

The Necropolitics of Narcissus: Confessions of Transgender Suicide in the Middle Ages

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[T]ranssexuals must take responsibility for all of their history, to begin to rearticulate their lives not as a series of erasures in the service of a species of feminism conceived from within a traditional frame, but as a political action begun by reappropriating difference and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinscribed body.—Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back”¹

IN A WALLED CITY of truth, where gender is segregated into binaries, a youth is raised in relative isolation. As they² grow, they feel trapped in a body and in a community that does not reflect who they are. Surrounded by people who do not understand and associate with them, the youth feels as though there is no one and nothing in the world like them. Then one day, the youth escapes into the unknown, a

1. Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” *Camera Obscura* 2, no. 29 (1992): 150-76.

2. On pronouns: I made the decision to refer to the protagonist of the story by the gender neutral pronoun, “they,” which was popularized through feminist impulses to avoid the masculine “he” as the default neutral and trans feminist impulses to avoid assigning any binary gender. The (non-plural) use of “they” has been accepted by a number of English dictionaries, including the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster. While the protagonist of the story is referred to as “he” by the author, the central discovery of the tale and a central argument in my reading of it, is that the youth comes to view themselves as a woman. The image of them as a woman is referred to as “she” concurrently with the author referring to them as “he.” If the youth did not shortly thereafter commit suicide, an event in large part caused by an inability to transition, then perhaps the youth could have come to embrace themselves as a woman. Because of the terminal nature of the story, the use of the gender neutral “them” signifies this state of dysphoria that the youth reaches but is unable to move beyond. Other gender-neutral pronouns are available through transgender studies, including “xe,” “ve,” and “ze,” but “they” was chosen due to its familiar (if often unaccepted) use among publics not familiar with new trans and intersex innovations.

wood of alternatives, and lives there among those marginalized by the walled city. In this queer environment, the youth, raised to be a cisgender man, is able to see themselves for the woman they are or might be. This image quenches a thirst in the youth that the dysphoria-inducing environment had brought on like a drying heat. Yet the youth is terrified at how hard it would be to claim their identity as a woman. They call for assistance—someone to help them make sense of their life, to offer community, support, and advocacy. Yet the call is answered by silence. Alone and unaided, the youth despairs and takes their life.

The narrative of suicide is too familiar among today's transgender community: the literature that records it—notes, obituaries, news articles—makes up one of the largest but too little discussed archives of trans literature. Yet the particular story above would not be known by name in the trans community because too often their name is relegated to psychological debates or classrooms where it is treated as a historical moral text on pride totally unrelated to the present-day suffering of trans youths. This is the Tale of Narcissus from John Gower's fourteenth century *Confessio amantis*.³ The *Confessio* is a fourteenth-century collection of stories, many of which are based on versions of Ovid's tales in the *Metamorphoses*, including that of Narcissus.⁴ As in the case of Ovid, Gower explores themes of boundary crossing and transformation. Gower's first book establishes that all humanity is "mad" from physical, social, and moral division, a pun in Middle English which signifies both being "made" (created) and being "mad" (irrational). The goal of the collection is to help readers endure and relieve the resulting tensions in the psyche and in society.⁵ Gower authored other story collections in Latin, French, and English, including *Mirour de l'omme* (the Mirror of

3. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 1, ed. Russell A. Peck, trans. Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), 2275-98, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1>. Cited parenthetically in text.

4. Russell A. Peck, introduction to *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 1, ed. Russell A. Peck, trans. Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), n.p., <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-volume-1-introduction>.

5. Peck, introduction, n.p.

Mankind), which likewise promises to reflect the divisions of humanity. In the *Confessio*, a variety of mirrors, such as the one Narcissus finds in the woods, are presented to identify a variety of psychic divisions.⁶ In the mirror of Narcissus, we find reflected what might be the goal of the *Confessio*: to bring those excluded and isolated by the presumptions of the world, especially anyone in a wood of suicide, into meaningful and life-giving community discourse.

What do we see in Gower's Narcissus's well? In this article, I call for a trans feminist turn toward the study of medieval literature, insisting that a variety of trans genres of embodiment exist in the premodern past. This intervention into medieval and transgender literature constitutes a relatively new movement in and intersection between both fields. This work strives to articulate and invite others to articulate what a medieval trans literary theory might look like and do. Granted, most trans literary theory has yet to be written. Also, much medieval history and literature has yet to be reconsidered in the light of an emerging Transgender Studies. Yet this gap in scholarship has many potential starting places, including previous waves of feminist and queer scholarship. This article aims to inspire others, even those who disagree with the particular arguments presented here, to offer their own methods and interventions into trans history and literature by making the case that such a response to precarious trans lives, present and past, is both necessary and pressing. In particular, I focus on Gower's *Confessio* as an example of how the confessional genre may be considered a literary and social form by which trans persons would be known and controlled as well as how trans lives came to embody and resist these discursive structures of genre and gender. A host of trans figures exist in the *Confessio*. However, the Tale of Narcissus stands out because of continued associations between trans youths and the famous suicide, bonds emphasized by innovations Gower makes to the classical narrative. I argue that Gower's Narcissus reflects a medieval history of isolation, exclusion, dysphoria, and death in the trans community. Consequently, an imagined life such as this

6. Jenny Boyar, "Reflection, Interrupted: Material Mirror Work in the *Confessio Amantis*," *Accessus* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1-38, <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol3/iss1/3>.

invites readers (medieval and modern) to critique, witness, and resist these systems in their own time.

To make this argument, this essay is separated into four main sections. In “The *Wód* of the Suicide: Confession and Necropolitics,” I establish how Gower orders the *Confessio Amantis* as a piece of necropolitical literature. The term “necropolitics” was developed by J. A. Mbembe to describe the ways in which death and dying are organized within society, marking some lives for certain forms of life and other lives for certain forms of death.⁷ I draw attention to the framing discourse centered around “the Amans,” later revealed to be a fictional representation of a suicidal Gower isolated in a wood. Through Venus and her confessor, the tales and treatises that follow are supposed to bring Gower out of isolation and relieve the dysphoria of his madness. In so doing, the *Confessio* joins the genre of suicide literature as it both critiques the social sins that lead populations towards self-harm and also generates new meaning from such deaths. Next, in “The *Ymage* of the Nymphs: Presumption and Trans-exclusive Radical Feminism,” I assert that by connecting the Tale of Narcissus to a subframe on “presumption,” Gower calls readers to reflect on how society excludes trans persons and ideas from cultural discourse because of a fixation on certain binary images of gender. Following an etymological examination of presumption, one discovers a wide range of “over-thinking” or “over-stepping” wherein things which are true in certain cases (such as the form of womanhood) are extended beyond their limits to erase or discipline a greater diversity and division of truths.⁸ As such, Gower’s confession can serve as a meeting ground for medieval and transgender suicide studies.

In “The Wonder Hot Day: *Condiciõuns* and Dysphoric Environments,” I closely read the first half of the Tale of Narcissus to unpack how Narcissus’s dysphoric and suicidal condition is instilled by a trans-exclusive environment, using a social model of dysphoria based on *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition, that defines gender dysphoria as a form of suffering particular to lives in

7. J. A. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.

8. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Presumption, n.,” accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/150903?redirectedFrom=presumption#eid>.

anti-trans environments. The word that Gower uses, *condicioun* suggests discursive associations (i.e., comparisons), deriving from the Latin “con” (together) and “dicere” (speak).⁹ This affirms the reading of gender dysphoria as a condition which arises from the speaking-together of a person’s internal or identified gender and the gender assigned to them by society. In “Flowers in Winter: *Otherwhiles* and Slow Death,” I conclude the close reading of the tale to discern how the description of Narcissus’s suicide and memorial allows readers to see the mechanisms of “slow death” that wear down trans youths through systematic marginalization and neglect. In the end, Gower leaves readers with an image of all the *otherwhiles*, other times, and other deaths that are connected to the tale and the social lessons that might be learned from looking into the mirror of Narcissus.

Key Terms and Theory

This article is organized around four Middle English words Gower uses in his Tale of Narcissus: *Wód*, *Ymage*, *Condicioun*, and *Otherwhiles*. Contrasting Gower’s Latin and French works, the *Confessio* is distinctive for its extensive use of Middle English, a language which was in the process of being claimed as a literary language. These words are thus examined for the diverse medieval significations and associations that would have been invoked by the Middle English. Each word is then also put into conversation with critical trans scholarship and theory to unpack meanings whose presence become more discernable in the light of later transgender lives. As ever, readers of medieval trans studies must take on the role of polyglots: hearing, thinking, and speaking both in medieval and modern trans dialects.

Before exploring each term in depth, a few notes on the key terms are important. The Middle English term *wód* signifies both a description of madness (the man was *wód*)¹⁰ as well as identifying the physical

9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Condition, n.,” accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/38550?rskey=i2SjvU&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

10. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “wōd, adj.,” accessed March 21, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED53255/track?counter=2&search_id=615298.

place of the woods (the forest).¹¹ While the word's evolution pushed one meaning into prominence at the expense of the other, so that the modern English word "wood" leaves behind any overt associations with madness, in Middle English the word "wód" offered Gower a pun which he puts to use in his *wod(e)* of suicide (1.110-12).

The word *ymage* is a bit more straightforward, translating readily into the modern English "image." Yet Gower's wordplay and framing direct readers to consider the queer games of visage, presumption, seeming, expression, presentation, mirroring, meaning, and signification that are at work whenever images or *ymages* are presented. The open question of what the *ymage* of a woman, a nymph, a prince, or a man looks like in the Middle Ages (or today) is retained here by maintaining its Middle English form.

Given the similarity in the form of the word, the Middle English "condicioun" is immediately recognizable to modern English readers and may be (problematically) interpreted without any noticeable pause. This presumptively speedy recognition is a key reason why the word's foreignness is noted in this paper through italics as *condicioun*. The way in which medieval readers may have understood the word *condicioun* would have been different from the way in which modern readers would read the word; particularly in the wake of modern medicine and diagnostic language. Examining Narcissus through a critical trans lens, the modern use of the word "condition" to signify a diagnosis or disorder will likely come to mind.¹² Yet Gower's use of the word *condicioun* is less medically than socially situated, although it may still be concerned with the inner psyche and moral character of Narcissus. The italicized *condicioun* reminds us to consider the various ways that Narcissus's *condicioun* was necessarily indeterminate and related to a range of social, spiritual, and historical circumstances.

Finally, *otherwhiles* is a term whose strangeness needs less emphasis.

11. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "wōde, n. (2).," accessed March 21, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED53253/track?counter=1&search_id=615298.

12. American Psychiatric Association, "Gender Dysphoria," in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed., accessed March 21, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm14>.

Yet the word is not so foreign as to be unrecognizable. In this respect, the word *otherwhiles* embodies the linguistic and temporal tension at the heart of this project. The word is from another time and yet seems uncannily modern. Medieval studies and medievalism is full of these *otherwhiles* when eras seem to ripple into one another. Queer, feminist, and trans studies live along these waves of *otherwhiles*, which Carolyn Dinshaw once called loci of queer “touch”¹³ or queer “vibrations.”¹⁴ Yet in its Middle English context, the word also signifies all the possible futures which might have branched off from this moment in the fictional timeline of Narcissus or in the historical timelines of Gower’s readers.¹⁵ These *otherwhiles* include us as one possible future but not only us. As ever, our present is defined by the failures and deaths of the past, which might have been otherwise if our *wód*, our presumptive *ymages*, our *condiciõuns*, and our *otherwhiles* had been better addressed. Yet the word also reminds us that even today there may still be many potential *otherwhiles* branching off from our actions or inactions in this moment.

In addition to the Middle English terminology, the figure of Narcissus may also need some definition, especially given how modern medicine has presumptively reduced the image of the mythical person to the embodiment of an infamous psychological condition: narcissism. Previous efforts have been made to link a medieval Narcissus with the trans community, yet a critical trans approach to the subject has yet to be fully developed. The tale by Gower last received gender studies attention in 2003 with Diane Watt’s *Amoral Gower*.¹⁶ Watt looked into the well of Gower’s Narcissus and saw the refusal of homoerotic desire. Watt examines the feminized reflection of the youth as recasting same-sex desire (a man in love with the image of a man; himself) as a misdirected form of heterosexuality. Nonetheless, like some other queer feminist studies,

13. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), 3.

14. Dinshaw, 14.

15. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “*ō*ther-while, adj.,” accessed March 21, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED31034/track?counter=1&search_id=615298.

16. Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 77-78.

Watt's work is open to trans interventions.¹⁷ "Reading Gower's *Confessio Amantis* in the 21st century invites self reflection," Watt writes, "as it must have done in the late fourteenth century and fifteenth century."¹⁸ In Watt, we see the critical difference between intersectional and trans-exclusive feminism: one invites and the other excludes. Gower's Narcissus invites self-reflections on ethics and narratives that point to the collective sins and divisions of the world. Because trans lives and narratives have been systematically silenced and ignored in history, it is necessary that medieval transgender studies trouble the waters of our image of gender in the Middle Ages. In "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," Sandy Stones writes, "In [trans people]'s erased history we can find a story disruptive to the accepted discourses of gender . . . and which can make common cause with other oppositional discourses."¹⁹ Following Stone, trans feminism looks beyond modern diagnoses used to build walls around modern trans lives in public discourse and history. Instead, trans feminism works to map how trans persons share continuity and community with the past. Can we read Gower's Narcissus alongside today's trans youths as a person left to die by the trans-exclusive gender systems of Gower's day?

Due to a lack of established discourse between medieval and transgender studies, it is necessary to clarify a few other terms and ideas that will be employed. To begin, the word "transgender" may be used as a modern term of identity, meaning someone who identifies as a gender other than the one society has assigned (opposed to "cisgender" persons who identify with the gender assigned to them), but also as a critical term that opens up gender beyond two static binary categories. Moving beyond such binaries makes room for what I describe as trans genres of embodiment. The concept of such genres follows Stone's assertion that transgender should not be considered a self-enclosed gender but as the living acknowledgment of a wide array of contingent "genres."²⁰

17. Diane Watt and Clare A. Lees, "Age and Desire in the Old English *Mary of Egypt*: A Queerer Time and Place?" in *Middle-Aged Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sue Niebrzydowski (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 53-67.

18. Watt, *Moral Gower*, xii.

19. Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back," 164.

20. Stone, 165.

As a trans feminist, Stone draws on Judith Butler's distinction between "butch" and "femme" forms of womanhood to suggest that such diversity exists in all categories of gender.²¹ Yet as a former music executive, Stone may also be suggesting that both genders and genres are modes of creative production that have distinct tropes and forms which are ever mixing and changing.

Here I examine dysphoric trans suicides as embodying the confessional genre as excluded members of society who call out for a return to life-giving discourses.²² As of the early twenty-first century, transgender has been defined for society by the clinical diagnosis of "gender identity disorder" and more recently "gender dysphoria."²³ At this time, one may be marked as medically and legally trans by revealing hidden truths before a psychiatric, psychological, or other medical authority who diagnoses the subject. Read within a broader understanding of this medicalized genre of social practice and identity, this exchange defines transgender as a diagnosis arising from a form of private confession.²⁴ Yet other forms of confession exist for those unable or unwilling to be diagnosed, those who cannot afford medical care, fear the consequences of being diagnosed with a mental condition, or are underage youths with guardians who do not support trans identity. One such other form of the genre is public confession. Today, suicide notes, obituaries, and biographies are examples of public confessions wherein trans persons (or writers on their behalf) address their inner truths to a wider society rather than to a private authority.²⁵ In part because of the necropolitics of Narcissus, the suicidal confession constitutes a trans genre of embodiment.

21. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 167-68.

22. M. W. Bychowski, "Unconfessing Transgender: Dysphoric Youths and the Medicalization of Madness in John Gower's 'Tale of Iphis and Ianthe,'" *Accessus* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1-38, <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol3/iss1/3>.

23. Susan Stryker, "(De)subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen White (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1-17.

24. Bychowski, "Unconfessing Transgender," 7-9.

25. Bychowski, 7-9.

Both private and public confession link dysphoric suicides to a heritage of cultural ancestors who despite differences in time and place experience similar conditions and are defined by similar confessional figures, such as Narcissus. Indeed, the mechanisms that isolate, exclude, and produce dysphoria as well as eliminate trans subjects are themselves ongoing systems that span historical eras; these mechanisms are identified in this article as “trans necropolitics.”²⁶ My analysis of trans necropolitics asserts that no suicide is a singular event or condition but is a symptom of a systematic wearing down and elimination of trans lives; a process that Lauren Berlant calls “slow death.”²⁷ By allowing medieval confession to speak together with trans theory, readers can better see that cultural genealogies of anti-trans sentiment continue to run in the blood of patriarchies and also some feminist movements, so-called “Trans-exclusive Radical Feminism” (TERF), even as these systems of presumption and exclusion take different forms in medieval and post-medieval eras.²⁸

As will be unpacked, Narcissus has become a figure of the trans suicidal confessor genre of embodiment. In the past as well as today, necropolitical systems invoke Narcissus in the process of narrating the dysphoric suicide as the embodiment of confessional desires. David Cauldwell’s 1949 essay, “Psychopathia Transexualis” established an association between trans identity and narcissism, writing of a trans woman, “she admired herself probably as much as the original Narcissus.”²⁹ Such comments inform Sam Vaknin’s three-part argument of 2007,

26. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 11–40.

27. Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 754–80, doi:10.1086/521568.

28. “TERF: Where the Term Comes From,” TheTERFS.com, accessed March 21, 2019, <http://theterfs.com/2013/10/11/terf-where-the-term-comes-from>; Kelsie Brynn Jones, “Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism: What Exactly Is It, And Why Does It Hurt?” *The Huffington Post*, August 2, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kelsie-brynn-jones/transexclusionary-radical-terf_b_5632332.html; and Christan Williams, “You Might Be a Terf If . . .,” *TheTransAdvocate.com*, September 24, 2014, http://transadvocate.com/you-might-be-a-terf-if_n_10226.htm.

29. David Cauldwell, “Psychopathia Transexualis [1949],” rpt. in *International Journal of Transgenderism* 5, no. 2 (2001): 274–80, https://cdn.atrria.nl/ezines/web/IJT/97-03/numbers/symposion/cauldwell_02.htm.

“Malignant Self Love: Narcissism Revisited,” published by a non-scientific press called Narcissus Publications.³⁰ First, Vaknin frames trans body dysmorphia as a sign of self-fixation: “[T]here is little difference between a narcissist who seeks to avoid his True Self . . . and a transsexual who seeks to discard his true gender.” Second, Vaknin views the insistence of members in a trans community that society reclassifies their gender as attention seeking “self-preoccupation” and “entitlement” (i.e., “I deserve to be taken care of”). Third, Vaknin argues that many trans persons are autoerotic heterosexuals who seek “to be rendered the sexual object of their own desire.”³¹ Throughout each of these steps, Vaknin continues and constitutes narratives that reduce Narcissus, narcissism, and transgender to disordered cisgender heterosexual matrixes of desire and disgust.

The conflation of trans identity and narcissism leads society to expect, even encourage, the possibility that like the disorder’s namesake, transgender lives will end in suicide. Based on his claims that trans persons may or destroy their “true selves,” Vaknin concludes that suicide is more likely for trans individuals than for cisgender persons, explaining, “narcissists are, at times, suicidal and are always self-destructive.”³² The association with transgender and Narcissus, qua “the suicide,” play out with real consequences. A 2014 report from the American Society for Suicide Prevention states that 41% of transgender persons attempt suicide, noting slightly higher numbers for trans men (46%) than trans women (42%).³³ Other organizations such as the Youth Suicide Prevention Program report that 50% of trans youths attempt suicide by the

30. Sam Vaknin, *Malignant Self Love: Narcissism Revisited*, ed. Lidija Rangelovska (Prague: Narcissus Publications, 2007), 1-720. The editors clearly state in the front matter of the book, “The Author is NOT a Mental Health Professional.” I reference this argument not because it is the reigning medical view, but because it represents an ongoing social prejudice evident in the book’s ongoing success. Since 2007, the book has been reprinted eight times, with the most recent edition coming out in 2015.

31. Vaknin, *Malignant Self Love*, 57-58.

32. Vaknin, 57.

33. Jody L. Herman, Ann P. Haas, and Philip L. Rodgers, *Suicide Attempts among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults: Findings of The National Transgender Discrimination Survey* (Los Angeles, CA: University of Los Angeles, 2014), 1-18.

age of twenty.³⁴ As explored in the next section, to be a dysphoric and suicidal embodiment of confession in the public eye is to be made into an image of Narcissus, reflecting back onto the world ancient unresolved necropolitics.

The questions posed by trans suicides are many and demand a multitude of responses. Not all of these responses must be medical or legal. Art and the humanities have much to say in this public confession. In particular, history and literature offer critical methodologies for engaging the social conditions of dysphoric youths. In the process, through Gower's *Confessio*, confession may become more than a personal submission or a ritual sacrament. Instead confession may serve as a literary mode of speaking-together the concerns of the past and present, cis and trans, fact and fiction. Likewise, through Gower's tale, narcissism (i.e., being like Narcissus) may be understood as more than a personality disorder or synonym for pride. Instead, Narcissus may serve as a mythic mode of thinking through the *wód* of suicide, the *ymage* of woman, the *condicioŋun* of dysphoria, and the many *otherwhiles* of transgender suicide in the Middle Ages.

The *Wód* of the Suicide: Confession and Necropolitics

It is rarely acknowledged that the *Confessio* is set in a wood of suicide. Decades earlier, Dante Alighieri wrote his *Inferno* in which the author finds himself alone in the woods only to be guided out by the dead.³⁵ Traveling into the wood of suicide, Dante discovers that those who have taken their own lives are silenced and locked away in trees. As Dante claws at the bark of one such tree, the wounds turn into mouths, allowing the suicide to tell their story and give warning, "so from the broken stump came forth words and / blood together" (Canto 13; 43-44).³⁶ This creative discourse between the living and dead anticipates Gower's

34. "Statistics About Youth Suicide," The Youth Suicide Prevention Program, accessed September 1, 2017, http://www.yspp.org/about_suicide/statistics.htm.

35. Dante Alighieri, "Canto 13," *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, vol. 1: *Inferno*, trans. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 199-206.

36. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, 201.

necropolitical frame in the *Confessio*. In the introduction to this text, Gower writes of wandering into the woods where he will take his own life if he cannot overcome his isolation. Entering into the same wood, Venus arrives and elicits a confession whereby Gower is brought back into community. The product and method of this confession are the tales that follow, including Narcissus and their wood.

The frame of the confession reflects the story of Narcissus, where the narrator, later revealed to be Gower, describes the turmoil of seeking life and love. Like the youth, Gower begins as a young man fleeing into the woods, “and that was in the monthe of Maii . . . Unto the wode I gan to fare,” he writes (l.100-10; and that was in the month of May . . . into the wood I began to journey). Here, as in the Tale of Narcissus, the word “wode” has double meanings: first, as a term describing the literal environment; second, as a Middle English word for madness. Both definitions signal a retreat into isolation, internal life, and a way of being counter to civilized norms. Divided and isolated, Gower expresses his suffering, “For whanne I was the wode amiddes, / I fond a swote grene pleine, / And ther I gan my wo compleigne / Wisshinge and wepinge al myn one” (l.112-15; for when I was in the wood, / I found a sweet green plain, / and there I gave my woeful complaint, / wishing and weeping all on my own). It is unclear whether the isolated wood is the cause of the suffering or whether it is only in such isolation that the suffering can be voiced. In any case, the normative culture outside the wood will not or cannot allow such a voice to be heard.

By using the image of a wood where one goes when one is insane, isolated, and excluded from loving community, the poet plays on the word’s multiple meanings. As a noun, “wood” means “a group of trees,”³⁷ or trees as a multiplicity, “trees collectively,”³⁸ yet as an adjective, from the Anglo-Saxon, “*wód*” also means isolation and exclusion from reasonable states of being, “out of one’s mind.”³⁹ There may be a tension

37. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “wōde, n. (2).,” accessed March 21, 2019, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED53253/?track=counter=1&search_id=615298.

38. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Wood, n.,” accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/230005?rskey=TbuWHZ&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

39. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “wōd, adj.,” accessed March 21, 2019,

between these two seeming opposites, collectivity and isolation. Yet in the combined image of a mad wood/*wód*, the meanings cross, reflecting what Martin De Mauro Rucovsky imagines in “Trans Necropolitics” to be a mad collectivity, a discursive place of excluded truths and associations.⁴⁰ When the wood is read as a site of confession, however, the *Confessio* reveals itself to be a necropolitical collective. Unlike confession’s private form wherein a person rectifies themselves to a community, which is the definition reflected most readily in existent Middle English Dictionaries,⁴¹ this wood suggests confession’s public form where the self and community are in equal discourse, literally a “con” (together) and “fateri” (speaking), where the *wód* and the wood converse.⁴²

In this way, the *Confessio* uses the literature of death and suicide to create alternative woods, discourses by which isolated people may reclaim livable lives. In “Trans Necropolitics,” Rucovsky argues that suicide and its literature (e.g., confession) are creative works that turn private isolation into public power. “It is death, rather than the positivity of life, that is put to work for the sake of the trans* political agenda,” writes Rucovsky, describing “the potential-symbolic production and regulation of necrotic bodies that have value for political capitalization (necropower).”⁴³ Building on Achille Mbembe’s “Necropolitics,” Rucovsky articulates how suicides serve society in their woods in ways they could not if they remained within the walled towns of accepted life and love. Following a necropolitical approach, readers can better see how Gower scrapes at the bark of silence around the *wód* of suicide in order to bring the isolated back into collective discourse.

Suicide or suicidal ideation would certainly have been regarded as

https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED53255/track?counter=2&search_id=615298.

40. Martin De Mauro Rucovsky, “Trans* Necropolitics: Gender Identity Law in Argentina,” *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad - Revista Latinoamericana* 20 (2015): 10-27, 11-13.

41. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “Confessioun, n.,” accessed March 21, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED8918/track?counter=1&search_id=615298.

42. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Confession, n.,” accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/38779?redirectedFrom=confession#eid>.

43. Rucovsky, “Trans* Necropolitics,” 13.

grounds for confession of one sort or another in medieval culture and theology. Thomas Aquinas condemned suicide as akin to murder, even if done for unselfish reasons. "According to Aquinas even a judge may not sentence himself to death for a capital crime," writes Andrew Papanikitas, "but must rely on the judgment of another in order to avoid the guilt of suicide."⁴⁴ In the same article, "Splitting hairs over the definition of murder," however, Papanikitas notes that Aquinas condones martyrdom and finds no fault in a person for being murdered because this presumes a certain drive to live that is squelched by outside forces. Thus, while Aquinas and other medieval theologians might not have excused Gower or Narcissus from the sin of being suicidal, there are grounds to complicate the question and subject of sin if it is possible to demonstrate that suicide is not always an idea or judgment executed totally independently from outside forces. Elsewhere, Sara M. Butler observes that a "culture of suicide" emerged in medieval England, wherein issues of death function not as an individual peril but as a community concern.⁴⁵ In other words, suicide does not merely affect one person, and it can be said conversely that suicide as an act and an idea can be affected by more than one person.

Although medieval theologians condemned committing suicide, the ability to make judgments (or non-condemning judgments) of the self may be hampered or depressed by social pressures. In turn, affect, emotion, and mental infirmity were concerns in medieval thought on suicide. As Rebecca F. McNamara observes, "suffering from mental and physical infirmity" could offer "a mitigating cause of suicide" in medieval judgments of the deceased.⁴⁶ Yet even without invoking mental illness, suicidal ideation may be recognized as an affective state brought on by diverse circumstantial conditions. Studying *The Decameron*, Saxby S.

44. Andrew Papanikitas, "Splitting Hairs Over the Definition of Murder: Thomas Aquinas and the Doctrine of Double Effect," *Clinical Ethics* 4, no. 4 (2009): 211-12, 212.

45. Sara M. Butler, "Cultures of Suicide?: Suicide Verdicts and the 'Community' in Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century England," *Historian* 69, no. 3 (2007): 427-49, 427.

46. Rebecca F. McNamara, "The Sorrow of Soreness: Infirmity and Suicide in Medieval England," *Parergon* 31, no. 2 (2014): 11-34, 11, doi:10.1353/pgn.2014.0091.

Pridmore and Garry Walter put forth a litany of examples of suicidal ideation arising out of social stressors, noting, “depictions of completed suicide in response to painful social/environmental circumstances by people without any apparent mental disorder.”⁴⁷ What emerges from a survey of scholarship on medieval suicide is a more complicated image of suicide that turns the discussion of suicide from the sin of an individual into a group examination of the affects, illnesses, and sins of suicide within a community: a collective examination that I suggest could be called a form of confession.

More than a mere holding device for its tales, the frame of the *Confessio* sets out on a mission of love to connect formerly divided stories and lives through ethical discourse. In the introduction to Book 1, “On Love,” Gower writes, “Naturatus amor nature legibus orbem / Subdit, et vnanimes concitat esse feras” (1.1-ii; Love fashioned for nature’s ends subjects the world to the laws of nature, and incites harmonized ones to wildness). Too often “love” as an idea becomes a mode by which society determines how life may come into existence, how it may be organized, and conversely, who and what exists outside of its kingdom. Michel Foucault calls this form of making life “biopolitics.”⁴⁸ Gower calls it love. By love certain persons are brought into community life, while those to whom love is denied are also denied life. This denial sets those excluded from love on a path towards the *wód* of death. As a confession of love, the *Confessio*’s overarching movement is the mapping and critiquing of necropolitics, the footpaths that lead to the *wód* of suicide.

Towards this goal of establishing livable lives, Gower defines love not as the elimination of difference and division but the forming of shared affects and associations across boundaries. “Est amor egra salus, vexata quies, pius error, / Bellica pax, vulnus dulce, suaue malum,” writes Gower (1.vii-viii; Love is a sharp salvation, a troubled quiet, a pious error, a warring peace, a sweet wound, a soothing ill). As a genre, suicide literature encounters the problem of trying to make sense of an act deemed

47. Saxby S. Pridmore and Garry Walter, “Suicidal Ideation and Completed Suicide in *The Decameron*,” *Türk psikiyatri dergisi* [Turkish Journal of Psychiatry] 25, no. 1 (2014): 38-41, 38.

48. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 138.

senseless, *wód*. Admitting that such a seeming contradiction exists in the heart of love, Gower anticipates Mbembe's work on the ambiguity of necropower, wherein "lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred."⁴⁹ One fears loving or listening to the suicide too much out of a concern that the power they reclaim in death might draw others to this "sweet wound, [this] soothing ill." Yet if one finds oneself in this *wód*, a suicidal person may be a useful guide, just as Dante needed the dead to show the way through death.

The *wód* of exclusion functions for Gower as a necropolitical space excluded from social discourse and yet open to alternative forms of meaning and power. In theorizing "necropolitics" and "necropower," Mbembe rejects the conceit of suicide as merely negative and unspeakable. Instead, Mbembe's theories chart how death environments are allowed, caused, and promoted, "to account for . . . the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead."⁵⁰ While modern society struggles to discuss death in a productive way, if it is discussed at all, Gower's confession of *wódn*ness offers a medieval genre of discourse with which to speak. Mbembe asks, "[w]hat place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?"⁵¹ To such questions posed by death and division, Gower responds in his own way and time with the *wód* of suicide.

The stakes of the *Confessio* follow the stakes of Narcissus's tale: love or death. If the trouble of the *wód* cannot be resolved, Gower will die. "So hard me was that ilke throwe, / That ofte sithes overthrowe / To grounde I was withoute breth; / And evere I wisshide after deth," writes Gower (1;117-20; so hard I was that same period, so often my sighs overthrew the ground I became without breath; and ever I wished after death). While lovesickness can spark suicidal ideations, in chivalric romance this love is often a public performance where intermediaries express concern and assistance. Yet the sufferings and suicidal thoughts of the

49. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 40.

50. Mbembe, 40.

51. Mbembe, 12.

wood seem to occur in isolation. There is then an attempt to solve the problem alone, accompanied by the despair of being unable to do so. Like other desperate persons calling out for confession, at last Gower begs Eros, “[n]ow doth me plainly live or dye, / For certes such a maladie / As I now have and longe have hadd, / It myhte make a wis man madd, / If that it scholde longe endure. / O Venus, queene of loves cure / . . . / Schal I ben hol or elles dye?” (l.127-32, 163; now I do plainly live or die, for certainly such a sickness as I now have and have long had, it might make a wise man mad, if it should last long. O Venus, queen of love’s cure / . . . / shall I been whole or else die?). The isolated Gower has lost agency over life and feels that he is left only with control over his death. Suicide is presented then not as an inner madness but as an escape from external circumstances that brought him to the *wód*.

A necropolitical approach to the *Confessio*’s suicidal frame requires readers to see beyond the literary trope of lovesickness or madness in order to honor the *wód*’s political force, which might be leveraged against wider social divisions. While Mbembe’s necropolitics focuses on the explosive agency of suicide bombers, all suicide functions in some way as a violent reclaiming of power and liberation, the last resort left to a person who has lost the power to live a livable life. “The besieged body becomes a piece of metal whose function is, through sacrifice, to bring eternal life into being,” writes Mbembe.⁵² “The body duplicates itself and, in death, literally and metaphorically escapes the state of siege and occupation.” Depleted of life, the only resort for the forgotten person is to die in such a way that death avails them of the necropolitical forces which might give them a sort of afterlife in the undead twilight of story. Even if the dead only exist as figures such as “the Suicide” or “the Narcissus,” they may be able to effect more social change in death than they did in life.

For the suicide, the call to make confessional literature is like a break in the walls around the *wód*, like the gasp of those buried alive or left for dead: “Whanne I out of my peine awok, / And caste up many a pitous lok / Unto the hevене, and seide thus: / O thou Cupide, O thou Venus, / Thow god of love and thou goddesse, / Wher is pité? wher is

52. Mbembe, 37.

meknesse?” (1.121-26; when I was out of my pain awoken, and cast up many a piteous look onto heaven, and said thus: O you Cupid, O you Venus, you god of love and you goddess, where is pity? Where is meakness?). Too often trans desires are likewise walled out of public spaces as a sort of irrational madness, *wód*, unspeakable and unknowable. The pain of the *wód* pulls the subject away from existing speech to feel the inarticulate speech of the body. Thus follows the challenge for the self to put unarticulated experience into words and for others to listen to experiences that are likewise hard to hear. It is telling that when Venus and Eros arrive, they request that Gower put these feelings into words, which will become the *Confessio*. “Sche seide, “Tell thi maladie” (1.164; She said, “Tell your illness”). *Wóds* are deemed inarticulate, yet through the confession of love a literature of the suicide emerges, thus turning the necropolitical drive towards death into an alternative form of power, meaning, and community.

While suicide may be articulated in isolation, confession nonetheless needs interlocutors. The *wód* calls for those who will listen. Gower writes, “of my maladie / [Venus] bad me telle and seie hir trow the / . . . / “Sey forth,” quod sche, “and tell me how; / Schew me thi seknesse everydiel” (1.180-85; of my illness, Venus bade me to tell her the truth / . . . / “speak up,” she said, “and tell me how; show me your illness completely”). Gower needs to be called on and given agency. Like Odysseus feeding the dead his blood in order to give them the power to speak, the suicide in the grips of a *wód’s* necropolitical power often needs the attention and even the words of the living to begin reclaiming language, such as through the bent logic of association and analogy.⁵³ Because the excluded often are deemed unspeakable, they lack the language to make their conditions known. As such, the marginalized adapt other discourses for their use be they derogatory, medieval, feminist, or medical. “What is thi sor of which thou pleignest?” Venus asks Gower, “Ne hyd it noght, for if thou feignest, / I can do thee no medicine” (1.165-67; What is the sore which plagues you? Hide it not, for if you feign, I can provide no medicine for you). If the isolated cannot engage society

53. Homer, “Book XI,” *The Odyssey*, trans. Samuel Butler (Overland Park, KS: Digireads Publishing, 2009), 72-80.

with their complaints and be engaged in return, the *wód* of suicide will continue to grow.

Because the genre requires readers as well as writers, confession as a social praxis and the confession of suicide in particular demands the restructuring of society in order to better allow for such critical engagement. Having heard Gower's complaint against her, Venus calls in the Genius, a confessor, to hear and assist Gower in the creation of his *Confessio*. "I wot miself, bot for al this," says Eros, "Unto my prest, which comth anon, / I woll thou telle it on and on, / Bothe all thi thoght and al thi werk. / O Genius myn oghne clerk, / Com forth and hier this mannes schrifte," (l.192-97; I would myself, but for all of this unto my priest, who comes presently, I will that you tell him one thing at a time, both all your thoughts and all your doings. O Genius, my own clerk, come forth and hear this man's confession). While framed as a private confession, the *Confessio* implicitly includes a reading public. This readership begins in the fourteenth century but stretches into the far future. By using an archive of personal and non-personal stories, Gower's *Confessio* also stretches far into the past. Unlike private confessions, one reader is not enough. Gower's story demands more stories and more listeners. His *wód* calls to more *wóds*. This is how the frame of the *Confessio* demands that the tales that follow fill it. Only then can the Gower of the *wód* move from the silent, suicidal isolation and ideation to the overwhelming chorus of confession.

The *Ymage* of the Nymphs: Presumption and Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminism

In the Middle Ages, the wood and *wód* were unordered (or less ordered) sets that came into being out of the excluded lands and peoples left over from the ordering of normative cities. I argue that in the treatise on "Presumption" that frames the Tale of Narcissus, Gower acknowledges how confessional discourses (including his own) can operate as walled cities of truth, potentially excluding the truths of medieval transgender lives. These presumptions establish foundations that will be replicated and built on by trans-exclusive radical feminism, which excludes the truths of modern transgender lives. I conclude that Gower seems to be

acknowledging the necropolitical machines at work, affirming the way in which *wóds* of exclusion (and suicide) grow in the erased and circumvented gaps in and around presumptuous systems of gender.

A genealogy of presumption demonstrates the concept's relation to the claiming of turf, be it land, people, or discourses such as feminism, and possessions, such as the image of what defines a woman. The term *presumption* comes from Latin, meaning "to take beforehand," from the roots "pre, before + sumere, to take."⁵⁴ In Middle English, the word had associations with property, suggesting "seizure and occupation without right," or "taking upon oneself more than is warranted."⁵⁵ The Middle English also suggests an overabundance of confidence, "to assume overconfidently or unwarrantably," especially confidence in the established order of things, "to take for granted . . . assume."⁵⁶ According to this definition, the presumptuous are not without claims to properties, bodies, and concepts, but they go beyond what is justified by refusing others who might also have a claim to something, such as to the image of womanhood. Likewise, in Middle English, *surquidrie* functions in many ways as a synonym of presumption but adds further nuance. It comes from the roots "sur, over + cuidier, to think,"⁵⁷ suggesting an overconfidence of ideology and information, "intellectual presumption."⁵⁸ If presumption takes land and goods from other occupants, *surquidrie* takes images, ideas, and histories from other discourses. Ideas dominate the discursive landscape, building high walls around their truth and relegating other ways of thinking to the silence and isolation of the woods. One way of knowing inhibits another way of knowing.

54. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Presume v.," accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/150896?rskey=71kZlj&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

55. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. "Presumption, n.," accessed March 21, 2019, https://www.etymonline.com/word/presumption#etymonline_v_19471.

56. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "Prēsūmen v.," accessed March 21, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED34546/track?counter=8&search_id=615298.

57. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Surquidry, n.," accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/195014?redirectedFrom=Surquidry#eid>.

58. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "Surquidri n.," accessed March 21, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED43921/track?counter=1&search_id=615298.

The treatise framing each tale in the *Confessio* likewise prepares readers to approach the text in certain ways and to take away certain truths. It is by this device that the Tale of Narcissus turns social presumptions into confessions that reveal certain truths while eschewing others. Such a confession can account for the presumptuous forces that normalize what gendered embodiment looks like, what definitions of womanhood are included and given life, and which embodiments and images are excluded. This process is forecasted by the surrounding discourse but is well illustrated in the tale when Narcissus sees himself as a woman. At this moment, Gower allows readers to see how presumption interferes with processes of knowing, especially self-knowing: “He sih the like of his visage, / And wende ther were an ymage / Of such a nimphe as tho was faie” (l.2315-17; He saw the likeness of his visage, and thought it was an image of a nymph as though it was enchanted). A hasty reader might assume that this *ymage* is the artificial misrecognition of the trans youth. Yet the emphasis on appearances suggested by the word “ymage” points to the presumptuous social constructs of gender that alienate a trans youth from themselves. What Narcissus sees clues readers into the ways in which the youth has been taught to not see themselves or others accurately, especially in relation to femininity. This turns the tale from a singular story of a faie-like individual into a moral machine that makes readers aware of presumptuous *ymages* of what a nymph looks like; whether they are reading in the fourteenth century or today. The *ymage* points to a network of associations and like visages as it also discretely points away from others.

In a queer study of the *Confessio*, Watt cites trans femininity as a troubled *ymage*. Trans femininity in the *Confessio*, including “male cross-dressing,” is held to be an embodiment of an unacceptable truth, “a travesty of masculinity. . . an ontological crisis, which can only be resolved by self-destruction.”⁵⁹ Utilizing the lens of trans necropolitics, I argue that Gower nonetheless admits how his truths presumptuously drive other *ymages* down the trails towards isolation and death. Following the confessor’s lesson on presumption, Gower cries, “my fader, I confesse” that “my wenyng hath gon amis / Touchende to Surquiderie”

59. Watt, *Amoral Gower*, 71.

(1.1952, 1970-71; my father, I confess . . . that my beliefs have gone amiss, touched with presumption). Aware that he is never alone in sin, Gower's confession points to a network of trans-exclusive sexism. Revealing the walls around his own "*yimage*" of truth, Gower invites readers to reflect on the presumption that excludes trans truths at the medieval moment of his writing and the later moments of readers.

The danger of ignoring exclusion in medieval literature is that readers join with premodern patriarchies in the work of transhistorical wall building. Such walls—based on cisgender presumptions as well as misogyny—have historically impeded the building of feminist communities of discourse and then further impede trans communities from entering into such enclaves of feminist scholarship once they are able to form. As mentioned earlier, feminist scholars who have a tradition of excluding trans lives and insights are termed "TERFs" (Trans-Excluding Radical Feminist) by the trans movement. Building such divisions between feminism and the trans community, one famous TERF likewise gave an oppositional name to Transgender Studies and trans feminism in her book *The Transsexual Empire*.⁶⁰ In her argument, Janice Raymond paints an *yimage* of TERF womanhood as a city under siege. "All transsexuals rape women's bodies," she writes, "reducing the female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves."⁶¹ In addition to misrecognizing trans women as cis male invaders, Raymond's infamous diatribe against trans-ness also serves to reinforce the walls around womanhood by affirming a siege mentality. Defending what womanhood is and who may assume it (i.e., claim it, as with a piece of land) in this way, TERFs such as Raymond do that for which they blame transsexuals: reduce women and their bodies to artifacts, *yimages*, that one presumptuously claims and holds with aggressive exclusivity.

The discursive walls built around this *yimage* of womanhood, what I call the walled city of truth, is not directly named in the treatise on presumption. However the meaning of these walls is expressed in the Latin text that Gower includes to introduce the section. Gower writes,

60. Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Cambridge, MA: Beacon Press, 1978).

61. Raymond, 104.

“Omnia scire putat, set se Presumpcio nescit, / Nec sibi consimilem quem putat esse parem,” (1.viii.1-2; All things Presumption thinks he knows, but he does not know himself, nor does he think that anyone similar to him is his equal). Too often an *ymage* of truth, a movement or methodology, that once sought beyond itself, consolidates itself within ever narrowing borders of discourse. Presumptive knowledge likewise walls itself up like a city, excluding neighboring forms of truth as less worthy ghettos of knowledge. “And thus,” writes Gower, “[Presumption] wolde bere a pris / Above alle othre, and noght forthi / He seith noght ones ‘grant mercy’” (1.1900-1902; And thus, [Presumption] would bear a prize above all others, and nevertheless he says to no one, “grant mercy”). Like most walls to some degree, presumption’s high fences are the double-edged weapons that protect its *ymage* of truth yet deny resources to potential allies, creating for itself a self-imposed siege. Presumption walls in as it strives to wall out.

Yet just as necropolitical spaces live in the shade of biopolitical architecture, presumption does not always begin with hate for other images of truth and life but can begin with love for an endangered *ymage*. For the presumptuous, love for one *ymage* grows and builds through the unloving of another, writes Gower, “he alle othre set at noght / And weneth of himselven so, / That such as he ther be no mo, / So fair, so seemly, ne so wis” (1.1896-99; to all others he leaves nothing and thinks so much of himself, that there is no other as he so fair, so seemly, nor so wise). Anxiety and pride set the presumptuous to defend womanhood against other claimants, such as patriarchy. This defensiveness can make feminists suspicious of trans feminism. Gower concedes that such *ymages* can be good (*fair*), true (*wis*), and beautiful (*semly*) but warns that such icons can become idols that make the presumptuous less able to perceive these graces in other *ymages*. “Ful ofte [the presumptuous] heweth up so hihe,” warns Gower, “that chippes fallen in his yhe” (1.1917-18; Very often [the presumptuous] chops up so high that chips fall in his eye). The “chippes” in the eye of the presumptuous may very well be the *ymage* of the beloved. The presumptuous sees the sticks in others’ eyes so well that she cannot see the stick in her own.

Ymages of the Middle Ages are recurrently being reclaimed in part because critical movements are limited by who is (allowed to be) involved.

While trans-exclusive *yimages* may allow for readings of medieval cis men and women, one way of knowing interferes with other ways. As if aware of the literate and educated persons reading his *Confessio*, Gower warns of an intellectual's tendency to presumption: "his wittes he despendeth / Upon himself, as thogh ther were / No godd which myhte availe there" (1.1904-6; he depends on his own wits, as though there is no good that might defeat it). Knowledge can be circular, like a tradition of feminism that defines womanhood only with reference to those women present, leading to the isolation of knowledge or ivory towers within walled cities. "Non other conseil good him siemeth / Bot such as he himselve diemeth," Gower writes of such proud thinkers, "For in such wise as he compasseth, / His wit alone alle othre passeth" (1.1891-94; No other counsel seems good to him. But he thinks so well of himself, because his wisdom is so expansive, that his solitary wit overcomes all others). The invoked "compass" is a tool of orientation that draws circles. Indeed, the presumptuous draw many kinds of circles, including social circles or circles of logic, drawing the ends back to their beginnings without asking who or what else is not being questioned or included.

It is worth noting that trans exclusion can occur among feminists who are not knowingly TERFs. Such exclusion can occur out of defensive risk avoidance in a dangerous environment. By making the world safer for cis women, feminists can unintentionally make the world more dangerous for trans people. Queer feminist Judith Butler argues that denying access to discourses of power leaves populations, such as the trans community, in a state of precariousness. "Precarity," writes Butler, "designates the politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks and become differently exposed to injury, violence and death."⁶² Trans persons are not always left without safe homes, schools, bathrooms, or jobs because of intentional and conscious hate of transgender people. Exclusion arises out of a presumptuous defense of populations who have defined themselves against transgender persons. By making room for one *yimage* of gender at the expense of another, presumption shifts precariousness by

62. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso Books, 2009), 25.

building cities of truth alongside *wóds* of suicide. The city is made safe by sending the danger into the woods.

Often, however, presumptuous exclusion occurs not by accident but by design. When presumption treats knowledge as a limited resource, those embodying different *ymages* of truth are excluded from life-giving and life-affirming discourses. Trans exclusion is too often justified as necessary for the health of a field. Rucovsky writes: “[N]ecropolitical calculus reminds us that, in order to protect certain lives (cissexual ones), many others have to be sacrificed (trans* lives).”⁶³ When the identity of women is treated as the exclusive property of those born within normate, able-bodied, and frequently white, cisgender parameters, so that only so many may be counted in the privileged *ymage* of womanhood, presumption grows. Rucovsky observes that in order to enact the biopolitics of cis feminism, groups exclude trans feminism to the realm of necropolitics, “to achieve growth, expansion and protection of civic life (cissexual universality), the vulnerability, precariousness, and death of others (trans* lives) becomes necessary.”⁶⁴ Trans exclusion becomes integral to admittance into womanhood, securing more livable cis lives by making trans lives less livable.

To conclude, the joining of the frame and tale presents the *ymage* of presumption as the cultural tendency by which certain lives may be systematically isolated and eliminated. In this way, while the *Confessio* moves on to other subjects and tales, it continually returns to the setting and drama established in the frame: Gower in the *wód* of suicide. At the end of the treatise on presumption, the *Confessio* returns to the frame to remind readers that it is because of such exclusion that Gower was driven to suicidal ideation. “Forthi, my fader, as of this, / That my wenyng hath gon amis / Touchende to Surquiderie, / Gif me my penance er I die,” Gower begs the confessor. (l.1969-71; Nevertheless, my father, my belief has gone amiss touched by presumption, give me my penance/cure before I die). Gower’s “er” suggests the precariousness of excluded lives. For Gower needs intervention from outside his exclusion, “or I die.” Suicides may demand change “er” (i.e., before) their death,

63. Rucovsky, “Trans* Necropolitics,” 21.

64. Rucovsky, 21.

even if it is too late for them. Confessional literature of suicide may yet produce meanings that give them powers in death that they were denied in life. Among precarious communities, this necropower can be critical to the reorientation of both necropolitics and biopolitics.

Thus, while presumptuous wall-building like trans-exclusive radical feminism can lead to other necropolitical forms of power, nonetheless there is a difference between the power of the living and the dead. Rucovsky writes that excluded trans people find themselves conflated with the *yimage* of the dead in the *wóds* of suicide, “represented all the same in the threshold between life and death as undead lives, half alive and half dead; spectral lives, immaterial citizenships, resurrected bodies or bodies in the threshold.”⁶⁵ This is how presumptuous wall-builders create *wóds* of isolation next door. By denying the life of transgender people, cis patriarchies and TERFs turn trans bodies into the living dead. Suicides or homicides do not surprise the presumptuous society that figured these deaths into their calculus. Associations with loneliness and death become naturalized qualities of the *yimage* of transgender. Over time, Gower illustrates in his Tale of Narcissus how the system eliminates trans lives by marking them as killable or as poor investments for lifesaving tools.

Read through the general frame of the *wód* or the specific frame of the *yimage* of presumption, Gower’s Tale of Narcissus may be understood as a tragedy of cultural overthinking on a narrowing image of gender and sexuality. Perhaps for the writer as well as many readers, the vision of a medieval trans womanhood is obscure. Yet if the answers that dwell within this vision remain dim, the failures and problems of that frame are more evident. If Narcissus was not bound by overwrought cisgender presumptions, the youth might have been able to imagine another life for themselves. If patriarchal manhood had not presumptively assigned a gender and sexuality for them in advance of what is revealed at the well, Narcissus might have been free enough to live another life. If Narcissus’s environment had not excluded other possible visions and versions of a nymph’s *yimage*, the wood may have become a place of transition. But mired in the swamps of presumption, standing in the place of the

65. Rucovsky, 21.

absent *ymage* of medieval transgender, Narcissus is conditioned to see either an unlivable life or else a liberating death.

The Wonder Hot Day: *Condiciöuns* and Dysphoric Environments

As shown, the frames of the *Confessio* prepare readers to approach Narcissus through a critical model that locates dysphoria in the environment rather than just in the body. The *wód* of suicide in the *Confessio*'s general frame establishes the cost of isolating a life from life-affirming discourses. The subframe on presumption then positions readers to attend to the isolation of those embodying genders outside socially accepted genres of truth. Within these discourses, Gower re-narrates the Tale of Narcissus from an exemplum on personal vanity into a story on precariousness, “the politically induced condition,” caused by society’s failure to affirm the life and truth of trans persons, resulting in unlivable lives and death by suicide.⁶⁶ Contrary to reductive answers that shut down discourses about suicide, Gower expresses the drive to enter the isolated *wód* as induced by a presumptuous trans-exclusive society, putting it into the terms of an unbearable thirst, a *condiciöun* externally brought on by a “wonder hot” day.

In classical versions of the Narcissus tale, the youth is driven by a curse brought on by a scorned lover. Gower’s narrative lacks such a supernatural cause. Without this element, Gower’s tale begs the questions, “why is Narcissus alone?” and “why does the youth commit suicide?” No immediate answer is given. Instead, Gower introduces the tale with an ambiguous statement about the youth and their circumstances, “was ther no comparisoun / As toward his condiciöun” (1.2283–84; there was no comparison as to his condition). In Middle English, conditions or “condiciöuns” were as much about context, “circumstances of life or existence” as a state of life, “mode of being.”⁶⁷ To exist in a *condiciöun* without comparison is to exist in a kind of discourse that actively isolates

66. Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

67. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “Condiciöun n.,” accessed March 21, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED8867/track?counter=1&search_id=615298.

or denies relationships. In a word, *condiciõuns* point to environmental forces that work together to isolate, exclude, and divide Narcissus first from community and then from their own body.

While framed by a discourse on the sin of pride, the youth in the Tale of Narcissus shows few unambiguous signs of a personal sense of superiority. Instead, Gower establishes in a multitude of ways how suffering is caused by a lack of associations, especially with women, and by a culture of presumption that excludes the youth. The closest Gower comes to naming a personal sin of pride in the tale is a statement about Narcissus's socioeconomic *condiciõun*. "Ther was no womman for to love," Gower writes, "So hihe he sette himself above / Of stature and beauté bothe, / That him thoghte alle wommen lothe" (l.2279-82; There was no woman for [Narcissus] to love, so high he set himself above the stature and beauty of others that he thought all women to be loathsome). Narcissus does not relate to women but readers cannot presume to know why at the start. What can be known at the start is the existence of *condiciõuns* that divide Narcissus from women. Raised as a man in a patriarchy, Narcissus is set above women. Raised as a rich man in a patriarchy, Narcissus is set above other men. Raised as a cisgender man in a patriarchy, Narcissus is set above trans folk. All this combines with the *yimage* of women and nymphs that become a source of uncanny recognition for Narcissus to produce a tale that sets up their personal *condiciõuns* as signs of wider social divisions and comparisons.

Nonetheless, male supremacy never exists without the need for *condiciõuning*, for collective participation and repetition in its rules of exclusion. This takes the form of a lack of certain associations and associates. Being raised as a rich man in a patriarchy gives Narcissus privileges that are nonetheless not free. To remain above others, in their *condiciõun*, Narcissus must not be lowered to "comparisoun" with other gender associations and associates. The demand from the biopolitical environment is nonetheless veiled as a personal choice and personal accomplishment, similar to what Jasbir Puar describes as "a call to upward mobility" that echoes the isolating, individualist motto, "pull yourself up by the bootstraps."⁶⁸ Narcissus is *condiciõuned* not to

68. Jasbir Puar, "Coda: the Cost of Getting Better: Suicide, Sensation,

associate with women. Furthermore, the presumptions of a cisgender society—including compulsory cisgender identification—*condiciõuns* Narcissus to be unable to associate themselves with trans women or other queer fairy forms of gender.

Claiming that one exists in dysphoric conditions or environments does not require the use of specifically modern transgender or psychiatric terminology. Even for modern trans persons, the *DSM-5* introduces gender dysphoria as the mental suffering resulting from social prejudice rather than as the personal *condiciõun* of being trans. “Gender dysphoria refers to the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender,” writes the American Psychiatric Association. “[Subjects] feel uncomfortable being regarded by others, or functioning in society, as members of their assigned gender.”⁶⁹ Because dysphoria is in the environment rather than just in the body, it can be named as a social ill. John Barnhill clarifies that the dysphoric are “not intrinsically pathological but are problematic because they exist within a certain social structure.”⁷⁰ By this definition, a person may experience gender dysphoria without using or knowing trans discourse. As a diagnostic, dysphoria works to describe an objective reality within both nature and nurture. These conditions may be understood subjectively and affected by society but are nonetheless part of a wider reality. For instance, while gravity is not a concept that medieval society understood in modern subjective and social terms, nonetheless gravity existed during the Middle Ages. One can surmise dysphoria and gravity by the effects we see recorded in the world, even if their recorders did not understand them as such.

Among these effects is the unspecified *condiciõun* that makes Narcissus’s life unlivable by the end of the tale. The *condiciõun* of being set apart by the environment causes unbearable dysphoria in Narcissus to grow like an embodied thirst for new gender associations. “The day was

Switchpoints,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (2012): 149–58, 151.

69. American Psychiatric Association, “Gender Dysphoria,” in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed., accessed March 21, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596.dsm14>.

70. John W. Barnhill, “Gender Dysphoria,” in *DSM-5: Clinical Cases*, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9781585624836.jb14>.

wonder hot withalle,” writes Gower, “And such a thurst was on him falle, / That he moste owther deie or drinke” (1.2307-9; The day was wondrously hot everywhere. And such a thirst had befallen on him that he must either die or drink). In regards to the metaphor of thirst, it is not unusual for medieval writers to use the environment to comment on the state of society. Once made, the metaphor flows outward in a few key directions. Narcissus’s world lacks the wetness associated with women and the fluidity to move between genders. Before they even knows what they wants, Narcissus knows that the current *condiciõuns* are unbearable. Puar and Berlant name this kind of death by thirst, “slow death,”⁷¹ caused by silence and isolation, presumption and exclusion, i.e., “the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering.”⁷² As is the case for many trans people, the future life is not set but the present *condiciõuns* are so unlivable that one way or another the present life will soon pass away, either by transition or by death.

The *condiciõuns* caused by the patriarchal environment exclude certain life-giving associations and eventually draw Narcissus outside into the wood where “a lusty welle” (1.2306) might quench this thirst. One day, while out hunting with a group of cis male associates, the youth breaks away for fear that if they stayed they would die of an unanswered thirst, “[he] hasteth faste for to ride, / Til alle men be left behinde” (1.2302-3; he hastened quickly in his riding until all men were left behind). The youth flees from isolating patriarchal, trans-exclusive presumptions to a *wõd* of alternatives. They have been raised within a belief set that frames all ways of being a woman as loathsome. Yet because of their *condiciõun* they also strive to leave all manhood behind. This trap of falling between available options and categories captures many transgender people who grow up within misogynistic cultures. Trans women may feel dysphoric and disassociated from their assigned male genders and yet be instilled with such a low and limited opinion of women that transition may stall without some assistance. Such a *condiciõun* of division, dysphoria, and displacement in the environment calls on Narcissus to break from these old presumptions and associations.

71. Berlant, “Slow Death,” 754-80.

72. Puar, “Coda,” 149.

In important ways, the “lusty welle” that Narcissus discovers in their *wód* acts as a re-*condiciöuning* device. The first power of the well is as a kind of gender euphoria that draws Narcissus out of themself. Unlike the presumptuous society that limits Narcissus’s associations, here the youth is able to move out of the isolated heights of cis manhood. Lowered “down” and to “the brinke” (of the well and self), “[h]e teide his hors unto a branche, / And leide him lowe for to stanche / His thurst” (1.2310-12; he tied his horse onto a branch and laid himself low to staunch his thirst). Leaving the horse corresponds with the act of dropping low, stepping away and down from the privilege of a cis man in a patriarchal, chivalric society. Narcissus gives themself to the well that finally takes them out of that embodied *condiciöun* all together, “[w]herof that love his herte assaie / Began, as it was after sene, / Of his sotie, and made him wene / It were a womman that he syh” (1.2318-21; whereof that love the assault of his heart began, driving him out of his mind and making him believe that it was a woman that he saw). Suicides and trans persons are often described by society as persons who are out of their mind. In this respect, the well may rightly be called “lusty.” The well is a site of gender euphoria and ecstatic possibility. While the conclusions of the tale are grim, at this moment there is the possibility of new forms of gendered life, eroticism, and relationality. Gower escalates and reveals Narcissus’s *condiciöuning*, so that new associations and meanings for the self and world can emerge.

The second *recondiciöuning* power of the well is that unlike the cis male society the youth left, Narcissus is finally able to see themself in the environment. The *condiciöuned* divisions between the isolated self and the external world begin to break. The well takes the look (*yimage*) of Narcissus and makes them finally heed what it means. Yet there is a difference in the repetition of images; it is “the like of his visage,” but not the image (*visage*) that corresponds to their *condiciöuned* way of seeing (*visage*). Gower writes, “He sih the like of his visage, / And wende ther were an ymage / Of such a nimphe as tho was faie” (1.2315-17; he saw the likeness of his visage, and thought it was an image of a nymph who was of the fairies). Narcissus saw themself but strangely, as a nymph, as a kind of woman. The nymph is a woman appropriate to the well and appropriate to womanhood. The well says, “this is where you belong and

this is your community.” The well *recondiciouns* the person by undoing the *condiciouning* of cis society.

Finding new life giving *condiciouns* and associations in the well, Narcissus forms a relationship with the excluded feminine environment and the excluded feminine self. In this location, even the syntax becomes reflective. Gower writes: “He cam [to the well] . . . cam she . . . whanne he wepte, he sih hire wepe, / And whanne he cride . . . sche cride also” (1.2322-27; He came . . . came she . . . when he wept, he saw her weep, and when he cried . . . she cried also). She comes, he comes, she weeps, he weeps, she cries, he cries. The youth begins to love women and the self by trans feminine identification. The trans woman here may very well be saying, “I am with women, what happens to women happens to me and what happens to me happens to women.” It is hard to define the affective register of these tears but readers can surmise that Narcissus feels in some way that the *condiciouns* (beauty, fear, hope, and suffering) that were once deemed incomparable are transformed through this reflection. These conditions are at once theirs and another’s, transitioning between the old “he” and new “she.” The youth learns to see themselves as lovable by seeing and learning to love reflections of themselves in the trans feminine ecology around them. At last, Narcissus finds *condiciouns* to live in and with the world.

Yet so long as the *condiciouns* of Narcissus’s livable life exists only at an isolated well in the wood, this “hard exchange” or transition (1.2330; difficult exchange / change / bargain) may only serve to extend an unlivable life.⁷³ Narcissus lacks the *condiciouned* knowledge of trans life to survive this difficult exchange or transition. Narcissus lacks enough belief in trans womanhood to recognize and love themselves, and even lacks language enough to articulate these feelings. Dysphoria (like gravity) may exist within the Middle Ages but without critical discourses (even such that Amans/Gower receives from Genius), the unstudied and solitary medieval person may be less prepared to understand and grapple with its effects. The text declares as much. Narcissus does not have the

73. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “eschaunġe,n.,” accessed April 21, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED14432/?track?counter=1&search_id=931640.

power to face the world as a woman alone, “to beginne / Thing which he mihte nevere winne” (1.2330–31; to begin a thing that he might never win). Womanhood (as a genre of embodiment) and trans womanhood (as a genre within and across it) are *condicioun* that Narcissus was not prepared to understand or manage alone. Narcissus has nothing to which to compare them, even when looking such an image in the face, except himself! Presumption has denied Narcissus the basis of knowledge to which to compare their condition. Without this comparison, critical relations and discourses are not available to Narcissus in this moment of possibility, resulting in a crisis. Without help or foreknowledge, Narcissus and other trans youths face an uncertain dysphoric state of being with an uncertain future.

Similarly to how Narcissus’s dysphoria ends with suicide, this *condicioun* of being without comparison can be too much for many modern trans youths to survive. In the case of continued social exclusions on the basis gender, the *DSM-5* warns that suicide can result from persisting gender dysphoria. The *DSM-5* fact sheet states that for dysphoria to be diagnosed, “it must continue for at least six months.”⁷⁴ Dysphoria is the ongoing *condicioun* of feeling trapped not only in one’s body but also in an isolating and excluding society. If dysphoric environments are not altered, the *DSM* warns that suicide is a common escape: “[a] dolescents and adults with gender dysphoria before gender reassignment are at increased risk for suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicides.”⁷⁵ Reassignment can come along with physical or legal changes, but signifies the need for a change in social *condiciouns* more than in the person. Yet in a society that isolates the youth from the means for a livable life or presumes against their *ymage*, death may seem the only alternative to such a dysphoric environment.

By filling out the conditions of Narcissus, Gower continues his approach of leaving the identity of the youth ambivalent and precarious while subtly taking the social environment to task. Whether or not one

74. American Psychiatric Association, “Gender Dysphoria: Fact Sheet,” in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed., n.p., accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.dsm5.org/documents/gender%20dysphoria%20fact%20sheet.pdf>.

75. “Gender Dysphoria: Fact Sheet,” n.p.

reads Narcissus as transgender, the condition of dysphoria under which the youth strains and finally collapses is an evident concern for the text. This is the critical theoretical move that Gower makes, which puts him alongside other critically trans and queer social critiques: turning the criticism from the individual toward the cultural conditions. Brought to the *wód* of suicide by the *ymage* of exclusion and exclusiveness, the youth finds themselves in a dysphoric *condicioun* without adequate recourse to the social discourses and assistance that might produce a more livable life. Without another place, image, or condition in which the youth might live, death overtakes Narcissus.

Flowers in Winter: *Otherwhiles* and Slow Death

While isolated and ignored, the medieval trans suicide is not alone. Gower's Narcissus is not the original but another echo, a ripple in the pond. Directly, Gower's story mirrors and distorts Ovid's tale where the nymph Echo disappears and curses Narcissus. While Gower cuts Echo out of the story and changes the nature of the youth's *condicioun*, her presence is marked as the folding together of nymph and Narcissus in Ovid's Latin text included alongside Gower's Middle English, "ipse faciem suam pulcherrimam in aqua percipiens, putabat se per hoc illam Nympham, quam Poete Ekko vocant, in flumine coram suis oculis potius conspexisse" (2279 ff Latin marginalia; perceiving in the water his own most beautiful face, he thought instead that he was regarding that nymph whom poets call Echo, in the river before his eyes). This commentary and conversation between Gower's English and Latin shows and tells the ways in which Narcissus is an echo of Echo, like later trans suicides are echoes of Narcissus. Each life and story is different but contributes to the ongoingness, the slow death, the replaying of an old trans historical necropolitical machine that Gower suggests the word *otherwhiles* enfolds.

The Tale of Narcissus is adrift in *otherwhiles*, alternative times and events that play out again and again. The word, *otherwhiles*, which Gower uses to show the ongoingness of necropolitical, presumptuous, and dysphoric ecologies, means literally, "other times." Yet an analysis of the term suggests more than mere trans historicism. Directly, "otherwhile"

signals repetition or something systemic, “at times, now and then, at one time or another; at various times . . . from time to time.”⁷⁶ The Middle English “other” comes from the Old Saxon, Gower’s “athar,” a proto-European term from which “alter” is derived, meaning “beyond” (al-) and “that one of two” (tero).⁷⁷ The “whiles” element of the word likewise passes through Old Saxon “hwilo,” from the proto-European “kwilo,” meaning “to rest.”⁷⁸ Together, *otherwhiles* suggests a time beyond rest. *Otherwhiles* can signal that which comes after death, undeath, or resurrection. *Otherwhiles* might also mean other rests, other deaths.

Otherwhiles also marks the suicide of Narcissus as a slow death. We know Narcissus struggles, and the text suggests it is a long struggle: “Ever” he “gan . . . / And preith . . . / And otherwhile he goth . . . / And otherwhile he draweth . . . / And evere he fond hire in o place” (I.2333-37; ever he went and prayed . . . and other times he went . . . and other times he drew. . . And always he found her in that place). The repetition of the words “ever” and “and” suggests the passage of time through repetition and return. Narcissus sits with the dysphoria for some time. In “The Cost of Getting Better: Suicide, Sensation, Switchpoints,” Puar examines the ongoingness of suicide, as a “slow death” that does not occur in an instant of insanity but over a long duration of exclusion and dysphoria. Puar calls slow death a “nonlinear temporality, for it starts and stops, redoubles and leaps ahead.”⁷⁹ Suicide is not a rush toward death but what Berlant calls, “wearing out.”⁸⁰ The mirror-machine formed by Narcissus and the well shows the cyclicity, spinning their wheels to show the passage of time but without changes in circumstance. It is the duration of suicide as a slow death.

The slow death at the well is not just a drive toward death but toward

76. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “ōther-while, adj.,” accessed March 21, 2019, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED31034/track?counter=1&search_id=615298.

77. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Other, adj.,” accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/133219?rskey=MTrKlJ&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

78. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “While, n.,” accessed March 21, 2019, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/228334?rskey=5NigJW&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

79. Puar, “Coda,” 152.

80. Berlant, “Slow Death,” 760.

unlivable *otherwhiles*. Narcissus continually returns to the well because it is the only environment where the thirst for inclusive womanhood is sated: “whanne he wepte, he sih hire wepe, / And whanne he cride . . . sche cride also” (1.2325-27; when he weeps, he saw her weep, and when he cried . . . she cried also). Rather than being self-obsessed, Narcissus disassociates from himself as a man among men. The irony of this environment is that it is only in the *wód* of suicide that Narcissus finds meaning for life. This well of *otherwhiles* functions as what Puar calls “a zone . . . of ongoingness, getting by, and living on, where the structural inequalities are dispersed, the pacing of their experience intermittent.”⁸¹ The well is not enough to keep Narcissus living but it is enough to keep them going. Necropolitical machines create undead, not only the dead. This unlivable *otherwhile*, an unbearable ongoingness, is what slow death looks like in narrative.

What is too often skipped over in the Tale of Narcissus, as in too many suicides, is the calls for help, the pleas to escape the ongoing *otherwhiles* of the necropolitical machine. “He wepth, he crith, he axeth grace,” writes Gower, “There as he mihte gete non” (1.2338-39; He wept, he cried, he asked for grace, whereas he might get none). The youth calls for help but none comes. In the moment between the cry for help and the answering silence, there is a time, an *otherwhile* of anticipation and hope. Something might happen. The whole narrative has driven to this point. If not for the isolation of the trans youth, there might be those around who could intervene. If not for the presumption of a gender system that excludes knowledge and love for trans and other non-binary bodies, then the youth might have been better prepared. If not for a society that allows the toxic environments that make trans lives unlivable, something might have been done. In this pause exists all the questions and discourses that have yet to be asked and answered. But for Narcissus, and for too many trans youths, no response arrives.

When death comes, suicide shows its ongoingness, a sense that death is not sudden but the culmination of a slow wearing out and a system that continues to exist. Narcissus takes “a roche of ston” and “smot himself til he was ded” (1.2340-42; a rock of stone [and] smote himself until

81. Puar, “Coda,” 152.

he was dead). The phrase “til he was ded” suggests that the suicide was not a momentary event. Death took time. Death had duration. Death had a relative slowness. Blow after blow came and nothing stopped the sequence of events. From the necropolitical view, the blow derived from many *otherwhiles*, long before the rock and the well. Blows were struck when Narcissus was assigned male. Blows were struck when Narcissus was raised a man among men. Blows were struck when Narcissus was isolated. Blows were struck when Narcissus called out and no answer came. In the long view, Narcissus, like the rock, is an instrument and instrumental cause of the suicide. A larger machine of trans exclusion and death uses the youth’s own hands to eliminate them.

What is Gower’s goal in slowing down the events of medieval trans suicide? Slowness, writes Puar, gives readers time to examine the necropolitical engines at work, “to ask what kinds of ‘slow deaths’ have been ongoing that a suicide might represent an escape from.”⁸² The death is perhaps more of a riddle than the dysphoria. While the suicide is the main event, the climactic happening that all other events flow toward, most people do not dwell on it or in its many *otherwhiles*. Reading about suicide is often done quickly. By slowing down, those who read and write about trans suicide feel the ongoingness of an unlivable life, the affect of wearing out. As a result, the questions change from “why did they die?” to “how did they keep going so long?” Gower shows that while trans identification is a key twist, it promises yet another *otherwhile*, a new way to continue on going and possibly a way to live. It is the lack of response that reveals how excluded the youth is and how long they have been excluded. In the light of a livable trans womanhood, their exclusive manhood cannot just go on.

In a way, death changes everything and nothing in a necropolitical machine. No sooner is the youth dead than “the Nimphes of the welles” and all others who “Unto the wodes belongende” come to mourn Narcissus (l.2343-45; the nymphs of the well . . . who belonged among the woods). This should give pause. Narcissus calls for help and none came. Yet Narcissus was not alone. The nymphs waited and watched as Narcissus dies, doing nothing. Or rather, the nymphs do nothing to

82. Puar, 152.

relate, to answer, or to compare themselves to Narcissus. These women who belong to the *wod(e)* and well, environments coded in the *yimage* of womanhood, did not answer Narcissus as one of them. Psychoanalysis since Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung has recognized the ways in which woods operate as symbols of the feminine and may be guarded just as physical woods can be from certain members of society.⁸³ These nymphs embody the passive exclusive spirit of the *yimage* of womanhood. Nymphs are not women in the sense of flesh and blood but are spirits in the form of women. These nymphs may be said to be the contingency, the form without content, “the participation without belonging,” which Jacques Derrida writes can define womanhood as an ecstatic state that never fully resolves into a set form.⁸⁴ These nymphs are provisional women. They may be granted that role or they might be denied it and fade like Narcissus. Ironically, the wood to which they belong is the location of exclusion from the patriarchy. These women know what it means to be excluded. It is unknown why they left Narcissus to die. Perhaps, like TERFS, they deny the truth of the youth’s trans *yimage*, seeing Narcissus as a man who has invaded the feminine environment.

Even after death, the necropolitical machine is not done drawing readers across *otherwhiles*. The presumptuous one says, “Hadde I wis” (1.1887; had I only known). The nymphs of the well, like us, are often better at grieving the dead, making memorials, than interrupting paths that lead to suicide. Readers are put in the place of the nymphs who passively observe the ongoing tales of trans suicide, consuming its affect while treating the story as predetermined, its ending presumed from the start. Narcissus is alone and dies, so goes the story. The suicide is alone and dies, so goes the story. The trans youth is alone and dies, so goes the story, around half the time. The truth of the unlivable *condicioūms* exist in *otherwhiles* and help is perpetually too late. The moment for action and therefore responsibility is over. No more cries for assistance. Nothing

83. Sigmund Freud, “X. Symbolism in the Dream,” *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. G. Stanley Hall (New York: Boni and Liveright Publishers, 1920), 58-66; Carl Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. Beatrice M. Hinkle (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Co., 1917), 307.

84. Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 55-81, <https://www-jstor-org/stable/1343176>.

must change. Biopolitics uses discipline to shape life, yet necropolitics is more conservative in its energy use, only demanding that we allow certain lives to unravel. Biopolitics wants hope or shame. Necropolitics suffices with despair or indifference.

In the end, readers are left with the symbol growing out of the grave of Narcissus. Once the trans youth is buried, “out of his sepulture / Ther sprong anon par aventure / Of floures such a wonder syhte,” flowers of winter (1.2349-51; out of his sepulture there sprung presently by chance flowers of wondrous appearance). What do the flowers mean? Is there a message in this fragile, easily overlooked trace of life amidst desolation? These flowers grow out of season, “in the wynter freysshe and faire / . . . contraire / To kynde” (1.2355-57; in the winter fresh and fair . . . contrary to nature). These are the flowers of *otherwhiles*, presumptions realized too late, replies not given, reflections, ripples, or echoes of the future in the past, the past in the present. The flowers are like Narcissus, creatures contrary to assigned “kynde,” an engendering not in the spring of birth but claimed in a later season. The flowers are like the trans lives that come after. In places of death and isolation, fragile lives cling to existence. The flowers show the ghostly ongoingness of trans suicide. Necropolitical systems have adapted across *otherwhiles*, over centuries, continuing to isolate, exclude, *condicioun*, and kill trans youths.

What stories might these flowers tell? Gower challenges readers to think on the flowers, which exist as a sign “[t]hat men ensample take myhte” (1.2352; that men might take heed of the example). By heeding the flowers, in *otherwhiles* the stories of the trans suicides are not left unheard. The flowers of winter are what Gower intends to grow in his *Confessio*’s wood of suicide when he writes, “Me quibus ergo Venus, casus, laqueauit amantem, / Orbis in exemplum scribere tendo palam,” (1.ii; Those disasters by which Venus ensnared me as a lover I strive to write, publicly, as example for the world). Gower is a Narcissus, the *Confessio* is a mirror, and the tales, writer, and readers are the many rippling, echoing reflections. These flowers draw later generations to cross into the *otherwhiles*, the boundaries of presumption, to enter the *wód* of suicide, and to look in the mirror of Narcissus. What do we see? Do we enter the *wód*? Do we know the nymphs? Do we feel the heat? Do we heed the flowers?

After all, this essay cannot answer the question or crisis of suicide. At best, it follows what Gower sets forth in *the Complaint to Cupid and Venus* as the *Confessio's* thesis:

Vt discant alii, docet experientia facti,
Rebus in ambiguis que sit habenda via.
Deuius ordo ducis temptata pericla sequentem
Instruit a tergo, ne simul ille cadat

I.ii

(Experience of the deed teaches so that others might learn what path should be held amidst uncertain circumstances. The twisting progress of one leading instructs another following at his back in the dangers already met, so that too should not fall).

No one can give an easy answer to the question and crisis of suicide. The world is too full of *otherwhiles*, divisions, and uncertainty. We cannot fix the path like a master over her property but can try to assist others as fellow travelers in a troubled world. If we can break through the presumptions that divide and isolate us, perhaps then such cries may not go unanswered. The *Confessio* calls out for a confession between *otherwhiles*, a speaking-together between ripples in the well and echoes across time, medieval and modern, for others might reflect on the *wód*, *ymages*, and *condiciõuns* in the mirror of Narcissus and say, "me too." The *Confessio*, this article, and all our *otherwhiles* look beyond themselves and their own times. Each is addressed as much to Narcissus as to later readers who see themselves reflected in its sense of deathly ongoingness or who see the ripples of another self. Like stones thrown away into the water, may the collective work of trans literature across the ages transform postscripts, old tales, and suicide notes from memorial flowers growing silently beside the well into disruptions of the necropolitical images that presume our isolation and death. May our troubling of the long still waters bring into view other endings, other stories, and other futures of the past.

Case Western Reserve University

Post
By Gabrielle

Script
M. W. Bychowski

look
again
slowly
i died
alone
beside myself
emerging
into a life
eternal
but you want hope
and so i write
a suicide note
scripts that confess and absolve
my death
giving power to
reaping
among the precarious
and dysphoric undead
the cost of doing business
in death
communicating
elsewheres
only there
reflecting why

in the well
again
dying
because i could not live
without myself
except in passing
out of a life
not my own
alienation
i wanted hope
a self memorial
post
for the crime of
my life
someone i could not be
meaning
the hurt
is calculated breakage
incalculable
we meet
across other lives
and otherwhiles
only then
i died