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To cite this article: Siobhan M. Kelly (2018): Messianic language in trans public speech, Theology & Sexuality, DOI: [10.1080/13558358.2018.1463639](https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2018.1463639)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2018.1463639>



Published online: 16 Apr 2018.



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## Messianic language in trans public speech\*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay examines how two trans public figures, Lou Sullivan and Jennifer Finney Boylan, try to realize the need for transgender legibility through messianic rhetoric. Messianism is a site of contention in queer theory, between advocates for either antirelational queer theory or queer utopianism. This essay sees messianic rhetoric as a strategy found in the public speech and writing of Sullivan and Boylan, each of whom instrumentalize it to achieve legibility. Such rhetoric works to the political end of broader transgender acceptance. However, it also relies upon a flattening of trans life into a monolith. Messianic rhetoric legitimates a singular narrative of “how to be trans” through excluding other possibilities. Public speech that rejects this universalizing messianic impulse is possible. The zine “Fucking Trans Women” represents such a possibility, focusing attention on experience and pleasure over narrative linearity, thus providing one path forward for trans public speech.

### KEYWORDS

Trans studies; queer theory; Lou Sullivan; Jennifer Finney Boylan; Mira Bellwether; messianism; futurity

## Introduction

Transgender people rely on various rhetorical strategies to create personal and public legitimization of their experiences. Certain trans people living in the public eye use a messianic rhetoric to achieve this intelligibility, thus rhetorically ascribing a messianic model onto their experience of gender. This paper examines two individuals’ public speech, illuminating how such messianic rhetoric is deployed and its productive, destructive, and ambivalent tendencies. The first, Lou Sullivan, was the founder of FTM International and has been dubbed “the individual most responsible for ftm community formation in the United States.”<sup>1</sup> Sullivan recorded a series of documentary videos with his psychiatrist, which are available on YouTube. The second, Jennifer Finney Boylan, author of the best-selling memoir *She’s Not There: A Life in Two Genders*, rose to fame as an academic, memoirist, and more recently as a cast member on the reality show *I Am Cait*.

By examining these two examples from two different moments in trans history, I show how and why religiously inflected rhetoric is deployed within trans popular culture. Rather

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\*This paper was previously presented at the Boston University conference Sex on the Margin, and at Harvard Divinity School’s Stendahl Symposium. Many thanks to the attentive audiences and their precise questions, and to Mark Jordan and Amy Hollywood for their guidance.

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than focusing on or imposing a divide between the religious and secular, this paper aims to show how groups and individuals who do not see themselves as religious (or who are not explicitly invoking religion) nevertheless deploy forms of rhetorical legitimation that map their experience onto a messianic narrative. Conversations within queer theory between those advocating for utopianism and those in favor of a more antirelational approach oftentimes overlook the ways in which they each mirror conversations about religiously inflected messianism. Neither Sullivan nor Boylan explicitly invoke religion in their public speech, yet both still use the rhetorical stylings of messianic speech. However, even without that explicit invocation, I argue that these narratives run the risk of harm: this religiously infused rhetoric renders some trans people unintelligible to broad swaths of the public that consume these messianic (and exclusionary) popular narratives. To have one's experience rendered anathema can place that person further from care and closer to harm, which, when already dealing with the vulnerability of trans life, can be a matter of life and death. Boylan and Sullivan are two examples of such streamlined narrativization that, through popular dissemination, leads to a narrowing of intelligible embodied possibilities.

### **Facets of messianism**

Messianic rhetoric is found within many religious and nonreligious traditions, and due to its widespread use, a cohesive and overarching definition of messianism is difficult to pin down; nevertheless, three characteristics appear in many of its representations. First, messianic rhetoric employs language of the self as resurrected and transcendent, changed from a previous state through death or something analogous (a social or political "death," for example) into a new, transformed self. This new self transcends one's previous social and temporal locations. Second, this messianic rhetoric includes the figure bringing about change: the transformed persons describe themselves publicly as bringing about a sea change, ushering in a new world order. The messiah does this by working against existing systems, standing in an antagonistic relationship to the way things are. Third, messianic rhetoric requires recognition by others of the messianic figure's singular importance and power, unrivaled in their impact.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary trans communities and individuals have more widely available narrative presence in the world than in past generations. However, these available narratives are still confining, due in part to the streamlining of acceptable public narratives into primarily messianic forms. Messianic rhetoric opens up the possibility of new ways of being in the world and achieving legitimation, while simultaneously foreclosing creative, embodied possibilities that do not follow the form(s) heralded by a messiah. Legitimation may be achieved but at a creative cost. Messianic rhetoric affects the embodied living and self-formation of those who come after in positive, negative, and ambivalent ways. This paper explores the ways messianic rhetoric simultaneously opens and closes sites of gender exploration and experience.

### **Messianism in philosophical thought**

Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida each write extensively about messianism. Benjamin's work, especially "Theses on the Philosophy of History," illustrates three aspects of

trans messianism in which a messianic figure is (1) resurrected and transcendent; (2) bringing change through working against existing systems; and (3) of singular, recognized, and primary importance. For Benjamin, the messiah is a singular, transcendent and resurrected figure who will work against the status quo to institute a new world order. Later, Derrida draws on Benjamin's work to structure his own thinking around messianism, which confirms the importance of these three facets' while adding nuance to the definition.

A transcendent resurrection marks an individual as a messiah, through their transition through death into a new self.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin sees "eternal and total passing away" as key to messianism.<sup>4</sup> Richard Wolin, a Benjamin scholar, marks this time of transcendence as a difficult period for the community affected: "there will be no smooth transition from historical to redeemed life. It is not a question of the organic transition from one realm to the next."<sup>5</sup> Transcendence remains a structuring facet of trans narrativity; one transcends their physical body, social location, personal history, sex, and/or gender in order to resurrect as a fully formed new self, much like Benjamin's messiah who will transcend ruin in order to reach redeemed life. Wolin says that "The idea[s] of salvation through death" and "redemption through death" serve as "the basis of Benjamin's own critical methodology."<sup>6</sup> This transition places the body itself outside of history, transcending its historical moment through death. Through this death, the world can "bask in the eternal light of truth, and thereby pave the road for their redemption" – the first of the three characteristics of messianism.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, a messiah toils against the status quo. According to philosopher Catherine Mills, part of a messiah's mission is the "messianic overturning of the law," which Jacques Derrida calls messianism's revolutionary character.<sup>8</sup> A messiah brings about change by working against existing systems. For Benjamin, the messiah will save the world, overturning history. Benjamin focuses on "that which will arise in [history's] ruin, free at last and undisguised."<sup>9</sup> For Derrida, "in the concept of messianicity there is revolution."<sup>10</sup> Within a trans context, a revolution occurs, changing not only what can be known about singular individuals' embodiments, but also how sex, gender, and sexuality (and the interplay between the three) are understood on a broader level, against existing cultural norms – where the fullness of gender is "free at last and undisguised."<sup>11</sup> A locus of connection between sex, gender, and sexuality is thus the central point of this revolution, with its changes branching through all three.

Lastly, for Benjamin, a messiah is singularly important for the change they bring; "only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates."<sup>12</sup> Benjamin believes a messiah will be prefigured in history (adding to their singular importance), and only a Messiah will clarify the immeasurable ways that history and what is to come have each pointed towards the Messianic moment. This is the third facet of messianism – a messiah's singular importance and recognition by others. For Benjamin, not only is the Messiah singular in importance, but also the Messiah is *primary*, meaning the first.<sup>13</sup>

A messiah's arrival, which Benjamin hopes for, presents complications that Derrida and his interlocutors examine. John Caputo's reading of Derrida's "messianicity without messianism" shows the ambivalence of the arrival.<sup>14</sup> Caputo says,

Were the Messiah ever to show up in the flesh, were, *per impossibile*, his coming ever taken to be an occurrence in historical time, something that could be picked up on a video camera, that would be a disaster. The effect would be to shut down the very structure of time and history, to close off the structure of hope, desire, expectation, promise, in short, of the future.<sup>15</sup>

According to Caputo and Derrida, a messiah's arrival would undo the future because time would stop; something they believe would be a terrifying possibility, forestalling human progress.

Instead of hoping for a messianic figure to transform history as Benjamin does, Caputo and Derrida advocate for a messianic structure *without* the expectation of the arrival of a messiah. For Caputo, a messiah "cannot in principle come about" and his and Derrida's worldview is "not sparked by a determinate Messiah."<sup>16</sup> For Derrida, the future ceases to be something toward which one can look and work when a messiah comes into being, because a messiah stops historical time in its tracks. Therefore, he suggests an approach of deconstruction with a forever-absent messiah, who will never arrive and thus remains forever unpredictable. Derrida names this worldview a "universal structure" that "is not limited to" religions embedded with a messianic story.<sup>17</sup> Derrida hopes for a world where the messianic narrative structure and the hopeful waiting that accompanies it is not limited to specific religions, nor to a belief in the actual arrival of a messiah. Instead, this worldview remains open to all possible futures – to the promise of a future without religious requirements. Derrida asserts, "As soon as you reduce the messianic structure to messianism, then you are reducing the universality,"<sup>18</sup> differentiating the messianic structure/messianicity (the universal structure of waiting for a future to come) from messianism (the arrival of a messianic figure). When messianism occurs, the progress Derrida sees as accompanying a worldview that includes messianicity stops: when what occurs is specifically messianicity *with* messianism, the progress of open messianicity ends.<sup>19</sup> In Derridean thinking, the open messianic worldview pushes progress forward through the vision of a future always to come and thus always to work towards, and the realization of a messianic figure runs the risk of forestalling that progress.

As Derrida and Caputo articulate the fear of stalled progress in response to a messianic figure's arrival, Paul North and Anna Glazova argue against messianism's implicit positive valence. To them, not only is Derrida's fear of stalled progress an issue in messianism, but so is messianism's destructive capacity:

When we speak of a messianic potential, then, we should be careful not to dwell only on its restorative or revolutionary power, when the destructive dimension is part and parcel of it ... Messianicity is both the most hopeful and the most nihilistic thought, calling for destruction and restitution alike.<sup>20</sup>

Because of the immensity of change heralded by a messianic arrival, the change will not only be positive and peaceful. Politically, "messianic talk produces hope for restitution while at the same time threatening longstanding institutions," but the authors are careful to remind the reader that this impulse, and the change brought by a messiah, is "an equivocal thing," not universally positive.<sup>21</sup> Within trans public speech, the societal change brought about by a messianic figure is accompanied by major changes to cultural understandings of gender writ large, which will be met with hostility because of the threat to "longstanding institutions" such as gender.<sup>22</sup>

## Messianism and futurity in queer theory

In queer theory, the concept of messianism has been used within and to critique queer futurity, which is a vein of scholarship that focuses on how the future is thought in relation to gender, sex, and sexuality. Two camps have emerged: one focused on antirelational queer theory, or queer negativity, which refuses to see the future as a site of hopefulness for the queer and embraces a more nihilistic approach; the other reaches for queer utopianism, for an approach to queerness that does look towards the future as something for “us” in relation to each other.<sup>23</sup>

Queer futurity is central to José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, which opens with descriptions of how he sees queerness. For Muñoz, “Queerness is” many things: “an ideality,” “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present,” “a longing that propels us onward,” and “essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”<sup>24</sup> Queer futurity takes queerness as a site in which the horizon is always seen and perhaps never reached, but always strived for, with a vision of queerness as at its core relational and including “a renewed and newly animated sense of the social.”<sup>25</sup> Queer futurity is queerness oriented towards social relations and the future, in opposition to anti-relational queer theory, which cedes the future to the normative and embraces risk and singularity in the present.<sup>26</sup>

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz’s vision of queer futurity responds to Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, a major text in antirelational queer theory. Edelman resists “reproductive futurism” as reliant upon the figure of “the Child” and thus oriented towards a future being built for the Child, arguing that “queerness names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’” and that instead, queerness assumes “the place of the social order’s death drive”; additionally, “queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place.”<sup>27</sup> Edelman argues for a focus on the present and on our singularity – of anti-relationality – as opposed to the focus upon the Child and the (Child’s) future and its utopian valences. These two contrasting definitions of queerness structure major arguments in queer theory that dovetail with messianic thought: to look towards the horizon is to look towards a messiah as a to-come figure of change, and to deny the horizon (and to deny “the Child” that represents the horizon for Edelman) is to deny a messiah and insist upon nothing to-come, either as an unrealizable hope or a historical reality.

Other scholars have used literature as a site to explore these notions of queer futurity. Richard Block discusses the “impossible possibility” of relationships in his exploration of messianism in *Brokeback Mountain*, where the possibility of a happy future is wished for and imagined with the realization it will never occur.<sup>28</sup> Romance that is acted upon without any possible happy future embraces a form of absent messianism in which a happy ending is held on the horizon without hope of arrival, much as Derrida argues for messianism without a messianic figure’s arrival. Similarly, Benjamin Bateman talks of queer futurity in Henry James’ work. He “distinguish[es] queerness with a messianic temporality,” which waits for a messiah to-come, from queer melancholy, or queerness that only looks backward.<sup>29</sup> Bateman advocates for a look toward “a horizon of possibility, of an unknown but promising futurity,” an unknown future also similar to Derrida’s forever-absent messiah.<sup>30</sup> Bateman contrasts a queer futurity that is forward-looking

and reaching for a more positive future, even if a messiah (and that future) never arrives, from what he calls “queer melancholy” that sees a future that will only ever be as it is now. While Lee Edelman writes of “no future,” or a non-messianic view of queer history, others attempt to recuperate a queer glance towards the future on the horizon, a queer drive to the non-foreclosure of the future yet to come.

Heather Love attempts to bridge the gap between antirelational and utopian queer theory in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, using Benjamin to do so. Benjamin, in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” describes “the angel of history” whose “face is turned toward the past,” and who the storm of progress “irresistibly propels ... into the future to which his back is turned.”<sup>31</sup> Heather Love, in *Feeling Backward*’s epilogue, reflects upon Benjamin’s angel while “trying to imagine a future apart from the reproductive imperative, optimism, and the promise of redemption. A backward future, perhaps,” allowing for Edelman’s eschewal of reproductive requirements while not foreclosing on the horizon.<sup>32</sup> Love asks, “What are we to do with this tattered, passive figure, so clearly unfit for the rigors of the protest march, not to mention the battlefield.”<sup>33</sup> Love argues for holding on to both queer melancholy and the possibility of a more positive future – a backwards future in which queers feel “bad” or “backwards” while refusing to foreclose possible positive futures. As Love says, “Contemporary queers find ourselves in the odd situation of ‘looking forward’ while we are ‘feeling backward,’” and Love holds on to that ambivalence as a possible jumping off point for political action.<sup>34</sup>

Each of these impulses – of looking forward and both seeing a horizon (utopianism) and refusing a horizon’s existence (antirelational thought), of “looking forward” and “feeling backward” – comes to a head in trans public speech. In public discourse, the category of “trans” becomes so oversignified that it marks the beginning and the end of everything – of queerness, identity, gender, sex, personhood, community, and politics. Public speech about (*not* by) trans people holds trans people responsible for Trump’s victory, the loss of a Democratic base, and for ruining the sacrality of sexual distinction. Two 2017 New York Times Op-Eds advocated centrism as a response to the rise of the alt-right, both naming “the left” as “obsessive on issues like gender identity” and tying the Democratic Party’s “loss of support among working-class voters” to “the party being mired too often in political correctness [and] transgender bathroom issues.”<sup>35</sup> In a National Review article, the author argues in support of binary understandings of both gender and sex: “The very concept of male and female seems to be evaporating before our eyes as the nation suffers a collective trauma over the issue of gender identity.”<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Finney Boylan used her New York Times Op-Ed slot to expose rhetoric at work in news channels immediately following the 2016 presidential election that put the onus of Donald Trump’s victory on “boutique issues” including trans rights.<sup>37</sup> Alternatively, a “Gender is Over” tank top (“if you want it” in tiny lettering underneath) has been sported by musicians Laura Jane Grace and Miley Cyrus on their Instagram accounts, showing that some of those embracing non-normative gender presentations and experiences also advocate for the very same evaporation of the concept of gender.

Antirelational theory and queer utopianism both answer questions raised in discussions of messianism as they specifically come to a head in queer theory. In the public imagination and the specifically queer public imagination, trans “identity” has come to represent that moment of horizon arrival, of the re-turn. Trans as a socially marked category



manages to simultaneously harden and elastize “identity” as a rote category. The former represents a danger in messianic writing – identity becoming hardened to the point where it cannot be changed, mirroring Derrida’s warning of progress’s end through a messiah’s arrival.

### Boylan, Sullivan, and messianism

Jennifer Finney Boylan and Lou Sullivan each rely upon messianic rhetoric to achieve legitimation, and they exemplify the ambivalence found in such rhetoric. Both have lived and worked in the public eye, engaging in public discourse around gender, sex, and sexuality, achieving prominence both within and outside of trans circles. Sullivan was notable in medical circles for his interviews and the work of his doctor, as well as ubiquitous in trans circles for his pamphlets on FTM (female-to-male) experience and for being easy to contact and quick to give support. Boylan’s memoir is heralded as the first best seller by a transgender American. It and Boylan’s other writings remain important within trans circles, and she entered the public eye more recently as the moral center on *I am Cait*. While Boylan and Sullivan use different, if overlapping, media, both show what happens when a messiah arrives – when a person either believes themselves to be a messiah or those surrounding a person believe them to be a messianic figure, or both. In this specific case, a trans messiah provides gender salvation: through dying and becoming resurrected in a new gender, they change how we think and experience gender, overturn existing gender norms, and are of singular importance in this change.

### Lou Sullivan

Lou Sullivan, activist and founder of FTM International, was the first publicly identified gay male FTM. As such, Sullivan embodied the de facto gay FTM experience. Sullivan did a large amount of community organizing, nationally and locally in San Francisco. Sullivan became a type of trans messiah, representing the “first” public manifestation of this form of gender difference, and thus transcended temporal limitations, containing within himself all previous and future forms of difference.

Ira B. Pauly, a psychiatrist and faculty member first at University of Oregon Medical School and later at University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine, is a pioneer in trans healthcare, who recorded several interviews with Sullivan to discuss Sullivan’s experiences. Pauly has published widely on the topic of transgender health care and treatment, beginning in the 1960s. The videos of Pauly and Sullivan were presented to the American Psychiatric Association in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including one presentation that Sullivan himself attended.<sup>38</sup>

In these videos, Sullivan speaks frankly about his experiences of gender, sex, and sexuality. Sullivan describes parts of his body pre-surgical intervention as “female,” and also published work identifying himself as a “transvestite,” standing in contrast to the gay male self that arises out of this past self through death and resurrection.<sup>39</sup> At one point, he says, “I was a female from the waist down,” with the past tense showing that this period of change occurred, and a new self is now present.<sup>40</sup> Here, the first aspect of messianism comes to the fore, where the resurrection is mediated by biomedical interventions: the previous self dies to make room for the new, fully realized and transcendent self.



After Sullivan is resurrected, he embodies the second element of messianism by working *against* existing systems to make change. During Sullivan's life, it was nearly universally required for a person hoping for biomedical interventions not only to fully match their gender identity to the de facto identity assumed by that body-to-come but also to certify that these changes render the person *heterosexual*. Sullivan openly and actively defied this, and his resistance to heteronormativity marks his importance to the biomedical establishment. He reports that AIDS experts and treatments centers were confused: "Even the doctors in the AIDS clinic and the specialists, they really don't know [what to do with a gay FTM seeking care] and they don't seem shy about saying that."<sup>41</sup> Gender specialists too were confused: he says, "I had a lot of problems with gender professionals saying that 'there's no such thing as a female to gay male,' and 'you can't live like this and we've never heard of that.'"<sup>42</sup> Sullivan worked against existing systems of knowledge and power to create new space for varied experiences of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Lastly, Sullivan brings about change by being both primary and recognized in his importance, which is reinforced both by Sullivan and by his doctor. Dr. Pauly refers to Sullivan's "Rather unusual transsexual condition," and says that as the first gay FTM speaking publicly, he is "defining a new syndrome."<sup>43</sup> Sullivan says in response, "Somebody's got to be the first one to open their big mouth and admit that this is what they're up to, and as long as no one else is talking about it it's going to be forever silent."<sup>44</sup> Through being the first to speak, Sullivan shows not only his primacy, but also the fact that through speaking, change will come.

Sullivan also wrote and distributed a pamphlet, *Information for the Female to Male Cross Dresser and Transsexual*. The document was "widely distributed among ftms" and served as a handbook for people who were cross dressers and/or transsexuals at the time.<sup>45</sup> Lou Sullivan, as the sole author and distributor of this pamphlet, is a figure of *singular and primary importance* to the movement. His importance was recognized within both FTM and medical communities. He was the "first one" to speak about being a gay FTM, and *Information for the Female to Male Cross Dresser and Transsexual* was a structuring document for early FTM communities. According to Ben Power, a friend of Sullivan's who was interviewed for the Trans Oral History Project, Sullivan included his personal phone number in the pamphlet in order to make him easily accessible as a person to whom one could turn for help, and in the copy held by the Digital Transgender Archive, Sullivan's personal address is also included.<sup>46</sup> Sullivan's personal papers, held by the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, contain a large amount of correspondence with other FTMs. Lou Sullivan, in many ways, defined and solidified FTM identity in the 1980s, and specifically made a place for gay FTMs to gain public and private intelligibility through both activism and personal relationships. Sullivan's work was described as the first of its kind and was recognized as such by trans communities, doctors, and later trans studies scholars.

## Jennifer Finney Boylan

Moving to Jennifer Finney Boylan, her memoir *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* reveals her use of public speech to achieve legitimation, in which she falls into similar traps as Sullivan. Boylan relies on the trope of being "in the wrong body, living the wrong life."<sup>47</sup> This trope labels a previous male self as incorrect and incomplete, and the "new," "complete" Jennifer as more perfect and whole – she is both transformed

and reborn. A past male self dies to make room for the resurrected and correctly gendered self, the first aspect of trans messianism.

Secondly, Boylan brings about change. Boylan brings trans experience to her undergraduate institution, Colby College, in the form of her “coming out letter,” which she publishes in full alongside a few chosen responses from colleagues, students, and strangers. She says in an email to her close friend and colleague Richard Russo that “The letters are pouring in now that I’m out. I’m up to 150 so far,” indicating a positive and broad impact.<sup>48</sup> Boylan says that she hopes her letter will “provide a model to others on how to find the bravery to be true to oneself, even if it means doing something that seems impossible.”<sup>49</sup> Boylan’s book and her later celebrity do the same – she gains notoriety on *I Am Cait* as its trans-literate backbone, showing the ropes to more “inexperienced” trans women.

Boylan brings about this change by working against existing systems on the interpersonal level, as exemplified by Boylan’s relationship with author Richard Russo, who wrote the afterword for her memoir. Russo feels like he is losing an important male friendship bond, and cannot understand how Boylan feels complete when she seemed, to him, so happy and fulfilled “as a man.” Boylan recounts, “Having his best friend turn into a woman hadn’t struck him [Russo] as a great idea at the time.”<sup>50</sup> Russo says in emails to Boylan that, “I miss our former ease” of their “old male friendship,” and

Your claim that Jenny is real may be true, but it seems almost beside the point. That Jenny is the real you is something that I have to take on faith, because the evidence of my senses suggests the opposite.<sup>51</sup>

Boylan responds to this, saying that “I don’t mind being called ‘studied’ and ‘mannered.’ But ‘implausible’? That hurts.”<sup>52</sup> Russo later apologized and, in the afterword to *She’s Not There*, describes his reaction as “both surprising and disturbing because it revealed an emotional conservatism in my character I’d have surely denied had anyone accused me of it.”<sup>53</sup>

Russo and Boylan’s conversations illustrate Boylan’s antagonistic relationship with existing interpersonal systems. Russo serves as the cisgender foil to Boylan, comparing careers, success, and marriages. Russo represents what could have been for Boylan, and the rupture and slow repair in their friendship shows tension between Boylan and existing structures. Her transition worked against and changed existing social mores. Through engaging directly with Russo and calling out the hurt and pain caused by his words, Boylan engages in the slow work of changing people on the individual level.

Lastly, the accolades describing Boylan’s book as “the first bestselling work by a transgender American” illustrate her singular importance. Notions of primacy once again solidify a messianic typology at work. She is presented as a role model who brings about diversity to campus and new forms of knowledge and understanding to the communities in which she participates, beginning with her memoir. Her presence, as a board chair for GLAAD and as a contributing opinion writer for the New York Times, cements her place as one of the most influential and well-known trans people today.

Boylan’s narration of her experience of gender in *She’s Not There* presents a linear, complete, and concrete narrative. For example, the text begins with Boylan’s knowledge from the age of three of her womanhood, goes through a period of suppression, beginning

with trying on clothes, confirmation by medical professionals starting from a young age, suicidality, a budding attraction to men after beginning hormone replacement therapy, “bottom surgery,” and an understanding of the self as transsexual before language. In her “coming out letter” she writes, “I have had this condition for my entire life, since before kindergarten, since before language,” revealing a gender identity *prior to the language of gender identity*.<sup>54</sup> This pattern of linear progress toward completion risks stifling other narratives of gender. When the experiences of trans people do not match this model, it can be more difficult for people to achieve their own forms of personal legitimization. Boylan’s narration provides the pattern for the type of story *required* in many places, still today, to access biomedical interventions related to gender. This means that trans people hoping to receive hormone therapy or gender-affirming surgeries must fit their own story to this model, whether or not it rings true, or risk being denied access to treatment.

Lou Sullivan and Jennifer Finney Boylan, through various forms of public speech, tell narratives that fit into the structures of messianism. Sullivan, through pamphlets, personal relationships, and public speech directed at medical communities, paints himself and is painted by others as a messianic figure. Boylan achieves the same end through personal relationships, her memoir, and more recent engagements with the public through the *New York Times* and *I Am Cait*. Additionally, Sullivan operates in the 1980s and Boylan initially in the early 2000s; even if some believe a messiah *has* arrived with Sullivan, the logic of messianism continues holding “the now” as the moment of their arrival, both for Boylan’s time and still to this day. The moment in 2014 when *Time Magazine*’s cover asks about the “Transgender Tipping Point” is not the first moment of trans (hyper)visibility, and any contemporary moment of messianism will not be its first instantiation. Messianic rhetoric breeds messianic rhetoric, and contemporary trans celebrity is, in some ways, shoehorned into such rhetorical strategies, yet genre considerations may impact the different ways messianism is employed.

## Dangerous rhetoric

What is the danger of the messianic structure of these narratives, and of the ways in which Sullivan and Boylan are figured as messianic within trans and cisgender communities? Through reinforcing a specific and limited trans experience, one tied up in messianic rhetoric, popular public narratives like Boylan and Sullivan’s becoming the *de facto* trans narrative risks excluding other experiences from the realm of intelligibility.

The authority given to Boylan and her view of gender identity prior to language may require that those who come after adhere to the same narration of the self. The specific experiences of gender that Boylan narrates are often required to gain access to biomedical interventions. Jakob Hero describes his own struggle to receive treatment because he did not fit the standard narrative. Hero was denied biomedical interventions because he did not experience enough bodily hatred and was attracted to men – thus failing to cohere to the available narrative – which he describes in an essay section titled “The Mythical Narrative of the ‘True Transsexual.’”<sup>55</sup> Boylan sails through treatment: her narrative follows and reinforces a messianic model. She begins referring to her “transition” in past tense: something completed, finished, going so far as to say people who have “completed” their medical transition are “former transsexuals.”<sup>56</sup> A transition, and one’s *being*

trans, becomes a piece of history. She says, “I always had to *choose* to be James. Being Jenny, though, isn’t like that. I just am.”<sup>57</sup> Because her narrative dovetails so neatly with existing biomedical requirements, it reinforces the notion that this is, in fact, the *only* way to be trans.

While others have used Boylan’s story to exclude other trans experiences, Boylan herself places some narratives outside of intelligibility/respectability in the way she describes them. She excludes others when she refers to the “many autobiographies published by my gamy and tawdry colleagues.” Thus, she places herself outside the perceived-salacious genre of trans autobiography.<sup>58</sup> She blames public distaste or hatred of trans people as stemming not from societal bigotry and fear but from (some) transgender people themselves being “gamy” or “tawdry” and thus deserving of hate. She asserts, “Unfortunately, the public’s primary perception of transsexuals as a population is defined by the extremely small fringe of the community that feels driven to behave badly on *The Jerry Springer Show*,” thus holding herself up as the exemplar of trans experience and a source of unparalleled authority.<sup>59</sup>

Lou Sullivan also values the importance of adherence to identity labels, revealing himself to be a “male homosexual” even before identifying as transsexual. Like Boylan, he insists on the importance of both bottom and top surgery in his journey.<sup>60</sup> However, Sullivan’s public homosexuality provided a much-needed different narrative than those previously available. Even to this day, biomedical interventions are denied based upon the belief that transsexuality necessitates heterosexuality, and Sullivan’s voice adds nuance to understanding the interplay of gender and sexuality. Sullivan’s work combats the notion of the “true transsexual” in a way that opens up greater conversation around sexuality and gender. However, Sullivan’s public speech also forecloses “bottom surgery” from being a topic of discussion or individual choice, by making it front and center to his male identity. By saying that not undergoing “bottom surgery” would be to remain “female from the waist down,” Sullivan limits how one can experience their body and gender into a single narrative that ties being trans to surgical intervention, and gender to genitalia.<sup>61</sup>

The unfortunate reality is that the dissemination of these limited narratives of acceptable ways of being trans forecloses other approaches to embodiment. Trans studies pioneer Sandy Stone shows that when one’s approach to embodiment “achieves canonization,” then that approach becomes “a diagnostic category,” and subsequently public trans understanding is “homogenized to satisfy the constraints of the category.”<sup>62</sup> The canonization of a single narrative arc of trans existence excludes other forms of embodiment and experience, leading to a homogenization of trans as a category that in turn can lead to policing those outside the realm of intelligibility. Jakob Hero’s work shows the consequences of this: he was denied access to biomedical interventions *because* his experiences did not dovetail as neatly to the norm, a norm defined in part by public trans speech, including that of Boylan and Sullivan’s. Messianic narratives thus have the power to dictate biomedical access.

Once the singular narrative of “how to be trans” is distributed and accepted, aided by public speech that conforms to that narrative, identities and experiences are consolidated and marked as either valid or invalid. Those rendered invalid include those who do not elect for surgical intervention, or other forms of biomedical intervention such as hormone replacement therapy, and those who reject binary definitions of gender or

question the category “identity” itself. This renders some supposed members of the community outside the realm of intelligibility:

the transsexuals for whom gender identity is something different from *and perhaps irrelevant* to physical genitalia are occluded by those for whom the power of the medical/psychological establishments, and their ability to act as gatekeepers for cultural norms, is the final authority for what counts as a culturally intelligible body.<sup>63</sup>

To be outside the realm of intelligibility means that some people’s experience of gender is unrecognizable to many, placing them simultaneously closer to harm and further from care. Because they are not within the “acceptable” frameworks of trans identity, those not interested in changing (all of) their physical genitalia (regardless of desire to access other biomedical procedures or a social transition) are pushed further to the margins.

In 1995, Tyra Hunter was in a car accident in Washington, D.C. in which she sustained injuries and began being treated by first responders (from the fire department) at the scene. Upon cutting off her pants, the responders discovered that Hunter had a penis, stopped providing care for a period of time, and made derogatory comments about the fact that she was trans.<sup>64</sup> Then, she was transferred to a local hospital, where the doctor on call failed to treat her. The refusal of treatment resulted in Hunter’s death. A jury found the fire department and the doctor both guilty and awarded Hunter’s mother a verdict of over two million dollars, which was later settled out of court during appeals. Hunter, who is reported as having taken hormone replacement therapy, did not have “bottom surgery,” and upon the discovery of this fact, was denied treatment that led directly to her death. The first responder was later promoted to the position of sergeant, and the doctor recently retired after practicing medicine for over 40 years and has an active license to practice medicine in Washington, D.C. until 2018.<sup>65</sup> Notions of how to be “correctly” trans impact trans people’s ability to access care when their own life does not match the narrow, socially acceptable and reinforced narrative. Additionally, the Twitter hashtag #transhealthfail documented trans Twitter users’ own personal experiences with health-care discrimination in a myriad of forms. When trans people differ even slightly from this accepted messianic narrative, a great risk of harm and denial of access follows.

Boylan has become more aware of these narrative shortcomings and has started working to highlight other trans narratives beyond the currently accepted, singular form. In a blog post titled “The Big Dress Theory,” Boylan calls for trans communities to accept and embrace all their members. Unfortunately, she continues to use limiting terms such as “his or her” and “transgender men and women,” which reinforce a binary understanding of (trans)gender even in a move toward acceptance.<sup>66</sup> Hero’s work elucidates that such binary understandings are privileged, thus marking as “other” those with different experiences. Boylan says, “If your special theory of gender – or anything for that matter – doesn’t reduce suffering or create a world more full of love, it might be worth asking whether what you really need is a new theory.”<sup>67</sup> Indeed, at one point Boylan describes her own missteps:

I can tell you that there are things I said in 2003, when I first published my memoir, “She’s Not There,” that I wish I had phrased differently. It takes a long time to understand the many, many ways of being trans – other than our own – and to recognize that other people’s take on being trans is as valid as our own. If you find yourself telling someone, “You’re doing it wrong,” you’re probably doing it wrong.<sup>68</sup>

If one's approach to acceptance and understanding others mandates following a messianic typology, it can discredit other narrative forms in a way that impairs access to services and biomedical interventions and makes some more vulnerable to violence. Trans people are murdered for not revealing their trans status, sometimes including their genitalia. Gwen Araujo, Islan Nettles, and Brandon Teena each were murdered because of this. In some cases their killers received shorter prison sentences due to the invocation of the "trans panic defense," meaning their killers acted out with violence *because* they discovered the person was trans and had genitalia that did not conform to their view of the person's gender.<sup>69</sup> The narrowing of legitimated trans narratives contributes to the culture in which trans people are both denied access to services and also murdered for not fitting to the singular, medicalized and binary narrative. Perhaps, then, the way to overcome these narrative dangers involves creating a more encompassing understanding of the particularity of trans experiences, and of the problematic singularity of public trans narratives to this day.

### Refused endings

Public speech around gender and sex is *complicated*. As varieties of gender experience gain more mainstream traction, trans people in the public eye have been pigeonholed into speaking on behalf of *all* trans people. As a result, the forms of narrativity such individuals use have wide-ranging repercussions, influencing how the public thinks about and engages with trans people. This chapter explored two such people and their influence, exposing how trans narratives have tended to reflect messianic narratives. This messianic rhetoric's three facets – that they (1) experience a death and transcendent resurrection, (2) bring about change by working against existing systems, and (3) are known for their singular importance – structure the public speech of both Lou Sullivan and Jennifer Finney Boylan. These rhetorical strategies have the ability to open up new forms of embodiment and experience: Sullivan's work opened conversations about sexuality among trans people beyond heterosexuality, which impacts access to treatment. However, messianic rhetoric also contains the power to stifle forms of embodiment. Boylan's adherence to a linear, complete, and identity-based narrative excludes other experiences from the realm of intelligibility, and both Boylan and Sullivan's insistence on the importance of surgical intervention makes those who do not desire this less likely to be recognizable as trans and perhaps closer to potential harm. Messianic rhetoric is ambivalent: it leads to positive and negative consequences, and it still has a hold on public speech by and about trans people to this day.

A different form of ambivalence serves as a site of future creative exploration and further research. Messianic writing serves a purpose, especially when it comes to intelligibility that is unfortunately often tied to safety. However, other writing stays open to multiple truths simultaneously: such texts look forward in a way that holds on to "a temporal experience of waiting for the future."<sup>70</sup> This writing refuses the solidity of categories, instead holding onto that experience of *expectation*, where messianicity is not known and not assumed.

The 2010 zine "Fucking Trans Women" by Mira Bellwether is a different form of expectant, ambivalent life writing that provides a foil to messianic narrative formation. In this zine, Bellwether focuses on "non-op and pre-op trans women."<sup>71</sup> She says, "I'm talking



about beginning with sensation, not with names, vocabulary, or the things we think we know about of bodies.”<sup>72</sup> She does so with tongue firmly in cheek, all while resisting a move toward normative narrativity: “Here be dragons and sea monsters, my fellow genital cartographers, and we have a lot to learn from poking them. Let the metaphors, the language, the analogies come afterward.”<sup>73</sup> Bellwether centers bodily experience above language or narrative, insisting that it is “Best to begin from the beautiful explosive moments of pleasure and discovery, and to let the rest come after.”<sup>74</sup> She clarifies, “This is your zine. This is your conversation,” asking for submissions and pointing to places she does not cover, which she hopes others with greater expertise will fill in.<sup>75</sup> In many ways, this type of writing relies on co-creation to build community knowledge and sexual satisfaction. She writes an unwillingness to commit to more than sensate experience in the face of a societal push to fill a role and signify so many things simultaneously – perhaps providing, in the words of Michel Foucault, “a different economy of bodies and pleasures.”<sup>76</sup> Bellwether includes a section on the sexual act known colloquially as muffing, a practice she herself says many transfeminine people do not participate in – but she includes it without dictating acceptability, leaving room for one to make agentic choices for sexual pleasure. She does not create a singular narrative of transfeminine sexual and erotic pleasure, instead opting for multiplicity, purposeful gaps, and rough edges. Sullivan and Boylan, in their attempts to achieve legibility and legitimation for themselves and trans people who follow them, rely upon messianic rhetoric that create a singular narrative which fails in its attempts at universality. Perhaps, then, the thing missing from a messianic impulse is the particularistic centrality of bodies and their pleasures: would a focus on pleasure, in its singular, jouissance-inducing cacophonous moments, undo the ropes tying non-normative bodies to narrowing narratives, and instead leave open the future?

## Notes

1. Hale, “Consuming the Living,” 320.
2. For more discussions of messianic rhetoric, see Selvidge, “The New World Order”; Beare, “It Gets Better ...”; and Charteris-Black, *Politicians and Rhetoric*.
3. The most obvious example that illustrates this characteristic of messianism is the narrative of Jesus Christ in the Christian tradition.
4. Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment,” 313.
5. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin*, 60.
6. *Ibid.*, 52.
7. *Ibid.*, 53.
8. Mills, “Agamben’s Messianic Politics,” 56.
9. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 10.
10. Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 25.
11. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 10.
12. Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment,” 312.
13. See: Colossians 1:15, Jesus as “the firstborn of all creation.”
14. Caputo, “The Messianic,” 273.
15. *Ibid.*, 273.
16. *Ibid.*, 272.
17. Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 22–3.
18. *Ibid.*, 23.



19. Both Derrida's and Benjamin's work on messianic structures and messianism are debated, and any entrance into that conversation must be taken with great care. For the purpose of this article, I am specifically looking at what happens after "the event" that, for Derrida, is supposed to remain ever in the future, occurs.
20. Glazova and North, "Introduction," 5.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. For a greater explanation of these two approaches, see the introduction of *Cruising Utopia*.
24. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
25. Ibid., 18.
26. Muñoz's argument lies in the work of another Frankfurt School thinker, Ernst Bloch, whose work he characterizes as "unorthodox and messianic Marxism," and thus similar to my reading of Benjamin as also focused upon messianic thought. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 86.
27. Edelman, *No Future*, 3.
28. Block, "I'm Nothin. I'm Nowhere," 255.
29. Bateman, "The Beast to Come," 83.
30. Ibid.
31. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy," 257–8.
32. Love, *Feeling Backward*, 147.
33. Ibid., 148.
34. Ibid., 27.
35. Blair, "Against Populism"; and Penn and Stein, "Back to the Center."
36. Watts, "Peril of Gender Trap."
37. Boylan, "You're Blaming Transgender People?"
38. Sullivan, *Changing the Standards*.
39. Sullivan, "A Transvestite Answers"; and Sullivan, *AIDS and Sex*.
40. Sullivan, *AIDS and Sex*.
41. Sullivan, *DSM 1990*.
42. Sullivan, *Battling Gender Specialists*.
43. Sullivan, *DSM 1990*.
44. Ibid.
45. Hale, "Consuming the Living," 320.
46. Power, *Meeting Lou Sullivan*; and Sullivan, "Information," 49.
47. Boylan, *She's Not There*, 19.
48. Ibid., 180.
49. Ibid., 174.
50. Ibid., 9.
51. Ibid., 183.
52. Ibid., 186.
53. Russo, "Afterword: Imagining Jenny," 286.
54. Boylan, *She's Not There*, 171. See also, John 8:58: "Jesus answered, 'before Abraham was born, I am.'"
55. Hero, "Toward a Queer Theology," 150–1.
56. While Boylan and others speak of "finishing" or "completing" their gender transition so that transition becomes past tense, not all trans people ascribe to this narrative. Some see it as an ever-evolving process, with no end. Boylan, *She's Not There*, 245.
57. Ibid., 162.
58. Ibid., 244.
59. Ibid., 249.
60. Sullivan, "Transvestite Answers a Feminist," 164.
61. Sullivan, *AIDS and Sex*.
62. Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back," 229.
63. Ibid., 232.
64. Bowles, "A Death Robbed."

65. Miller, "D.C. Settles Bias Suit"; and U.S. News and World Report, "Dr. Joseph Bastien."
66. Boylan, "The Big Dress Theory."
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. Diebel, "U.S. Marine Found Guilty"; Fraley, "Gwen Araujo Murder"; and Schwirtz, "Embarking on New Life."
70. Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 22.
71. Bellwether, "Fucking Trans Women," 18.
72. Ibid., 7.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
76. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 159.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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