these questions - drawing on my collaborators’ response videos and on replies in the comments of my videos. I also take up drawings I created around the gender envy trend which may be an opening to explore the idea of nonbinary gender in abstract or disembodied ways.

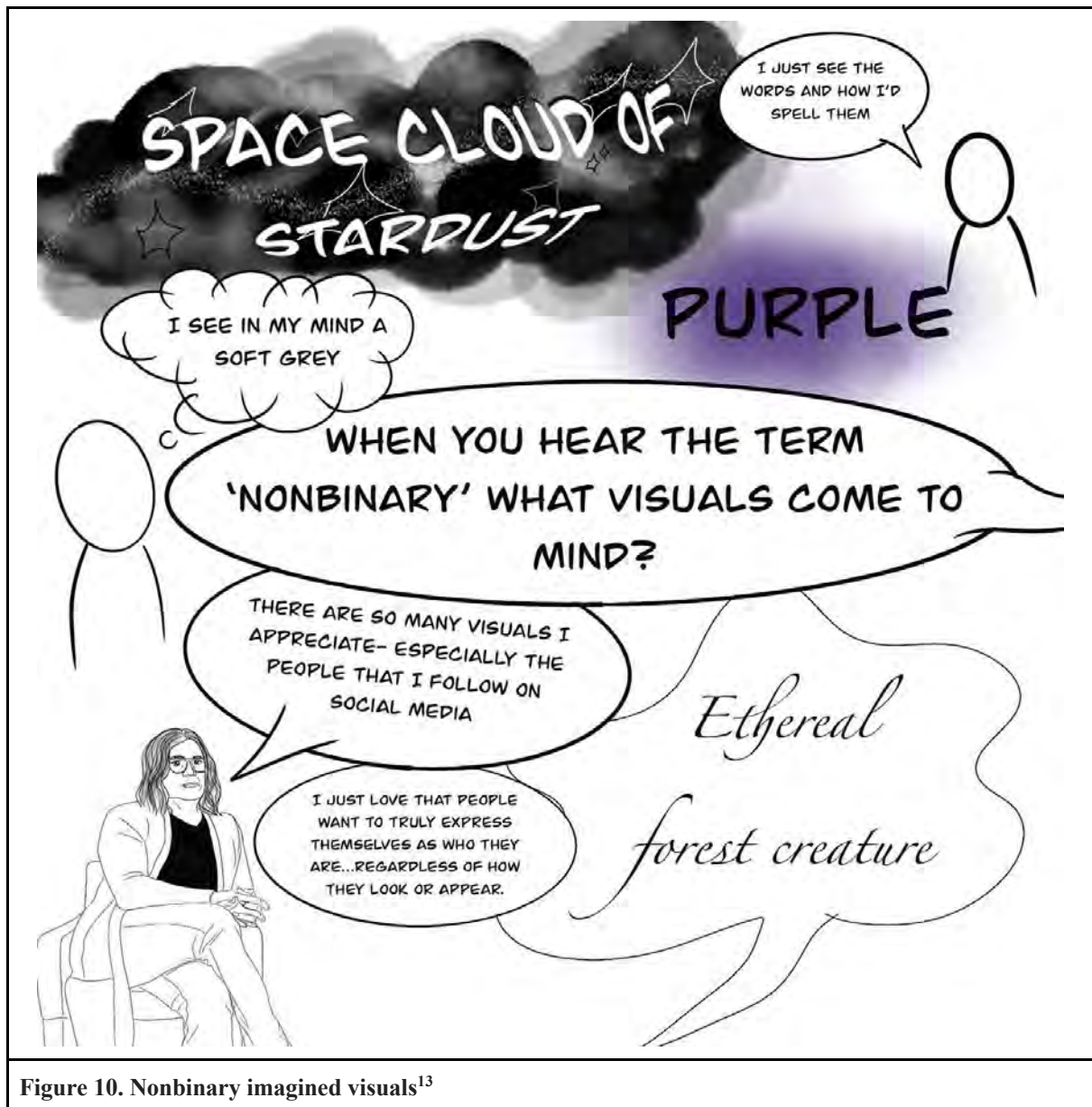
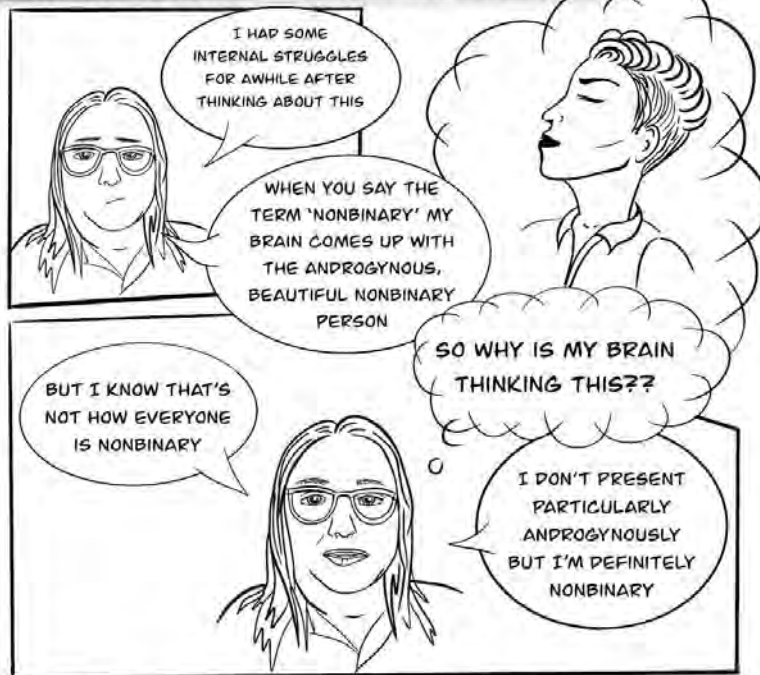


Figure 10. Nonbinary imagined visuals<sup>13</sup>

The prompt video I made asking about nonbinary visuals received significantly more engagement in the comments than my other prompts. I've drawn out many of these comments (see Figure 10) alongside the video responses from my direct collaborators. In general, the comment replies revealed simpler and more abstract responses (e.g., colours or shapes) while my direct collaborators offered somewhat more practical responses. In responding to this question, my collaborator @nickie\_frente64 (see Figure 10) thought of

<sup>13</sup> View this comic gathering in video form here <https://www.tiktok.com/@enbyanthro/video/7091377524713753862? t=8T8mKuhB2hx& r=1>.

RESPONDING TO THE QUESTION "WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU HEAR THE TERM 'NONBINARY'?"



THEN I REALIZED...

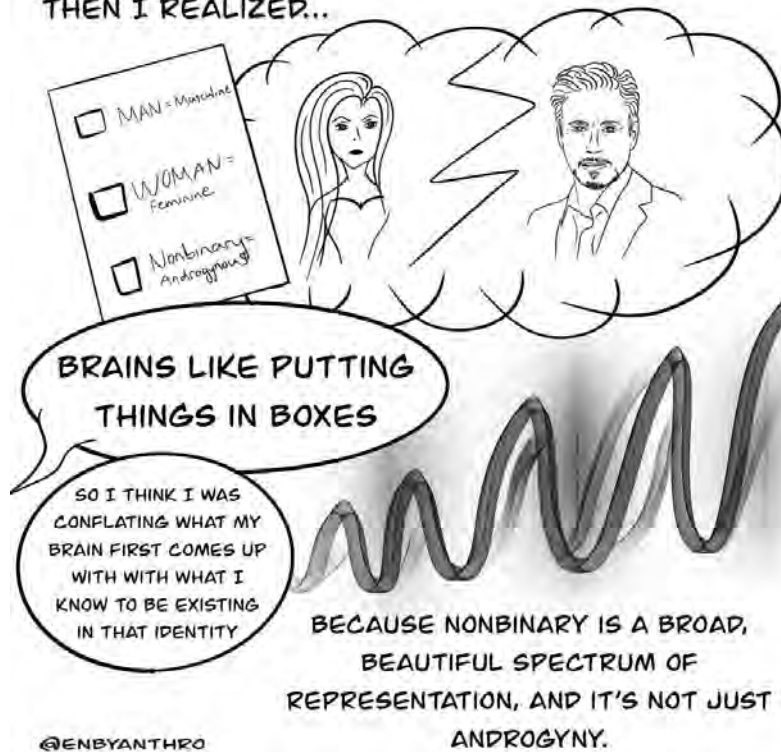


Figure 11. Brains like boxes (@thisonehannah94)

the representation they see from others on social media, representation which, in @nickie\_frente64's words, allows people to "truly express themselves as who they really are, regardless of how they look or appear." My collaborator @thisonehannah94 responded with a reflection on how the androgyny stereotype has been linked to the term nonbinary in their own mind (see Figure 11). They found this connection troubling, saying "When you say the term 'nonbinary' my brain comes up with the androgynous, beautiful nonbinary person. But I know that's not how everyone is nonbinary. I don't present particularly androgynously and I'm definitely nonbinary." In processing my question, they also considered how the terms 'man' and 'woman' called up visual stereotypes for them. Just as not all women sport flowing hair and lipstick, and not all men look like Robert Downey Jr., nonbinary people are not monolithic in their gender presentation.

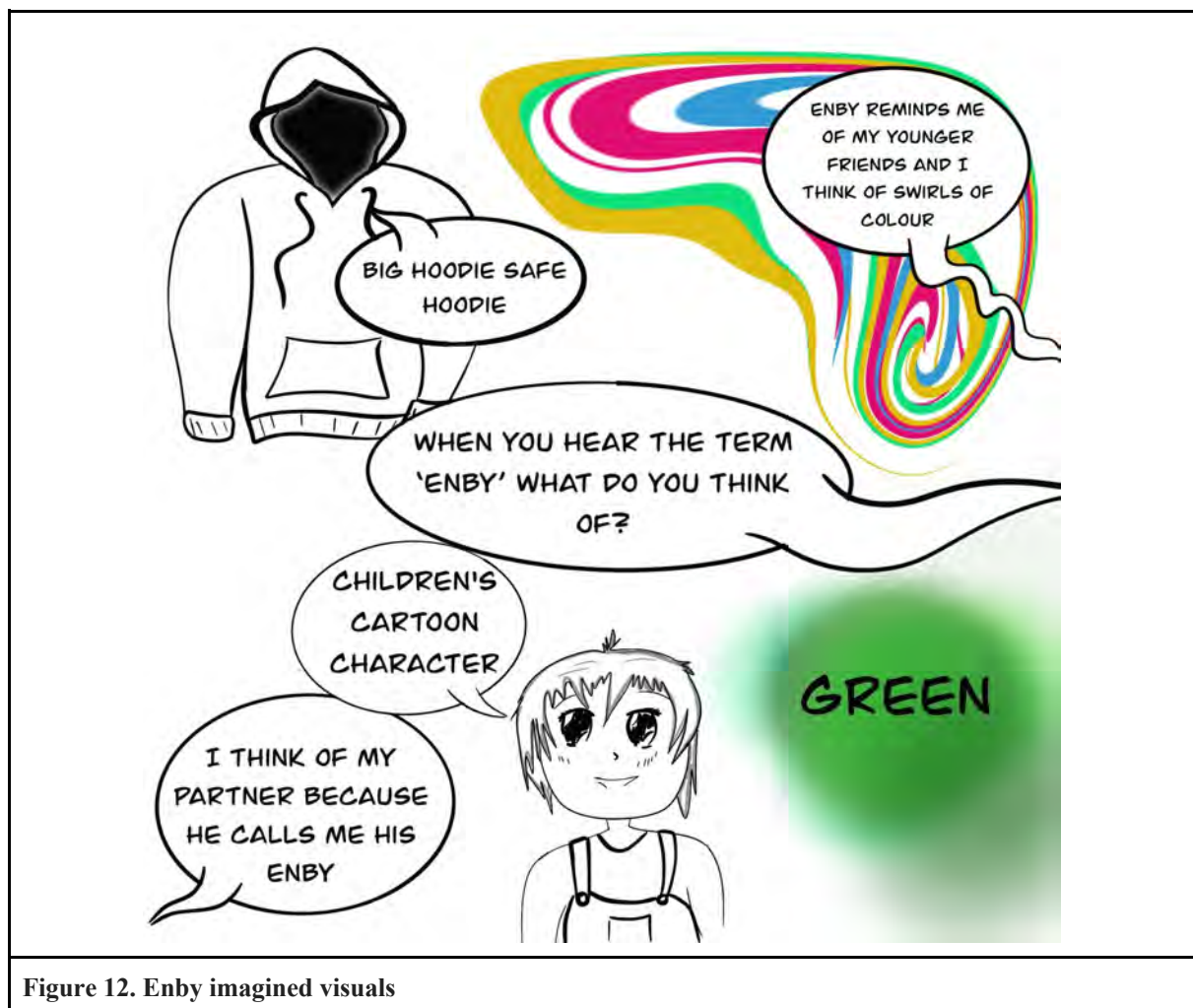


Figure 12. Enby imagined visuals

Drawing these responses also brought forward a difference in how the term ‘nonbinary’ was imagined in comparison to the term ‘enby.’ Enby, which is a phonetic shorthand for nonbinary, was put forward in 2013 by tumblr user *revolutionator* as an equivalent term to boy or girl (Urban Dictionary). I learned through my ethnography on TikTok that not all nonbinary people use or appreciate the term enby, preferring any number of alternatives including n.b., n-b, nby, nb or simply spelling out ‘nonbinary’ (see Figure 2). I was corrected by other TikTokers when I used the term enby interchangeably with nonbinary, and sometimes on the same video I was warned that spelling out ‘nonbinary’ might get my content flagged and suppressed by the algorithm. When I used the shorthand ‘nb,’ following the lead of one of my sources (Barker and Scheele 2019) I was informed by several commentors that ‘nb’ is already used in some circles to mean ‘non-black’ and so it is not appropriate for nonbinary people to use. These commentors recommended that I use ‘enby’ instead, while other commentors on the same video rejected the use of ‘enby.’ I reflected on the tension between these terms as I drew, considering how enby is often rejected on the grounds that it is childish or essentializes nonbinary as a third category. The responses I received about imagining enby in the comments of my prompt video seem to reflect this (see Figure 12). The drawings I’ve created around these terms are not simply a record of what was said to me, they also bring in my thought process in connection to broader TikTok dialogues.

The drawing below (see Figure 13) was drawn from @itsalexforsure’s response to my question, “when have you felt happiest or most yourself as a nonbinary person?” Their video response<sup>14</sup> was incredibly joyful, sharing the two main visual experiences that were most affirming to their nonbinary self: shaving their head, and wearing a chest binder for the first time. They shared these two moments by showing photographs on screen using TikTok’s greenscreen hand feature. I drew these photographs (Figure 13) gathering them together with

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<sup>14</sup> View the video here <https://nbvisualnarratives.ca/panel-1-imagining-nonbinary/>.

my collaborator's comments on androgyny. What particularly struck me about this response, in relation to the above discussion about androgyny, was the need to qualify or explain why androgyny had brought joy. It brings up a question for me: in widely declaring that androgyny is not owed, is androgyny being discouraged? This is not a question that was answered in my research, but it is something I have considered throughout my project.

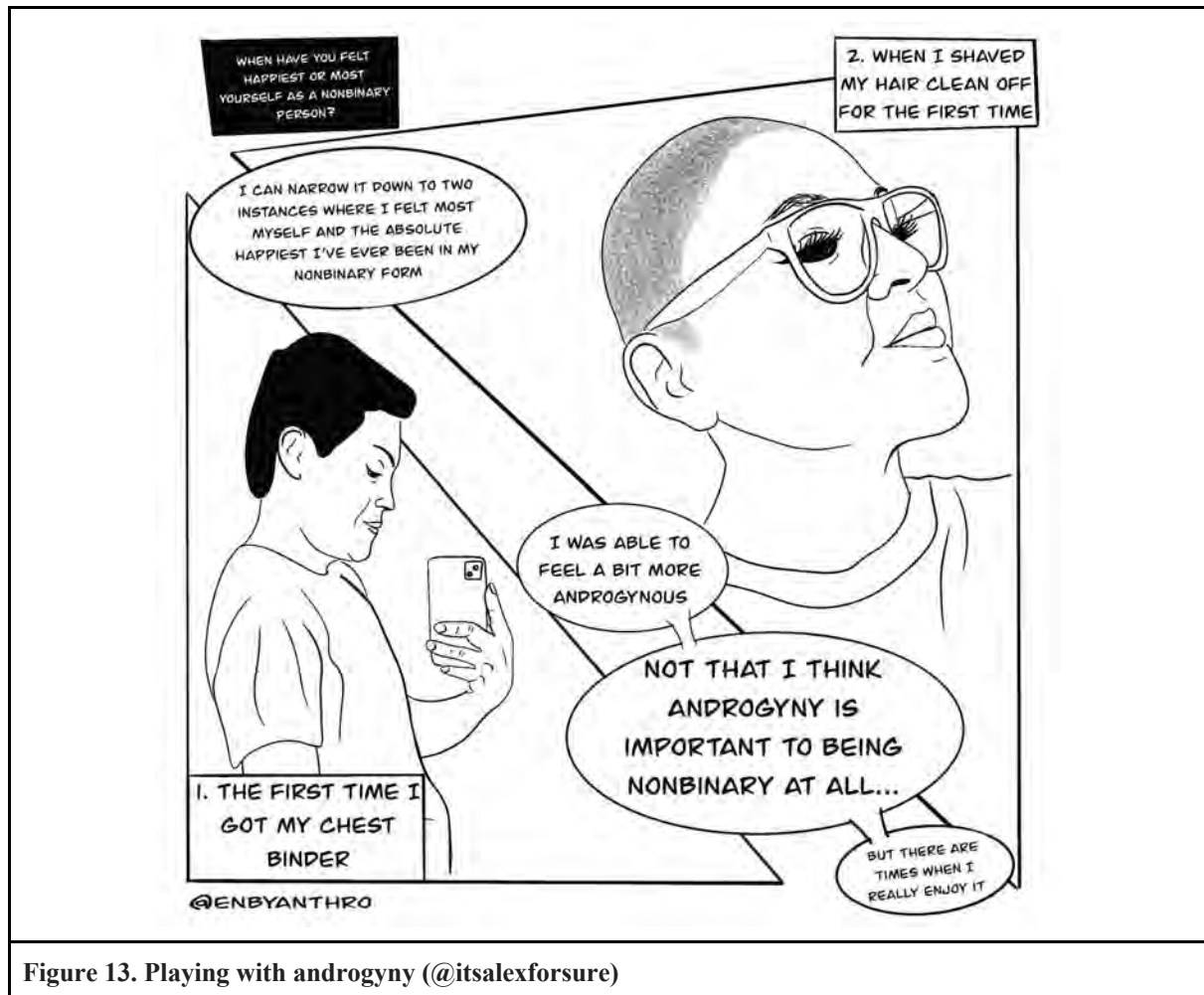


Figure 13. Playing with androgyny (@itsalexforsure)

I noted in the literature review that nonbinary gender presentation is not entirely apart from binary coded ideas of masculinity and femininity, but rather nonbinary people might use binary categories to accomplish their own kind of expression (Barbee and Schrock 2019; Darwin 2017). In the drawing below (see Figure 14), my collaborator @nickie\_frente64 shared that their most authentic self “[leans] toward the feminine side.” However, even

though manicures, eyelashes, and perfume might be feminine coded, in this case they are associated with nonbinary femininity.



Figure 14. The feminine side (@nickie\_frente64)

In the drawing below, my collaborator @samson.josephine shared a similar experience. They described a return to femininity after having top surgery.<sup>15</sup> Their gender affirming medical care “opened a door” and allowed them to re-engage with femininity in a nonbinary way. But despite their reconnection with femininity, some feminine things remained off limits. In the first version of the drawing below (Figure 15) I had drawn them

<sup>15</sup> Top surgery is the lay term for subcutaneous mastectomy (removal of breast tissue).

wearing lipstick which they later told me creates dysphoria for them. As I updated the drawing, I thought about the way that femininity and masculinity are often presented as discrete and separate packages. I had made an assumption that because @samson.josephine was talking about femininity and had mentioned makeup in their video, lipstick might be part of that package. When they reviewed the drawing, it was an opportunity for me to reconsider my own assumptions about femininity.



In the literature review I took up the idea from feminist literature of gender as something that is done and redone in daily life - not something that simply is (West and Zimmerman 1987; Darwin 2017). The drawings shared here explore how my collaborators do androgyny and femininity (masculinity was not raised by these individuals) as nonbinary

experiences. In their exploration of doing genderqueer, Darwin (2017) wrote, “[p]erhaps NBs do not simply “do gender” or “do transgender” so much as they challenge binary accountability within both scripts by “doing nonbinary gender” as a unique interactive process unto itself” (Darwin 2017, 15). The uniqueness of doing nonbinary gender does not necessarily mean that the visual strategies used are entirely different from binary gender, but rather the interaction with those strategies has shifted. I take up the idea of doing nonbinary again in the next section.



Figure 16. Gender envy trend

Drawing out the imagined nonbinary visuals above (see Figure 10) alerted me to the fact that my exploration of nonbinary visuality might not be limited to embodied human

experiences. My engagement with the gender envy trend which I have drawn a snapshot of above (see Figure 16) brought forward a different aspect of gender than I had previously considered. The idea of gender as something abstract or disembodied resonated with me. On a video I made expressing my appreciation for the queerness of having gender envy from abstract things<sup>16</sup> - rain on cobblestones, shelves of old books, and sunbeams through a window - I received many comments in support. Gender envy is usually defined as something trans people feel when they see someone whose gender presentation they would like to resemble. While this concept is often defined in embodied, human terms, the trend I am referencing here points to limitations in that definition. Other trans and nonbinary TikTokers commented their own abstracted sources of gender envy - some of which I have drawn out above. I also received comments in support of the trend itself, such as “I hadn’t come across this trend before, but love the concept! Beautiful imagery AND confuses the cis even more? Sign me up!” or “It’s such a unique and beautiful queer experience. One of my plants gives me gender envy.” The conversation about disembodied/abstract gender envy may be linked to the stereotype of androgyny or gender ambiguity in that the shared goal is to break away from normative, binary ideas of gender.

In the drawing below (Figure 17) I’ve gathered part of a response I received on my gender envy video from my collaborator @samson.josephine.<sup>17</sup> They offered the thought that nonbinary people might be drawn to abstract ideas of gender envy because we typically don’t have adequate representation in daily life. While embodied representation may still fall into binary or oppositional categories, the disembodied and abstract sources of gender envy may allow for things to be either/both/neither.

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<sup>16</sup> This video can be viewed here <https://www.tiktok.com/@enbyanthro/video/7095823692642454790? t=8T8nicnMQ69& r=1>.

<sup>17</sup> View the response here <https://nbvisualnarratives.ca/panel-2-boxes/>.



Figure 17. Gender envy in the abstract (@samson.josephine)

Playing with the gender envy trend pointed towards another nonbinary discourse - the desire to confuse and disrupt. Barbee and Schrock (2019) noted a similar desire in their work with nonbinary people. In speaking about their approach to gender expression, one participant stated simply “If they’re confused, that’s the point” (Barbee and Schrock 2019, 579), ‘they’ being the audience. Androgyny may be one tool for creating this confusion. Getty (2020) writes that “[a]ndrogynous usually means that, externally, you live in a very “Wait, is that a boy or a girl?” space and are probably very comfortable there” (79). Intentionally creating cis confusion, and relishing it when it comes, can be a way of distancing oneself still further from normativity in gender. This desire to confuse may be a celebration of transness but it may also be a defense mechanism wherein trans people are turning mockery they have

received back onto their cis audiences. Another Sound I used during my research states, “Wait, did your mom pick out your gender for you? That’s embarrassing, bro! I got my own, limited edition. That’s embarrassing” (zanny phantom, n.d.).<sup>18</sup> While I performed this trend in good fun and to break up a content creation dry spell, there may be more serious notes hidden in this Sound. One of my mutuals used this Sound in response to a comment that misgendered them and insisted that their assigned gender is what they ‘really are.’ This Sound is disrupting the idea that to be trans is something strange or mockable and is instead suggesting that what’s truly ‘embarrassing’ is to never question the gender your mom picked out for you, aka, your assigned gender at birth. While it is easy to dismiss the kind of communication that happens on TikTok as weird and random ‘Gen Z humour’ it would be an oversight to not consider what is being hidden amongst the joke. This kind of humour may be supportive of trans and nonbinary individuals, but it has also received backlash from those who feel that these jokes communicate ‘cisphobia.’ While I, and others (Whitaker 2017), see this response as a strategy to deflect and to avoid recognizing the harm of transphobia, it is a reminder that these trends may be humorous, but they are not neutral. By virtue of being about non-normative gender, jokes of this variety are embroiled in politicized and polarizing discourses.

### **3.2 Doing Nonbinary Online**

In questioning what it might mean to look nonbinary, and how the TikTok app may impact this idea, I frequently considered audience. As I noted in the literature review (see section 1.1), doing gender is not an entirely individual experience. As individuals learn and do gender, they are impacted by the expectations and accountabilities of their audience (West and Zimmerman 1987; Darwin 2017). In my work here, I also considered how audience

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<sup>18</sup> View the original Sound here <https://www.tiktok.com/@enbyanthro/video/7091766009639619845? t=8T8npQiew2Y& r=1>.

might differ between online and offline audience for nonbinary individuals. I asked my collaborators to consider the questions, “Does the audience you anticipate reaching on social media impact how you present yourself?” and “Do you present your nonbinary identity differently online or offline?” Unexpectedly, the question I noted above in relation to imagining nonbinary, “When have you felt happiest or most yourself as a nonbinary person?” was also used by one of my collaborators to consider audience (see Figure 22). In the gathering of drawings below, I’ve brought the responses from my direct collaborators alongside an autoethnographic experience of mine from my fieldwork. I also take up a Sound that exemplifies a kind queer dialogue on nonbinary TikTok.

### 3.2.1 Pronouns and Being Seen

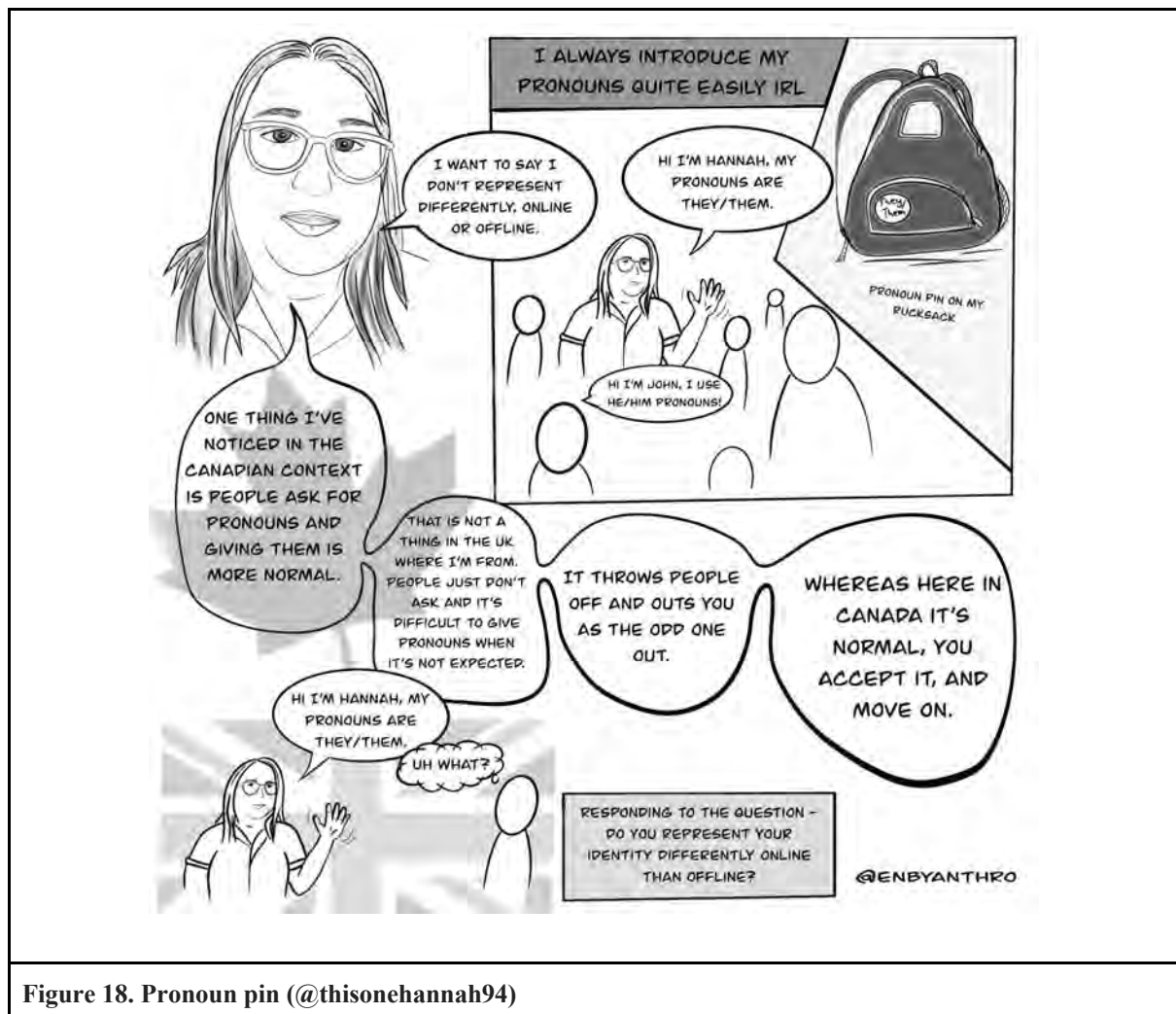


Figure 18. Pronoun pin (@thisonehannah94)

In the drawing above (see Figure 18), I have gathered part of a video made by my collaborator @thisonehannah94. In response to the question “Do you present your identity differently online than offline?” @thisonehannah94 considered how sharing pronouns contributes to how they present themselves. While they didn’t see a difference in how they present between online/offline environments, they did note that some offline environments are more accepting of pronouns than others. The association between communicating pronouns and being visible as nonbinary comes through the following three drawings and has also been a common element in the literature on nonbinary lives and experiences (Barker and Scheele 2019; Getty 2020; Smith et al. 2020).

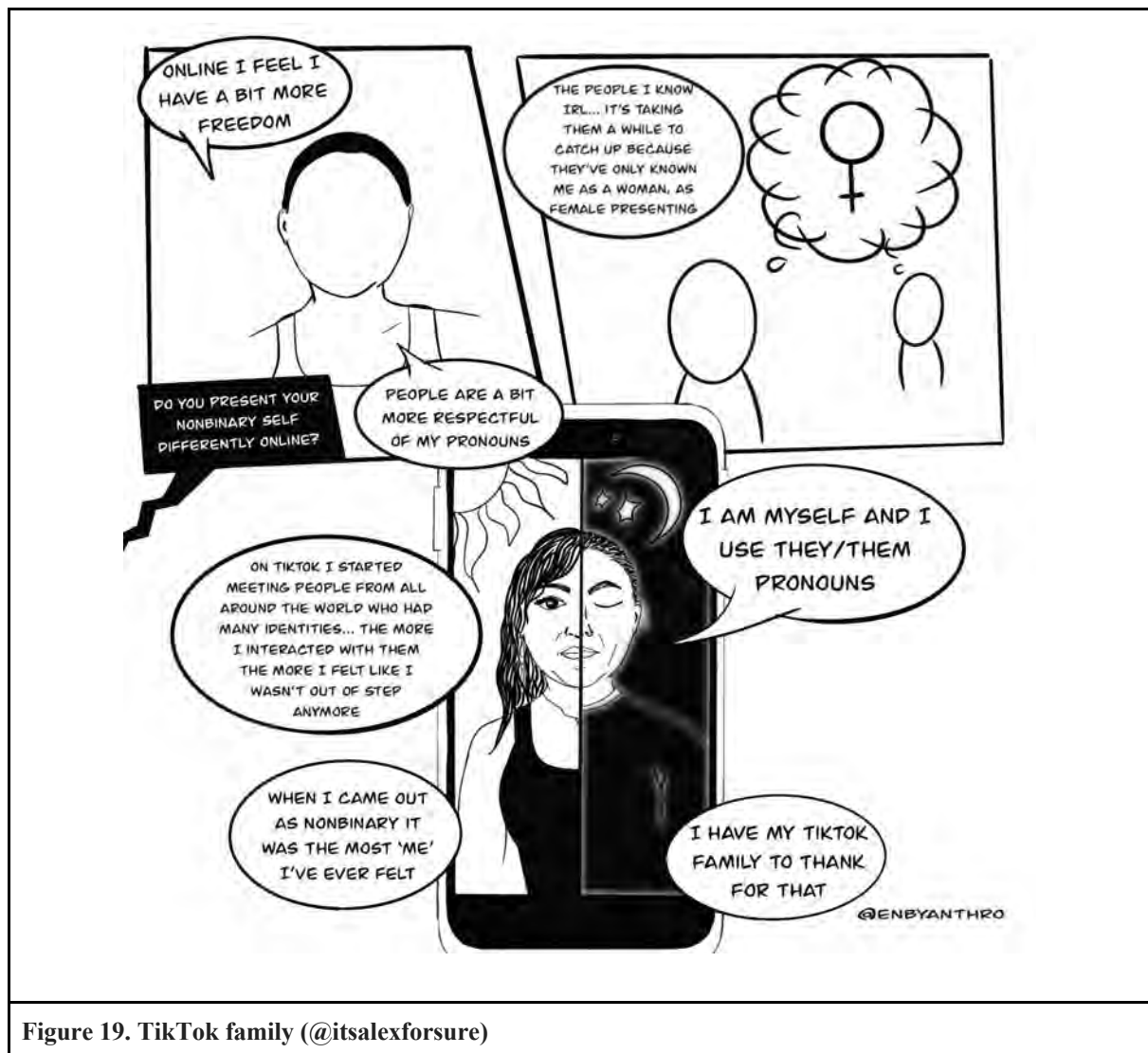


Figure 19. TikTok family (@itsalexfor sure)

Barker and Scheele (2019) consider pronouns and other kinds of inclusive language in English (e.g. titles and terms used to address groups) as a means of addressing the lack of nonbinary visibility which perpetuates binary assumptions (118). Getty's (2020) work takes up the importance of nonbinary pronouns in greater detail, connecting genderless pronouns to personal freedoms. They state that, "This is more than just pronouns and grammar lessons and arguments about bathrooms - this is about freedom of expression and the human right to choose for one's self how to identify one's self. And while *they* might only be for some, that freedom is for everyone" (Getty 2020, 35).



Two of my other collaborators also considered pronouns in relation to their audiences. @itsalexfor sure stated that the people they met in the online environment of TikTok were more respectful of their pronouns while the people they engaged with offline were often

caught up on their past as a female presenting person (see Figure 19 and Figure 20). My collaborator @nickie\_ferrante64 also spoke of pronouns in terms of respect, crediting the normalization of pronouns with making it safe for them to come out as nonbinary (see Figure 20).

As I noted in the literature review, pronouns have emerged as a significant (and sometimes contentious) aspect of increasing nonbinary visibility. On TikTok, #Pronouns had reached 1.6B views at the time of this writing. This number does not indicate how TikTokers are using the hashtag and a full review of these videos is outside the scope of my work here, but the popularity of this hashtag does suggest the significance of pronouns in TikTok dialogues. Particularly when contextualized with the experiences of my collaborators shared here, pronoun discourse on TikTok may become more complicated. While pronouns may be affirming of gender, the connection between pronouns and gender identity is not always clear cut. #pronounsdoequalgender had reached 243.3k views on TikTok at the time of this writing with multiple variations on this hashtag also reaching thousands of views. Similar to the androgyny script referenced in the previous section, “pronouns don’t equal gender” is a phrase that is frequently used as a quick response on the app. This response may be offered in support of people who use multiple sets of pronouns (e.g. they/she, he/they, she/he/they or any variations thereof), but it may also be used to refute assumptions that pronouns must ‘match’ gender (e.g. woman = she/her, man = he/him, nonbinary = they/them). I offer this context, not to refute the experiences of my collaborators, but to better understand how pronouns contribute to nonbinary visibility for English speakers without essentializing the connection between gender neutral pronouns and nonbinary identity. I return to the importance of pronouns to being seen on TikTok in section 3.3.

### 3.2.2 Digital Vulnerabilities and Co-Presence

Doing nonbinary gender on TikTok potentially leads to feelings of exposure and vulnerability. The following two drawings (see Figures 21 and 22) explore this dynamic in different ways. My collaborator @aerybeneth responded to the question, “When do you feel happiest or most yourself in your appearance as a nonbinary person?” by considering audience (or lack thereof) instead of a specific visual.<sup>19</sup> As I drew their response, I thought about how being unseen, or not wanting to be perceived, are also experiences of looking nonbinary. I take up the relational dynamics of looking again in section 3.3.

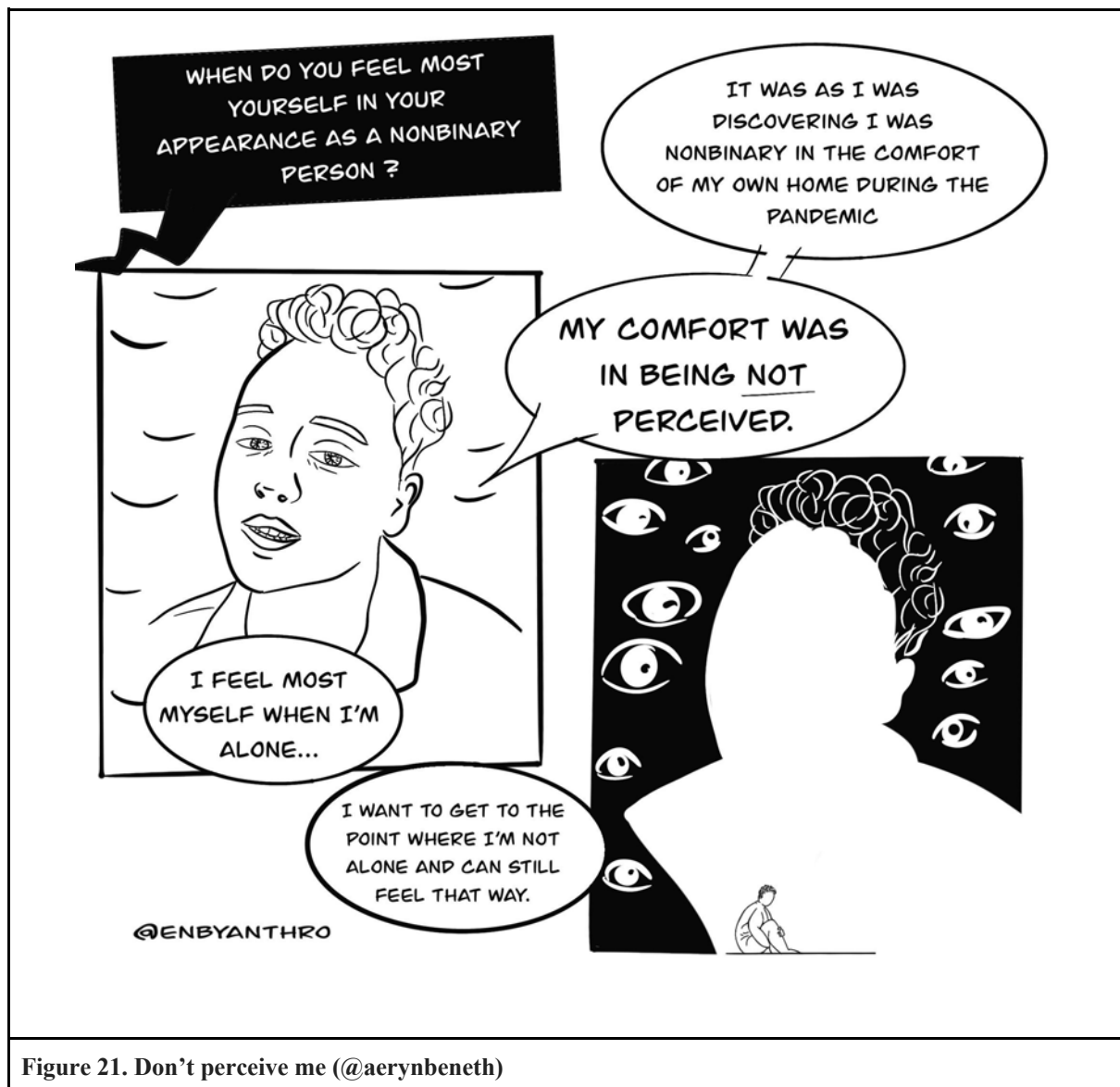


Figure 21. Don't perceive me (@aerybeneth)

<sup>19</sup> View the video here <https://nbvisualnarratives.ca/panel-6-how-do-i-look/>

The drawing above (Figure 21) communicates @aerybeneth's personal experience, but this experience has been echoed by many others I encountered throughout my research. Iavine (2021) writes that the COVID-19 pandemic created an opportunity for self-reflection and self-realization. Without the pressures of external perception, some people found their personal experiences of identity shifting because "in solitude, we don't see anyone — and no one sees us, either. We're forced to confront who we are when we're alone and thus who we are in public. Are we performing? Who are we performing for?" (Iavine 2021, n.p.). The effect of the pandemic on queer awakenings hasn't yet been explored extensively in academic work but it is an experience that is frequently shared on TikTok, prompting many 'before and after' trends where people show their radical shifts in appearance and identity which they credit to their time in isolation. As I explore in my digital work here, isolation due to the pandemic did not do away with audience altogether, but rather shifted where, when, and how audience are engaged.

Audience was a significant factor in how I created my own presence on the app. In the drawing below (Figure 22) I share one of my own experiences of vulnerability while playing with gender affirming makeup. In my case, when I was able to manage the mental and emotional drain of feeling exposed on TikTok, vulnerability sometimes helped me connect with my community. However, posting content related to my personal nonbinary identity could be exhausting because it forced me to anticipate rejection and ridicule from my potential audience. Even if that ridicule did not come, the anxiety surrounding the possibility of a negative reaction had a very real, detrimental effect.



Figure 22. Mascara moustache<sup>20</sup> (@enbyanthro)

<sup>20</sup> View the original video here

<https://www.tiktok.com/@enbyanthro/video/7051444199186582790? t=8T8o1pIQC3S& r=1>



As I noted in the literature review and in many of the drawings shared here, being seen or perceived is a complicated experience for nonbinary people, online and off. Online, the “messy media ecologies” (Berry 2017, 310) of social media platforms may play into this experience. Although not a new concept, some recent scholarship (Berry 2017; Pink et al. 2016) has further considered the ideas of digital co-presence and networked sociality to

understand feelings of being perceived online. Berry (2017) considers digital co-presence in terms of how behaviour is shaped by feelings of being seen and perceived in online spaces. The way that social media users consider their audiences reveals an innate understanding of co-presence (Berry 2017), although, as I have begun to explore in the comics shared here, not every TikToker considers their audience in the same way. My collaborator @thisonehannah94 shared the following experience:

I don't usually consider myself as having an audience, as such. My social media is usually my friends and family and like-minded people. The stories I tell are affected by how safe I feel being out in those environments. My Facebook, uhm, I have a lot more of my family members on there and they may be less understanding of parts of my identity, uhm, so I'll post different things on Facebook compared to Instagram or here (TikTok) where it's mostly friends and people that I have common interests with, who I know create a safer space to talk about my identity. It isn't that I hide myself in those other things, I just don't share as explicitly as I would otherwise.

Another collaborator @samson.josephine described how they feel freer to speak about their experiences in the comment sections of friends/mutuals videos than when they are in front of the camera (see Figure 23). They refer to the way that they selectively share stories as 'self-censorship' but clarify that this censoring typically impacts what they say and not how they visually appear.

Similar to this idea of self-censorship, @aerybeneth describes how they 'gatekeep access' to themselves by using privacy settings. They say,

So I've got some privacy options on social media that I do utilize. So for close friends on Instagram or mutuals on TikTok, uhm, my content will be more personal, more raw, more vulnerable. Uhm. more true to who I am. And for everything else it is some kind of curated, watered down, or covered up version of myself. And it's not

necessarily that I want to hide [...] It's a lot of anxiety around being vulnerable with other people. A lot of anxiety around being accepted one way or another [...] I am absolutely gatekeeping access to myself in order to preserve myself.

The three examples I have briefly explored here show different strategies for navigating experiences of being seen as nonbinary only. @thisonehannah94 adapts their content between platforms, @samson.josephine strategically uses comment sections, and @aerybeneth relies on the in-app privacy setting provided by TikTok and Instagram. Each of these strategies shows an awareness and need to regulate the feeling of being perceived online.

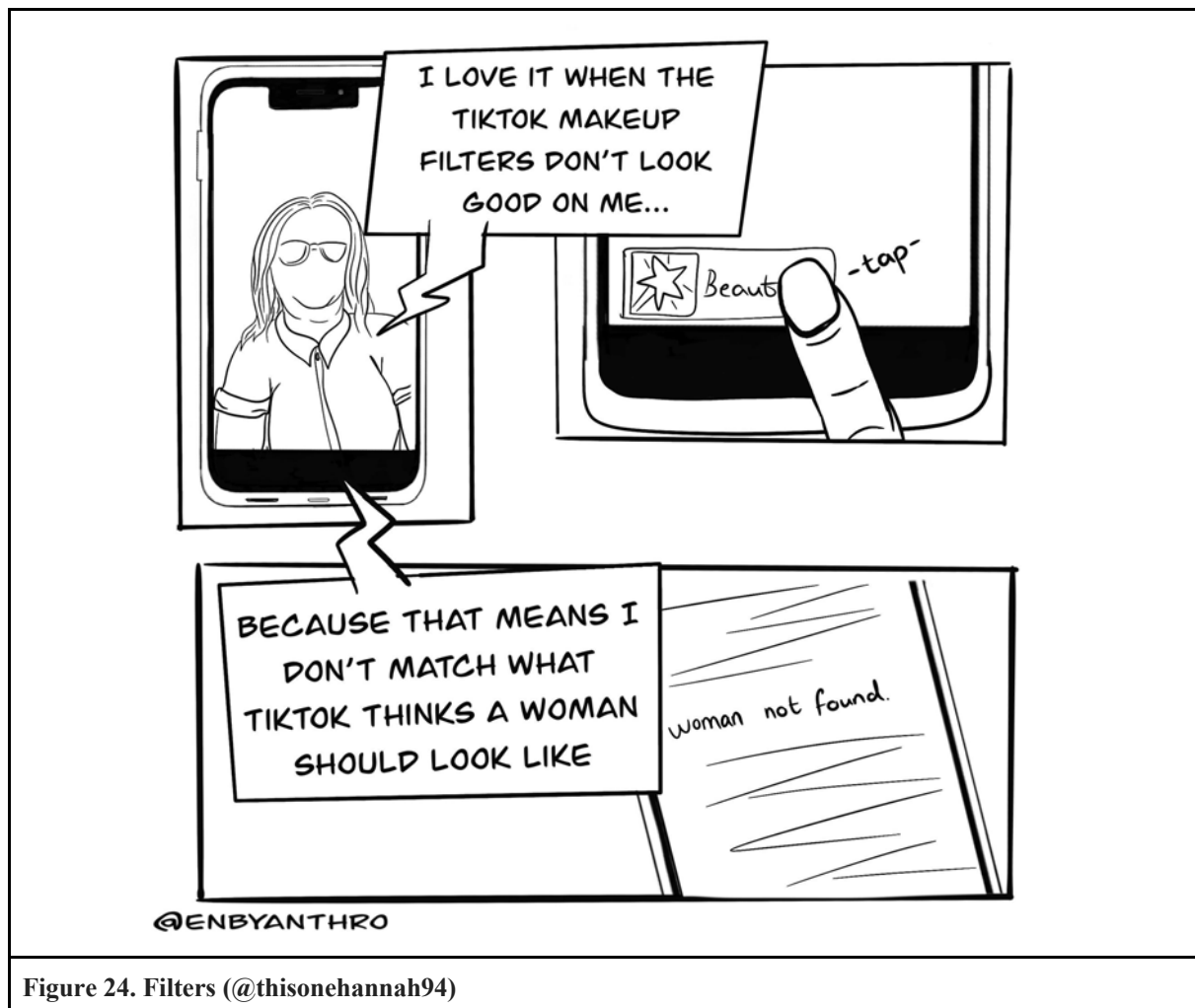


Figure 24. Filters (@thisonehannah94)

In the previous paragraphs and again below I consider co-presence as the dynamic of being seen/perceived by other humans in online spaces. However, the drawing above (see Figure 24) which is taken up from a video made by one of my collaborators in response to the question, “when do you feel happiest or most yourself as a nonbinary person?”, indicates another possibility in online perception: being seen by technology. @thisonehannah94 described this as a ‘joke answer’ but their experience suggests another actor in dynamics of co-presence which is the phone/camera/app/filter itself. I noted in the literature review (see section 1.3.4) that some approaches to digital ethnography create the space to consider more-than-human actors (Lugosi and Quinton 2018). Lugosi and Quinton (2018) considered how algorithms might act in digital communities but the impact of social media filters on gender affirmation and euphoria is just beginning to be considered (Brown 2022).

Experiences of co-presence, of being seen and perceived, are so commonplace on the app trends, tags, and communication ‘scripts’ (e.g. “if you look at my outfit you’re homophobic”) have emerged around them. At the time of this writing #dontperceiveme had reached 3.6 million views. While this tag is often used humorously, as I’ve noted above, humour on TikTok often carries complex meaning. In the nonbinary community I have been working with, the idea of being perceived is often linked to discourses about pronouns, dysphoria, and misgendering. There is a weariness and a frustration in this kind of content which sometimes comes through as defiance, centering the message of “if you can’t see me for who I am, don’t perceive me at all.”

Thinking about co-presence factored into how I’ve drawn some of my collaborations and field interactions. As my fieldwork was mediated by my digital devices, mainly my iPhone, I have drawn the tactile, offline component of this work in several comics. The structure and frame of the phone itself is one tactile aspect, and my scrolling hand is another. Pink et al. (2016) offers a beginning for thinking through ‘tactile digital ethnography’ that

considers the hand as the means to “access the partially hidden digital worlds in which they live a part of their lives” (2). Digital co-presence is often enabled by corporeal experiences (Pink et al. 2016). As a digital researcher, I consider how I use my hands to access the digital lifeworlds of other people, and to share my own digital lifeworld.

The feeling of connection that initially drew me to the TikTok app grew as I began to scroll regularly, building tactile habits alongside the digital communication and content. As Pink et al. (2016) write, “Putting one’s finger on the screen does not only open apps, but invokes feelings of connection with people, experiences, and activities” (19). Habitual motions of the hands show pathways that have previously been navigated through digital space by feeling (Pink et al. 2016). On several occasions during my fieldwork, I noted that the digital pathways and habitual motions my hands performed in engaging my digital devices would occasionally leak through to offline experiences. I recorded one memorable instance in my fieldnotes when I habitually tapped the screens of my digital devices with my fingertip to ‘wake them up’ and then tapped a paper notebook and was momentarily surprised when it didn’t also light up. I felt strangely disconnected and unsettled by the dormant nature of the page after being so immersed in the digital.

This experience cued me to think about the kinds of tactile habits I was developing through this work. The habitual motion I make with my thumb to scroll on TikTok - beginning at the bottom of the screen and sweeping upwards - is not simply the gesture required to make the FYP play, it is also what brings me into the shared digital place of this research. When I am observing my field site, I am typically also holding it in my hand. When I am watching and listening as my collaborators share their stories, I am holding them. This sense of closeness, facilitated by my tactile engagement with my device, is something I have explored in the drawing below.



Figure 25. Co-presence

### 3.2.3 Queer Discourses on TikTok

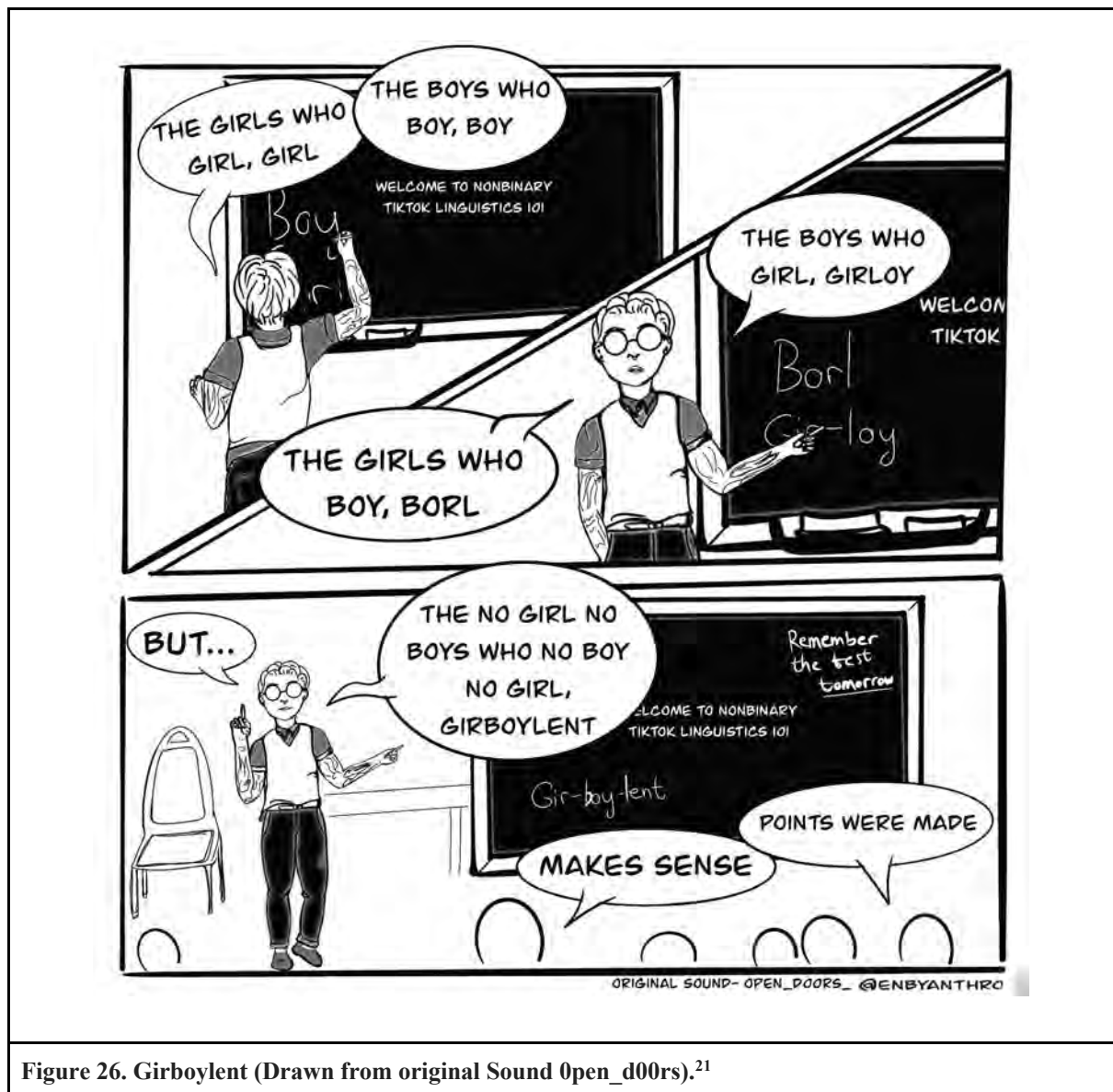


Figure 26. Girboy-lent (Drawn from original Sound 0pen\_d00rs).<sup>21</sup>

A significant factor in understanding how nonbinary gender is done on TikTok may be the soundscape of the app. The drawing above (see Figure 26) is a comic I created from a Sound that exemplifies the kinds of dialogues that emerge from the app. As I noted in my literature review, queer communities often engage in complex discourse that is not fully represented in academic theorizing - even queer theorizing (Weiss 2011). The nonbinary discourse that this

<sup>21</sup> View the original Sound here

<https://www.tiktok.com/@enbyanthro/video/7096529774742392070? t=8T8nVwyr4& r=1>

project has developed alongside is often laced with humour and sometimes absurdity, but it is firmly situated in the context of the app at this particular point in time - the years immediately following 2020. While the words, phrases, actions, visuals, trends, and tags, may seem nonsensical or foolish they are draped in meaning. These discourses are unhinged in the sense that many of the social rules upon which identities once hinged are being broken, and we are faced with the unending, productive challenges of sorting through what that means.

Some sides of TikTok are characterized by an embracing of the chaotic and the confused, the liminal and made-up. If all the words and all the meanings are made up, if “gender is a social construct” as the refrain goes, if “nonbinary people don’t owe you androgyny” and raindrops against pavement can create gender envy, then is there any compelling reason why ‘the no girl no boys who no boy no girl, girboylent’ (original Sound - Open\_d00rs) should not be accepted as an explanation of nonbinary gender? From the responses on videos using this Sound - “points were made” and “finally someone said it” - it is clear that this nonsense rhyme is resonating. These responses are often humorous, playing into the ‘joke’ - but they may also be sincere. The ‘nonsense’ is illustrating the potential futility - or at the very least, difficulty - of expecting language to encompass gender experiences outside of the binary.

One of the challenges I have experienced in applying queer theory to unsettle normativity is that there comes a time when deconstruction compromises intelligibility. Some kind of structure has to remain in order to communicate, even if that means placing limits on the process of queering. However, as some TikTok discourse illustrates (see Figure 26), the standard for intelligibility is a moving target. In embracing nonsense, or perhaps actively refusing to make sense “to the cishets” as many of these videos declare, communication is queered. Attempts to interpret exact meanings or definitions fall short because this kind of communication requires a tacit agreement to accept ludicrous statements as they are and to

not take them apart. Another common phrase on the app that is often brought into these dialogues simply states, “those that get it, get it, and those that don’t, don’t.” These dialogues, and the drawings I’ve used to gather them show a comfort and familiarity with incomplete things - fulfilling one of the main potentials of ethnographic drawing which is to observe alongside the world coming-into-being.

### 3.3 Looking Nonbinary



Figure 27. You Look Nonbinary (Drawn out from “this audio is not for cis people” @parker).

The title for the i-doc project - “You Look Nonbinary” - was inspired by a TikTok sound that was popular among nonbinary creators (although not trending on the app as a whole) in the months leading up to my fieldwork. I drew part of that Sound in the comic above (see Figure 27) as one of my first graphic fieldnotes. The full sound states,

I don't know who needs to hear this but you look nonbinary. You look nonbinary. You don't look like a man, you don't look like a woman. If I saw you in public I would look at you and go, mmm, that person is nonbinary. I love you. ("this audio is not for cis people" @parker).

This Sound had been used in 735 videos at the time of this writing, almost entirely by nonbinary TikTokers, showing off their nonbinary 'looks' and offering words of support for their communities. The associated #youlooknonbinary had reached 31.8k views. However, I saw little discourse or analysis about what this Sound is saying if taken literally. This surprised me because it sets up an obvious tension when approached in a literal way. The tension is this: if there is no one way to present as nonbinary (which most nonbinary TikTokers seem to agree on) how can we recognize each other as nonbinary? How can you see someone in public and think that they look nonbinary? As I have identified in the previous sections, the visuals associated with being nonbinary may not all be embodied or human - setting up further challenges for looking/seeing nonbinary. This productive tension has rested at the heart of my research from the beginning in part because, as a nonbinary person, I find this Sound validating. I understand what the original creator is saying on an emotional level, even as I recognize the potential contradictions on an intellectual level.

In considering the possible meanings layered into this Sound I am struck by the multiple potential ways to 'look.' As Kashanipour (2021) writes, "To *look* and *to see* both refer to visual perception, but *to look at something* means to acknowledge it, while *to see* means not only to look but also to understand or recognize" (83, emphasis original). To look is also to present in a certain way, to create what will be seen and looked at. To 'look' nonbinary may be to see and acknowledge oneself, to create one's visuality, and to see and acknowledge others in a nonbinary way. As I have explored in some of the comics above, representing nonbinary visuals may mean decentering gender from representations (drawing

ungendered people) but it may also mean decentering human bodies and realities in favour of more disembodied and abstract thinking.

Based on my autoethnographic experiences I suggest that the idea of looking nonbinary - and seeing nonbinary - is not necessarily to see with more specificity or definition but is rather to become more comfortable with necessarily incomplete and unfinished sights. Gender presentation, the visual, gendered self, is always a narrative fragment that cannot be expected to stand in for both the outer world and the inner. To look nonbinary is a tacit agreement that emerges between the individual and the audience. It is the commitment of the viewer to see what is being offered and resist the urge to sort that visual into binary categories or narratives. This commitment mirrors the one I asked of the viewers/readers of this paper.

### **3.3.1 Applying Comic Sensibilities to Looking Nonbinary**

Prior to this I have identified drawing as a mode of communication, and as a means of connecting into a research context following the lead of anthropologists such as Ingold (2011), Taussig (2011), Causey (2017), Hendrickson (2008, 2019) and Kashanipour (2021). I have explored how comic drawing can be used to play with disembodied and abstracted ideas of gender but in this section I also consider how comic drawing might also be useful in perceiving embodied expressions of gender. As I read, viewed, and drew throughout my digital ethnography, acquainting myself with comics form communication, several visual sensibilities emerged that potentially apply to the idea of looking nonbinary on TikTok (and beyond). In particular, the concept of closure developed by Scott McCloud (1993) offers a means of understanding how the partial narrative of gender presentation is (often problematically) taken to represent the whole of an identity. As noted in the literature review, McCloud (1993) defines closure as “the phenomena of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63) and notes that closure is a learned ability that depends on past experiences.

Although McCloud (1993) has considered how closure happens almost instantaneously in film as each frame quickly merges into the next, I apply this concept slightly differently to the multimodal communication form of TikTok and to the nonbinary visual narratives shared there.



**Figure 28. Spot the differences**

When an uninformed audience (an audience unaware of the gender of the person they are looking at) views the part of an identity that is shared visually, they may participate in the act of closure, ‘filling in’ the aspects of identity which they cannot see. This is often how unintentional misgendering occurs. The viewer observes a trait they associate with a specific gender (e.g. a beard) and based on their past experiences they assume/perceive/impose a gender experience on the person they are observing. Queer TikTokers have developed multiple strategies to subvert how an audience accomplishes closure. Some of these strategies integrate text to alter or clarify the meaning of the images that can be directly observed. Including pronouns as text in the content of the video or using pronoun or identity hashtags can challenge how an audience might then perceive the ‘whole person,’ regardless of their presentation (see Figure 28). This integration of text is similar to the strategy I noted in the

literature review of using text to challenge the assumptions a viewer might make about a visual and is a significant aspect of doing queer gender online. Because TikTok is a multimodal app, visuals and text are not the only available modes that can be used in this way. The TikToker's visual presence in the video is only one part, the content of the video - what the creator is saying or performing- may be another, and as I've noted in many of my drawings, Sounds used may indicate something about identity. Nonbinary individuals reveal parts of their identities in multiple places at multiple times in this shared digital space. After spending an extensive amount of time scrolling, interacting, and being nonbinary on TikTok, I have found that my eye has learned to immediately take in these parts, perceiving the person and the aspects of their lives they choose to share, seeing them as nonbinary with minimal effort.

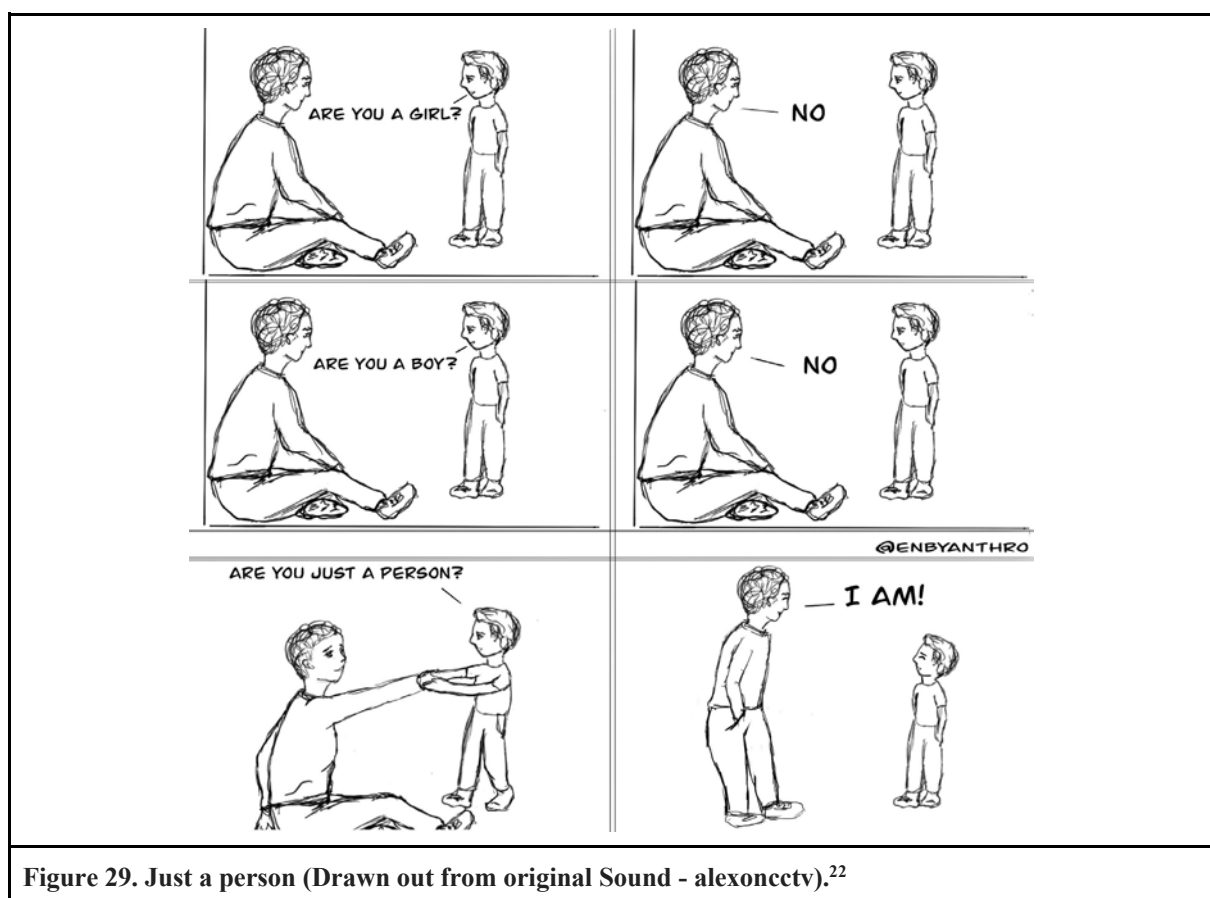


Figure 29. Just a person (Drawn out from original Sound - alexoncctv).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Listen to the original Sound

<https://www.tiktok.com/@enbyanthro/video/7043500711212027142? t=8T8gbQ3fwXu& r=1>

This visual literacy has become natural to me, but it is not a process that every TikTok user is accomplishing in the same way - evidenced by the fact that I am still misgendered on the app sometimes despite the way that I flag my identity in my username, bio, tags, and content. The liability in the process of closure is that it grants power to the reader/viewer to decide what happens in the space between things or in the untold pieces of the story. An uninformed audience may continue to ‘read’ my content much differently than intended while my audience comprised of queer and nonbinary mutuals may be able to ‘see’ me as a whole, nonbinary person across multiple content frames. As Hendrickson (2008) writes of visual records, “not everyone will be able to see all of the connections, but their potential is there and ripe for the thinking” (129). The potential to accomplish closure differently when observing the parts of identity that are made visible, to see the connections between the many layers of information offered, is there.

### 3.4 Sharing the Research

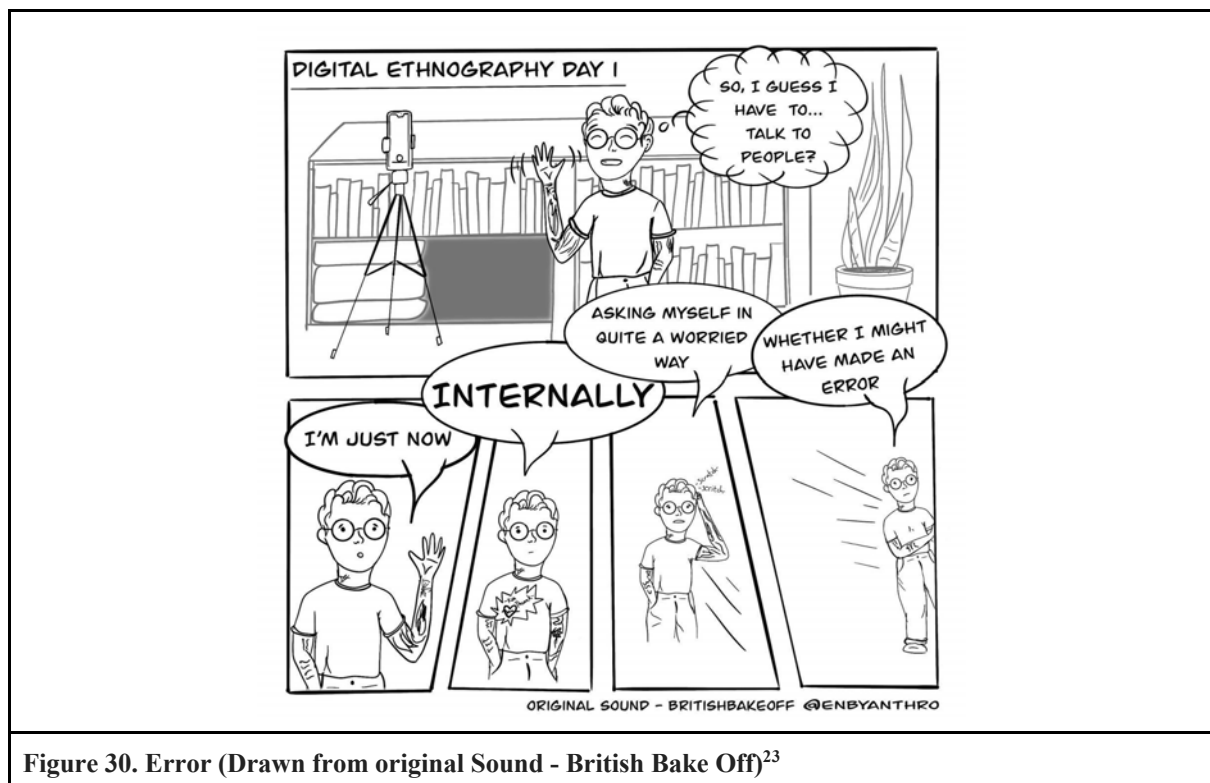


Figure 30. Error (Drawn from original Sound - British Bake Off)<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> View the original video here

<https://www.tiktok.com/@enbyanthro/video/7023099734961245445? t=8T8oBw5a1sz& r=1>.

I have shared my research in several ways: through this document in text and comic drawings, through social media (TikTok and Instagram), and through a webcomic-style interactive documentary (i-doc) housed on the project website nbvisualnarratives.ca.



Figure 31. Vulnerability and connection

### 3.4.1 Creating the Interactive Documentary

In developing the documentary aspect of this work, I combined the methods of interactive documentary and mobile documentary to create a web-comic style documentary experience. I have overviewed these methods in Chapter 2. The i-doc created for this project, titled “You Look Nonbinary,” connects comic art, video, and text in a user-driven format.<sup>24</sup> The i-doc presents six emergent themes from my research which are titled: 1) Imagining Nonbinary, 2) Boxes, 3) Online/Offline, 4) Seen/Unseen, 5) Anti-Binary, and 6) How do I look? I will overview each of these themes briefly below.

<sup>24</sup> Explore the i-doc at <https://nbvisualnarratives.ca/explore-the-interactive-comic-documentary/>

On my project website, I have created a landing page for the i-doc that gives some background on the project and its purpose. To ‘play’ the i-doc, the viewer can select from a series of buttons which reveal the six major themes explored in the i-doc and also offer the option of starting at the beginning, or at the end. When the user clicks on a button, they will follow the link to a panel that hosts an assemblage of comics and videos. From that panel, the viewer can navigate back to the i-doc home page or can navigate to another video/graphic/text story panel. In total there are 6 panels hosting different pieces of the i-doc corresponding to the themes I listed above. When viewed together, in any order, the i-doc presents an in-process narrative of being nonbinary on TikTok. Although a central aspect of an i-doc is that it is multilinear and user-driven, I did organize the content somewhat for viewability.

Panel 1 - Imagining Nonbinary brings together several of the drawings I have created about nonbinary visuals as they are thought of and imagined (see section 3.1).

Panel 2 - Boxes explores nonbinary narratives that reject the idea of nonbinary as a third gender and open up gender as a continuum (see section 3.1).

Panel 3 - Online/Offline uses my interview prompt - “do you present your nonbinary identity differently online or offline?” as a starting point to explore some of the responses to this question alongside other drawings about online interactions (see section 3.2.1).

Panel 4 - Seen/Unseen explores the dynamics of vulnerability and feelings of being perceived online (see section 3.2.2).

Panel 5 - Anti-Binary engages ideas of abstract/disembodied nonbinary gender including the gender envy trend (see section 3.1).

Panel 6 - How do I look? Takes up the idea of looking as a relational and dynamic process (see section 3.3).

The process of organizing the i-doc offered a further opportunity for analysis as I

could suggest emergent themes between collaborator narratives, TikTok Sounds, and secondary source material. Curating the i-doc was an iterative process that gradually came together over the last several months of this research. As I gathered videos from collaborators and produced new drawings, the structure of the panels shifted and changed, presenting new possible connections. The i-doc represents process work - coming into being (Ingold 2011). I frequently revisited the stories and experiences shared throughout my fieldwork, sometimes re-drawing similar concepts from different perspectives. In this way I have adapted Alison Bechdel's use of queer archives (González 2021) to create dynamic and sometimes uncertain narratives that reflect the changeability of queer identities. The archives I am drawing on - both personal and public - are made up of social media content across multiple platforms.

### **3.4.2 Creating and Managing Social Media Content**

Creating original content on my TikTok research profile was necessary to establish my presence on the app but it also provided an opportunity to communicate about my research. The timeline of this project was not split between data collection, writing, and dissemination, but rather each of these components overlapped. The video content I created on TikTok not only supported my presence as an ethnographer but this kind of mobile filmmaking is in itself autoethnographic (Berry 2017). Berry (2017, 312) explores this dynamic, noting how anyone can achieve 'thick description' as they document their lives for social media.

One of the challenges with creating original content was that it was exposed to the public beyond my immediate TikTok community. As a nonbinary person creating content about nonbinary and queer topics I expected to eventually receive a negative response due to the amount of homophobic and transphobic rhetoric online. The first video that went viral on my research account accrued a number of supportive comments but also attracted 'trolls' and hate comments informing me that my identity was made up. This kind of response is mentally and emotionally draining, not only for me but also for other queer people who watch my

videos and read the comments. Because I am seeking to build community through my project, I had a responsibility to create a safe queer place on my account. To accomplish this, I monitored and deleted overtly homophobic and transphobic comments except in those situations where a useful dialogue had emerged in response to those comments. I typically did not respond to hateful or negative comments unless they were directed towards my theoretical approach or project in general. Attacks on my person, my identity, or my community were deleted.

Hate comments were by no means the most common kind of engagement my content received. Posting original content allowed for dialogue with other nonbinary and queer people, fellow neurodivergent grad students, and allies. Dialogue in comment sections on my own videos and those of my mutuals could be productive in several ways. In the comments themselves, conversations are often linear and abbreviated but can be surprisingly fruitful. As noted in Chapter 2, comments filled out the video contributions from my main collaborators. Comment conversations can also prompt new videos using TikTok's video reply feature. Comments from mutuals and followers can indicate to me if parts of my project aren't connecting, either because my delivery was unclear or because some background was needed. While the community I've found on TikTok is mostly composed of nonbinary and queer people, my content and my project reach beyond this community and so I can't assume that all my viewers will have the same foundational knowledge. In order for this project to be a useful piece of public anthropology, or to have any potential as "an arbiter of emancipatory change" (Scheper-Hughes 2009, 3), it must be approachable even to those who do not have an existing understanding of life beyond the binary. While it is difficult to quantify the impact of a project like this, I believe that the sharing of stories always has the potential to enact change and that public anthropology can support that sharing.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

### 4.1 Closing Notes

In this thesis I suggest that to ‘look’ nonbinary is a dynamic and relational process, and that queer, ethnographic comic drawing may be a productive way to engage with this visual process on TikTok. The practice of comic drawing and reading may assist with learning to look and see beyond the gender binary. I want to make very clear that I do not intend this work to be a guidebook for spotting nonbinary people in the wild, what I am suggesting is that drawing can guide us to look differently, to see the visuals people offer without immediately classing them as man or woman. Just as a character in a comic might appear alongside text boxes or speech bubbles that tell the viewer something about who they are, so too do some people on TikTok and elsewhere use text (pronoun pins/tags, hashtags, etc.) to communicate how they wish to be perceived and known *in addition* to their baseline personhood. Learning to see these things and allowing them to shift our visual assumptions away from binary thinking may be a way of preventing the violence of misgendering.

The stories and experiences I have gathered in my drawings show both a wide range of individual experiences, and many overlapping shared experiences. My drawing has been informed by ethnographic drawing in anthropology, theorizing on queer drawing, and a practical engagement with graphic literature of many kinds. The drawings I have created from my direct collaborators’ videos explore some of the personal experiences of looking and being nonbinary on TikTok such as making nonbinary gender visible by sharing pronouns, navigating feelings of vulnerability and co-presence, and engaging queer discourses via TikTok sounds and trends. The drawings I’ve shared here about imagining nonbinary and the gender envy trend show a sense of gender that is disembodied and powerful. An ancient, moss-covered forest. A space cloud of stardust. They show an idea of gender that is random and unapologetic. Bubble tea. Converse shoes. The TikTok app may support explorations of

gender in this disembodied way by creating space for a kind of representation that requires and encourages imagined experiences. The dynamics of looking and being seen on the app may directly impact how these visual gender explorations occur. As I have sought to understand through my drawing method, TikTok users are participating in a gathering in a place that is created through their engagement with it. The digital place where stories are shared, friendships are born, and identities are developed is constantly coming into being through the creation of new content. My field site and the community I found there are quite as dynamic and changeable as the drawing methodology I employed to explore them, and my personal but shared nonbinary identity that guided my work.

What all of the ideas of nonbinary I encountered through my gathering have in common, is that they are fractured, composite, and transcendent. Some of their elements can't be contained by objective, viewable reality. And this is another part of why I draw. My drawing work does not exclusively account for things that I have directly observed - things in the outer world. It also accounts for things that I have felt, imagined, and things that have been described to me. The comics I've played with range from the literal to the abstract, from the serious to the ridiculous. They do not capture or contain what it is to be nonbinary, they simply suggest possibility.

In holding space for possibility, the comics included here may appear somewhat fragmented. I have not created a complete narrative or record around them. This was intentional and can be productive for several reasons. Taussig (2011) writes that drawings present a challenge to reality and the illusion of completeness. He writes, "The drawings come across as fragments that are suggestive of a world beyond, a world that does not have to be explicitly recorded and is in fact all the more "complete" because it cannot be completed" (Taussig 2011, 13). In my work I take this idea up to say that the incompleteness of the drawings is more realistic of how I experienced the place of TikTok, because even as these

narratives are drawn out of the content stream, they retain the fractured brevity and abrupt shifts in content and tone that characterize the app. In using comic drawing alongside queer theory and in application to nonbinary narratives, the sense of incompleteness presents a resistance to categorization and norming.

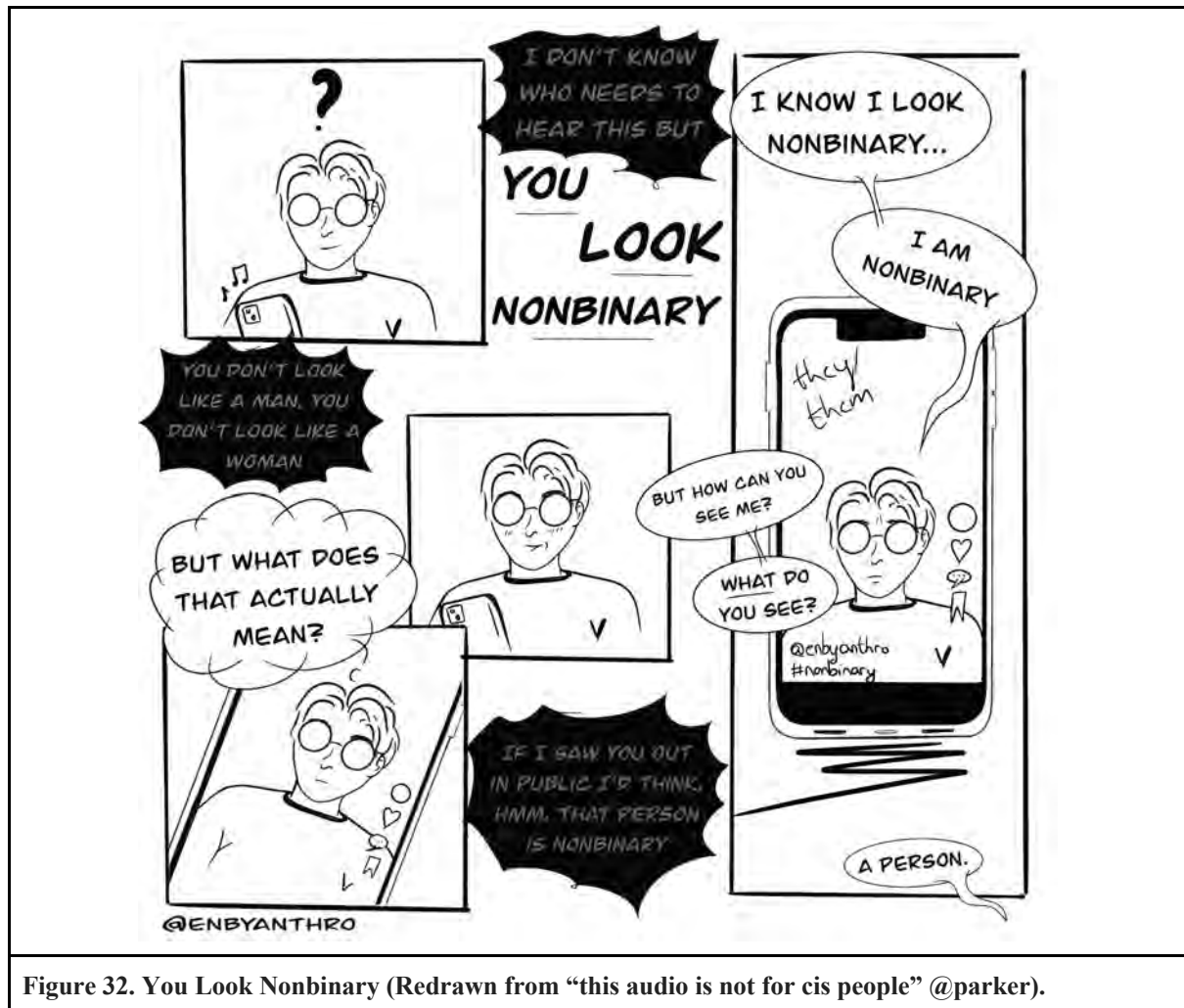


Figure 32. You Look Nonbinary (Redrawn from “this audio is not for cis people” @parker).

To conclude this work, I suggest that to look nonbinary is not a static state, or an endpoint to be arrived at. It is an ongoing, relational process of acknowledgement, and an agreement to recognize. How one’s nonbinary identity is understood and expressed may be continuously changing, and so the recognition from one’s community must also maintain its dynamism. To look nonbinary, to look in a nonbinary way, and to draw, are all queer potentials which recognize the unfinished and unfinishable dynamics of identity. In my work

here, I put forward drawing and looking at drawings as an opportunity to gather and to gather around the fluid experiences of nonbinary life in the ephemeral world of TikTok. This work has been guided by a deep and continuous process of reflection as I use drawing to look beyond the binary. My auto ethnographic experiences as a nonbinary person have significantly shaped my engagement with existing queer dialogues and approaches to a drawing methodology.

#### **4.2 Limitations**

In choosing to work with smaller accounts on TikTok, and to maintain a small presence on my research account, I did not develop as large an audience as is possible on the app. This project was focused on personal narratives at a small scale and so does not provide an exhaustive account of nonbinary TikTok creators and their demographics. The scale of this project was also limited in that all collaborators were adults living in Canada or the US. Engaging with a broader nonbinary population may reveal other narratives and experiences that were not considered here.<sup>25</sup>

The kind of digital communication that occurred throughout this research also placed limitations on how collaborative certain aspects of this work could be. Although my collaborators were given the opportunity to review and comment on the drawings I created and on the i-doc, we were not drawing or creating together. Future work might consider how other features of online communication such as video calls might be employed to increase dialogue in digital collaborations.

#### **4.3 Directions for Future Research**

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<sup>25</sup> I was required by my ethics review to place parameters on my research population. As my project potentially engages experiences of vulnerability and exposure I elected to work with adults. The geographic parameters unfortunately excluded some of my mutuals who otherwise might have participated. Future work in digital ethnography might consider how to identify the boundaries of a community while still maintaining the potential global reach of apps such as TikTok.

This work has only scratched the surface of the complex and dynamic community of nonbinary people using the TikTok app. There are many intersections that could be followed up on but were beyond the scope of this project.

A significant point of connection that could be explored through drawing is the way that neurodivergency and nonbinary identities/genderqueerness engage and build upon each other on TikTok. Some recent studies have taken up this connection from a clinical perspective (Warrier et al. 2020). This connection has also been identified and discussed by many individual TikTokers in my own online community who feel that they are not being seen by either queer communities or by neurodivergent communities because of the way that their identity cannot be explained or defined by either component without the other. However, an intersectional community of 'neurodivergent queers' has begun to emerge. Engaging further with these complex experiences may be an opportunity to challenge some of the ongoing gendered assumptions around neurodivergency - particularly with the experiences of autism and ADHD.

Another point of connection that was not fully developed in this work is the overlapping experiences of nonbinary identities and race as they play out in online spaces. I recognize that I have not considered race in this work beyond my consideration of the androgyny stereotype, but I feel that this work will be better taken up by non-white scholars who have considerably more personal authority and knowledge to bring to experiences of racial discrimination on apps such as TikTok. My own work and experience on TikTok is in some ways limited by my privilege as a white content creator.

In regard to methodology, I view this work as a brief beginning into drawing-as-gathering. Developing this approach further might allow for more collaboration in the process of drawing itself. In this work the collaborative aspect of the i-doc came through in the mobile filmmaking, but I created the drawings myself. While the comics and the i-doc

facilitated new connections and conversations once created, there was little opportunity for co-creation. Future work might consider how gathering to draw together - whether online or offline - might result in different kinds of nonbinary visual narratives.

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