

**BEYOND SKIN DEEP: AN EXPLORATION OF FEMALE-  
TO-MALE TRANSGENDER EMBODIMENT  
- AND -  
EXPLORING VANCOUVER'S QUEER AND  
TRANSGENDER YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS**

by

Colton Dodsley  
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# APPROVAL

**Name:** Colton Dodsley  
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**-and-**  
**Exploring Vancouver's Queer and Transgender Youth Organizations**

**Examining Committee:**

**Chair:** **Dr. Marilyn MacDonald**  
Assistant Professor of Women's Studies

---

**Dr. Helen Leung**  
Senior Supervisor  
Assistant Professor of Women's Studies

---

**Dr. Ann Travers**  
Supervisor  
Assistant Professor of Sociology

---

**Dr. Susan Stryker**  
External Examiner  
Ruth Wynn Woodward Endowed Professor

**Date Defended/Approved:** April 22, 2008



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## **Abstract**

Essay 1: *Beyond Skin Deep* explores a specific subculture of female-to-male (FTM) transgender individuals who use tattoos as a method of expressing identity. By accessing this contemporary subculture of FTMs from a combination of autobiographic self-reflections and an analysis of Kael T. Block's XXBoys photography project, this paper demonstrates how a subculture of tattooed FTM bodies challenge particular assumptions about the body that have been understood in previous/established representations of the transsexual body.

**Keywords:** FTM, transsexual, tattoos,

Essay 2: *Queer and Transgender Youth Organizations* evaluates the current resources for queer and trans (QT) youth programs in Vancouver. By engaging in a close textual analysis of the commitments, services and mandates provided online by two main organizations within Vancouver that offer support for QT youth, I argue that the programs for queer and trans supportive organizations are not being implemented or used to their full potential. The paper builds this argument on the basis of interviews with organizers and volunteers of these programs, as well as QT youth who have use the services in Vancouver.

**Keywords:** Queer youth, trans youth, youth programs, Vancouver

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**Beyond Skin Deep:  
An Exploration of Female-to-Male Transgender Embodiment**

## **A photograph; an experience**

With each release of the shutter, his frame is captured and his story unfolds. Through the lens of the camera he is boulders and buildings and acres of blazing arrogance, chasing down the sky (*we all look a little tougher when our truth is on the line*). He shifts his weight; hands hanging at his side, one foot pushing against the wall slightly ahead of the other. He leans on the grungy structure- torso tilting forward. Feeling unsure of his hands, he shoves them into his pockets, wishing now that he had a cigarette- something to make him look tougher. Beneath his leather armor he is disconnected joints struggling to extract another move. If the day was warmer he could show some inked skin. His hood covers his blond hair; just a few strands hang over his right eye. He doesn't want to expose himself completely; it's only the first shoot.

### **Inked: An Exploration of XX Trans Embodiment**

The current understanding of bodily acts on transgender and transsexual bodies is shifting. The body has increasingly become a venue for expressing gender deviance due to the rise of knowledge on transsexual issues in the medical field and the options available for gender variant people. Escalating numbers of individuals who do not identify as transsexual are having surgery and taking hormones to physically appear gender neutral rather than the conventionally understood "opposite" gender. Other methods of bodily inscription, such as tattooing, are used as techniques to personalize the body's surface. Tattooing can present a re-appropriation of stigmatized bodies by allowing the subject to embody a form of art in/on their skin. It allows one to write artistic self-inscription and provides a place where a sense of self is projected (Pitts, 2000). Tattooing one's body also acts as a method of identity transition. Language tattoos, tattoos that cover scars, and tattoos depicting symbols of gender inscribe meaning onto bodies and assist in culturally reading the body as trans, or differently gendered.

Investigating genres of tattooing as identity expression may change our

understanding of trans bodies and subjects as a new subculture of female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals expose traditional myths on what it means to undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS) and write our stories onto our bodies. By accessing this contemporary subculture of FTMs from a combination of autobiographic self-reflections and an analysis of Kael T. Block's XXBoys photography project, this paper demonstrates how a subculture of tattooed FTM bodies challenge particular assumptions about the body that have been understood in previous/established representations of the transsexual body.<sup>1</sup>

## **A Discursive Genealogy of the Transsexual Body/Subject**

Since the first “wave” of research on trans identities and bodies began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, transgender identities have become more visible, specifically in academia and queer culture. However, as the history of the transsexual subject began to unfold, FTM identities continued to be invisible with attention granted mainly to male-to-female (MTF) identities (Califia, 1997; Meyerowitz, 2002)<sup>2</sup>. This section will provide a selected genealogy highlighting the research and theories on transsexual, transgender and trans subjects, specifically locating when the FTM subject became visible in society. The discourse of individuals gendered outside our Western dichotomy of the two-gender system (male and female) has its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in works of scientific investigators such as Richard von Kraft-Ebing. Kraft-Ebing developed a system for classifying “psychosexual disorders” that labeled people who strongly identified with the “opposite” sex as “disturbed”, and were therefore considered

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A: Notes on Terminology

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, (Benjamin, 1966. *The transsexual Phenomenon*) His study revealed only twenty FTM identities and 152 MTF's by the end of 1964.

psychotic. His belief that homosexuality was a form of gender variance created a historical interconnection between transgender and homosexuality, as well as revealed a significant persistence of extremely specific forms of subjectivity that are identifiable in present terminology (Stryker and Whittle, 2006). Magnus Hirschfeld, a German doctor who founded the world's first gay rights organization in 1897, and in 1910 opened the world's first Institute for Sexology in Berlin, argued that "transvestites" could not be understood in the same capacity as homosexuals, nor could gender deviance simply be reduced to some form of psychopathology. During a time when endocrinology was becoming a valued treatment for gendered "deviance", FTM medical doctor Michael Dillon wrote "*Self: Ethics and Endocrinology*" (1946) in which he argued for two treatable types of inversion of "mannish", or masculine females (Rubin, 2006). He argued for hormone treatments stating, "surely where the mind cannot be made to fit the body, the body should be made to fit, approximately, at any rate to the mind" (Dillon cited in Rubin, 2006). Dillon's book is the only substantial published work that addressed FTM identity during this period of scholarship.

Harry Benjamin, whose work from the 1920's through the end of the 1960's further developed Hirschfeld's views on transvestism, popularized the term "transsexual" to describe those who were in need of more intensive psychiatric help, hormone therapy, and surgery (Benjamin, 1954). Although Benjamin did not agree with all aspects of psychoanalysis, he noted that an "unfavourable" environment for early childhood development might cause an individual to feel trapped in the "wrong body" (Benjamin cited in Califia, 1997). In his 1966 book *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, Benjamin

identifies some psychiatric categories, such as drug abuse, self-mutilation, suicide, asexuality, schizophrenia, and narcissism, as acts of frustration for not being able to live in the gendered body of choice (Benjamin, 1966). His expertise in endocrinology allowed him to prescribe hormones to individuals as early as the 1920's and he was one of the leading doctors to advocate sex reassignment surgery for transsexuals (Califia, 1997; Stryker and Whittle, 2006). Although Benjamin's work was predominantly on male-to-female transsexuals (MTFs), since his research of 152 MTFs and only twenty FTMs led him to believe that female-to-male transsexuals were "rarer" (Califia, 1997). Benjamin's work significantly assisted the conceptualization of gender identity as well as encouraged the visibility of the trans body. In 1964, a female-to-male transsexual, Reed Erickson, launched the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF), an organization funded entirely by Erickson, which assisted in the understanding of transsexualism at the time (Meyerowitz, 2002). The EEF helped to financially support and provide resources for nearly every aspect of work being done in the 1960s and 1970s in the field of transsexuality, mostly in the US. The EEF also assisted in the development of the Harry Benjamin Foundation in the late 1960's (Meyerowitz, 2002).

Benjamin's work on "male transsexuals", or MTF's, allowed for the emergence of the transsexual subject and the "wrong body" narrative evident in the "first wave" of transsexual autobiographies. Medical doctors, such as Richard Green and John Money, gave descriptions for specific psychiatric treatment of transsexuals, while psychiatrists themselves explored the motives of patients desiring a sex change, dismissing patients whom the doctors believed were not "true" transsexuals but were really homosexuals,

transvestites, or psychotic patients. The “true” transsexual was required to live in the preferred gender for two years before sex reassignment surgery (SRS) could be possible (Califia, 1997). Although SRS was now an accessible step in gender transition, the arduous and lengthy journey motivated transsexuals to write out their personal experiences. Those that were published, such as Christine Jorgensen’s 1967 autobiography, provided an intimate knowledge of transsexuality- a personal narrative that explored the issues of trans identity and the trans body and a counter narrative to the medical texts that were available at the time. Following Jorgensen’s lead, many other transsexuals began publishing their stories, and the first wave of transsexual autobiography became a publicly accessible form of discourse for the trans subject (Califia, 1997). Medical practitioners, at this time, accepted that the ratios of MTFs and FTMs were narrowing, and that more FTMs were seeking surgery (Rubin, 2003). Henry Rubin proposes that the emergence of FTMs during this period can be explained by an inadvertent outcome of identity work in the lesbian community (Rubin, 2003). “Internal debates about the essence of lesbian identity helped to sharpen the lines of demarcation between women-identified female bodies and male-identified female bodies. This distinction consolidated a lesbian-feminist identity that could sustain a burgeoning feminist movement and at the same time contributed to the consolidation of an FTM identity” (Rubin, 2003).

During the late 1970’s and early 1980’s- the same period during which transsexual bodies were continuously regulated while at the same time trans folk began actively telling their stories- an element of the feminist movement was also policing

transsexuals. Feminist scholarship directed its attention to trans identity in response to what was started by the medical establishment and the self-writing of trans subjectivities. Dominant discourse on transsexuality within second wave feminist was hostile and some feminists within the movement suggested transsexual women were deviant men determined to destroy the feminist movement. Second wave feminisms' argument for essential female identity attempted to keep FTM identities invisible at this particular moment of feminist consciousness. Janice Raymond's 1979 *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of a She-Male* encouraged anti-inclusion within feminist consciousness. She declined to acknowledge trans identities as anything other than patriarchal motives of oppression and accused MTF's as men who "rape women's bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact" while invading the female body in order to exercise male dominance and sabotage the feminist movement (Raymond, 1979; Califia, 1997; Stryker and Whittle, 2006). Raymond discounts transsexual persons by describing their post-operation body as a "synthetic product" with "synthetic parts" which "produce a synthetic whole" (Raymond, 1979; Grenfell, 2001). Raymond focused her negative arguments on MTFs and paid little attention to FTMs except to depict trans men as traitors to their sex. Lesbian separatist feminists agreed with Raymond's argument, which continued to inspire the anti-inclusion debate. The negativity of Raymond's argument fuelled Sandy Stone's "Post Transsexual Manifesto" in 1991, which has been described as the "protean text from which contemporary transgender studies emerged" by developing a poststructuralist analysis of gender identity (Stryker and Whittle, 2006). Stone, along with a number of trans folk who felt their experiences belonged with the women's

movement and were being denied, struggled with feminist ideology and the lack of support from the feminist movement led to the visibility of the growing transsexual community.

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, the FTM subject became visible within queer culture and the emerging transgender movement. Lou Sullivan started the *FTM Newsletter* in San Francisco in the mid 1980's (Green, 2004; Stryker, 1999) and began a support group for FTMs- one of the first in the US at this time. This support group, like many others that followed, continued at the margins of trans communities but became more visible in the 1990's when sexuality and gender themselves became more expansive due to postmodernism and queer theory deconstructing gender binaries. Halberstam (2005) suggests that with emerging gender categories and cross-identifying women who did not conform to medical models of transsexuality, a reshuffling of gender occurred in the 1990's. Moreover, with the rise of home computers and the accessibility of the Internet, geographically dispersed and diverse trans communities were able to form (Whittle, 1998; Shapiro, 2004).

Patrick Califia (1997) argues that a shift in trans activism occurred in the 1990's. Originally, trans activism focused on laws against the impersonation of "opposite" genders, policies regarding changing personal identification papers and records, advocating for more inclusive and available sex reassignment surgery, as well as educating the public about trans people (Califia, 1997). The mid-nineties brought on a larger more visible FTM community and more trans folk were speaking up rather than assimilating into society. The responses of author/activist/theorists, including Kate



Bornstein (1994, 1996), Leslie Feinberg (1996, 1998), Riki Wilchins (1997, 2004), and Patrick Califia (1997), to feminist transphobia introduced a new understanding of transgender and used the term “transgender” as an umbrella term for most “deviant” genders. This category “transgender” marked a “political and generational distinction between older transvestite/transsexual/drag terminologies and an emerging gender politics that was explicitly and self-consciously queer” (Stryker, 2008). With the rise in popularity of the term and meaning of ‘transgender’, more activists and academics discussed gender as a political and academic genre, a trend that continues to thrive today.

Many gender theorists used the work of postmodernists and queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1990, 1993), Riki Wilchins (1997, 2004) and Kate Bornstein (1994), to understand transgender subjectivity because both theories create spaces for alternate genders. Contra the anti-trans inclusion contention that trans persons are avoiding oppression, for many trans people passing is the ultimate “sell out” (Bornstein, 1994; Roen, 2001). According to Bornstein (1994) and Roen (2001), contemporary trans politics are informed by postmodern concepts of subjectivity, and by queer understandings of sex and gender. Queer gender subjectivity has emerged as a result of ‘not passing’. In the 1990’s, theories on trans subjectivity suggested identities are ‘fluid’ and struggled to find a place in theory for trans scholarship. Queer theory deconstructs the conventional categories and oppositions of sexuality and gender as singular identities. *Queer*, as a term, suggests an assortment of genders and sexualities and challenges the dichotomies of only two genders and only two sexes (Jagose, 1996). Although queer and postmodern theories developed an avenue for trans identities to diverge from the medical

models of sex and gender, they still failed to address the notion of gender performance as a means to safely pass in everyday life as one's preferred gender. Jay Prosser opposes queer and postmodern theory's preference for performativity over narrative, maintaining that "there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be non-performative, to be constative, quite simply to be" (Prosser, 1998). His contention with queer and postmodern theories is that the importance of the body diminishes with ever more abstract ideas of gender, sexuality, and desire (Prosser, 1998). Viviane K. Namaste (2000, 2005) is similarly skeptical about queer theory's reading of transgender subjectivity. She rejects queer theory and postmodern theory's current approaches to examining transgender and transsexuals as viable theoretical and political methods of analyzing trans experience and argues instead that transsexuals are made invisible by the medical field, as well as within the cultural and institutional world (Namaste, 2000).

In the mid to late 1990's, the notion of only two genders continued to be questioned by theorists such as Judith Halberstam (1998) who introduced the 'transgender butch' to the discourse. This new identity category, which combined the lesbian butch with transgender masculinity, allowed for a greater understanding of the spectrum of gender possibilities. Halberstam's 'transgender butch' was an attempt to create a space, both theoretically and culturally, which did not presume transsexuality as its epistemological frame (Halberstam, 1998). More recently, she suggests that "we have hardly begun to recognize the forms of embodiment that fill out the category of transgenderism, and before we dismiss it as faddish, we should know what kind of work it does, whom it describes, and whom it validates" (Halberstam, 2005). This illustrates

the importance of a category that continues to flourish making room for a wide variety of gender identities.

This brief genealogy has traced the emergence of transgender and transsexual as terms of identity and as descriptions of the body. 'Trans' now provides FTMs with an encompassing term from which to further delineate identities, such as 'genderqueer', for individuals who do not fit into prescribed male or female categories, and 'trannyboy', for transgender/transsexual boys, among many others today who do not take on a strict transsexual identity. As a result, such identities have created a generational gap and have moved away from trying to find support within feminist ideology altogether. Queer theory, postmodern theory, and the increasing amount of transgender theory, have aided the development of trans communities, which seek to create and maintain their own services and support systems that are not found elsewhere. A particular genre of trans boys, their relationships with the body and search for identity will be the focus of the next section.

### **Stories in the Flesh: Tattooing and SRS among a FTM subculture**

Gender has been challenged as a binary construct and as a result, new gender categories have emerged such FTMs, MTFs, genderqueers, trans or 'tranny' boys and 'tranny' girls, bois and grlrs<sup>3</sup>. These new gender categories materialized out of ever-increasing available queer theory in the 1990's (Butler, 1990; Jagose, 1996), postmodern theory and transgender studies in the late 1990's and early 2000's (Stryker, 1998; Stryker and Whittle, 2006), as well as the rise of transgender/transsexual community organizing on the Internet such as support groups and list-serves (Shapiro, 2004; Whittle, 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A: Notes on Terminology

Older generations of transsexuals paved the way for younger generations to obtain sex reassignment surgery by combating the medical establishment. The most famous SRS battle with medical gatekeepers spawned publicly in 1952 when Christine Jorgensen struggled to locate doctors to perform her surgery (Califia, 1997). Heavy medicalization from psychiatrists, endocrinologists, and medical doctors was involved in each transsexual case documented. These historical battles allowed younger generations of trans folk to alter their bodies and assert an identity that warrants a sense of pride. Not only has SRS become more accessible, other instances of bodily inscription, such as tattoos, have become attractive possibilities to personalizing gender. Several FTMs have tattoos, but there is a specific subculture of younger trans boys wearing tattoos along side their sex reassignment scars, or on their own, that help create and expose subjective transsexual bodies, which had not been considered desirable in the past.

Michael Atkinson in *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (2003) outlines four categories of “body projects”, which alter the subjects’ corporeality. The first and least invasive category is camouflaging body projects. Actions such as applying make up, deodorant or perfume, and wearing clothes or costumes are considered cultural projects that are generally used on a daily basis. Extending body projects intend to compensate for or overcome limitations of the natural (i.e., biological) body so that “the underlying purpose of the alteration shifts away from corporeal aesthetics [and toward] functionality or experimentation” (Atkinson, 2003) such as wearing contact lenses, prostheses, or certain sports equipment, like running shoes or baseball gloves, for example. The adapting body project includes physical reconstruction of certain body

parts for aesthetic or medical purposes (e.g., hair removal, weight loss, or lumpectomies) so that the body is emphasized as a site of personal representation and to be, and appear, healthy and attractive. The most invasive category is redesigning body projects. These projects involve permanent modes of altering the subjects' body and require the highest level of commitment. Some examples of redesigning the body include hair transplants, rhinoplasty, replacement joints, pacemakers or surgical transplants (Atkinson, 2003), as well as tattooing and SRS. Transgender and transsexual people have used aspects of each body project in order to manipulate the perceived gender of their bodies. I argue that both tattooing and SRS are methods of gender expression for the FTM body.

The FTM body has been a host to a number of invasive projects on the body. Skin, muscle, breast tissue and glands are often sacrificed to make the bodily encasing feel like one's own. Hormone treatment relies on the muscle and skin to achieve masculine features; breast tissue and glands are removed to redesign the chest; and in some genital reconstruction, skin is removed from the arm, leg or abdomen to help construct a penis. Nevertheless what I find intriguing is the way that tattoos are used as methods of creating and enhancing individualized bodies. Tattooing specific identity marking symbols and using ink as a way of covering FTM chest scars is more apparent in a specific genre of FTMs today. Tattooing and other body modification practices such as branding, scarring, and cutting have been linked to cosmetic practices and surgeries, which in turn have been related to sex reassignment surgeries (Califia, 1997; Pitts, 2000; Atkinson, 2003, 2004; Sullivan, 2001) and more recently, self-demand amputation – understood as “bodily integrity identity disorder”, or the elective removal of “healthy”

bodily tissue or limbs (Stryker and Sullivan, 2006). But, until recently tattooed and surgically constructed FTM bodies have not been given unambiguous attention as attractive, autonomous bodies. A younger subculture of FTMs is redefining what it means to write their stories onto/into their skin.

Nikki Sullivan compares practices of transsexual surgery, cosmetic surgery and “non-mainstream” body modification in *Transmorgification (Un) Becoming Other(s)* (2006) to suggest that modifications on the body function, in varying degrees, “to explicitly transform bodily being- they are all, in one sense at least, ‘trans’ practices” (Sullivan, 2006). There is overlap between methods of body modification that might help to rethink trans-embodiment. She notes an important conceptual shift put forward by Judith Halberstam (1996) that attempts to eliminate the pathology of transsexual surgery by comparing it to cosmetic surgery. In this regard, essential notions of SRS are replaced with new theories that understand the procedure as a way of organizing the body to suit one’s self-image (Halberstam, 1996). If SRS is possible in this regard, then it can be compared to tattooing as a method of creating the self through a demand for corporeal transformation in a non-pathological way, which is unlike how it has been thought of in the past. SRS can be seen, then, as a way of taking control of one’s body and identity. The idea of controlling one’s identity in a culture where it is difficult to represent an authentic self- one who is true to one’s own self despite pressures of everyday influences- is one area where forms of body modification, especially tattooing, have become increasingly popular. The feeling of subjective alienation has also aided in the development of tattooing the body as a form of autobiography. The transgender subject

may feel a sense of alienation with their body since it has been argued that the transgender body does not belong in our Western binary of the two-gender system. Furthermore, the dualism of medical versus aesthetic practices on the body does not have to be so strict, but can be viewed, as Halberstam suggests, as methods of organizing the body to suit self-image. For me, a concern for an authentic post-SRS body is paramount. I want tattoos to cover my constructed chest to give deeper meaning to my scars so that they are not just seen as scars, but as a developing construction of my identity. In more recent photographs of FTMs, the placement of tattoos on or above constructed chest scars is popular, thus contradicting with my own desire for an “authentic” body. These photographs will be explored later; however the placement of tattoos is particularly useful in this section.

The placement of tattoos on trans bodies can be interesting, specifically placement that accentuates, or conversely hides transsexual scars. Tattoos allow artistic-self inscription and a place to which a sense of self is projected. They also display a public entity, group affiliation, and the inscription of language that reveals a subjects sentiments, dispositions, and desired alliances (Pitts, 2000). Some FTMs tattoos reflect their trans identification. For instance, I have two trans symbols inscribed on my body, which came at pivotal moments of shifts in my identification from queer woman to trans boy. Each tattoo marks an aspect of my individuality while simultaneously affiliating me with the trans community. Michael Atkinson (2004) echoes this argument by suggesting that tattooing projects reinforce the “I” in social and cultural affiliations. His study on body modification and self-control found that many who participate in body modification do so

to display their individualism. In this creation of identity the skin is used to improve, beautify and personalize the body through invasive manipulation. Additionally, Atkinson states that there is power and legitimacy of cultural expectations to perform identity through aesthetically pleasing forms of physical manipulation (Atkinson, 2004). The tattooed subject, and the trans subject who has undergone SRS, are able to create subjectivity through the manipulation of their skin.

Jay Prosser, in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998) offers a useful explanation of the skin as locus for creating subjectivity. Examining the ways in which the skin is viewed as the body's encasing, Prosser's argument that our skin, as it borders between our corporeal inside and outside, is the "key interface between self and other, between the biological, psychic, and the social" (Prosser, 1998). His theory on the skin helps to conceptualize tattooing as a process of identity formation since he argues that skin facilitates the creation of subjectivity. Prosser applies Didier Anzieu's assertion that the skin is the primary organ in the formation of the ego, thus individualizing our psychic function, to investigate whether the transsexual, by changing sex, reconfigures the status of the body's surface. In turn, Anzieu connects Freud's analysis of the ego as "the mental projection of the surface of the body" to his own idea of the "skin ego" (Prosser, 1998). Anzieu argues that the ego is principally derived from bodily sensations on the skin. Skin, as the body's encasing, is what awards analytic support for the psychic apparatus. Not only does the body provide support for the mental state of ones' identity, it is responsible for producing this projection (Prosser, 1998). The tattooed subject, and



one who has undergone SRS, then have the ability to use their skin as a site for creating meaning on the self.

The concept of redesigning the body to make it feel like one's own is paramount in notions of creating the self through tattooing and sex reassignment surgery. Body image is an area that should be examined, especially if the trans person who embodies tattoos, or who undergoes SRS, is doing so to feel more secure about being in the 'wrong body'.

Transsexual subjects frequently articulate their bodily alienation as a discomfort with their skin or bodily encasing: being trapped in the wrong body is figured as being in the wrong, or an extra, or a second skin, and transsexuality is expressed as the desire to shed or to step out of this skin. (Prosser, 1998)

The "wrong body" analogy has been used since the first "wave" of transsexual autobiographies in the late 1950's. SRS was not available to those who did not convey a feeling of being trapped in the wrong body to their psychiatrists. In the past, two years of living in the preferred gender was required before hormonal or surgical procedures could be made. More recently, a psychiatrist's counseling is not always necessary if a trans person can convince their surgeon that they are prepared to undergo surgery and pay for it on their own. This is evident due to the advances in the medical field and the rising number of FTM chest surgeries being performed<sup>4</sup>. Many of my FTM peers in Canada concurred that they have had considerable ease attaining surgery compared to previous years, especially if they can pay for their surgery. In the past few years, it is less likely that an FTM is turned away by a surgeon, or is denied by their doctor to seek out surgical procedures. I am not saying this is the case for all trans people seeking surgery. There is

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<sup>4</sup> Conversations with my surgeon in Toronto suggested he was performing one FTM chest reconstruction per week.

still a considerable amount of work to be done by the medical establishment in order to make SRS more attainable for those seeking gender-related body alteration, and less about making “norm-abiding gendered subjects” (Spade, 2006). A contradiction still exists: one must fit a particular mold of gender in order to obtain surgery without scrutiny from medical practitioners.

Bodily alienation remains a commonality for those seeking surgery regardless of their intended gendered path. Prosser claims that “skin appears as an organ enabling and illustrating the psychic/corporeal interchange of subjectivity” as it borders between psyche and body (Prosser, 1998). By examining the transsexuals’ sense of being ‘trapped in the wrong body,’ we can see how the skin becomes a site of this predicament for subjectivity. Since the psychic representation of our bodies is projected onto our skin, being “trapped” in the wrong skin can cause serious psychosomatic problems. These problems are connected to what has been termed “psychodermatology” or the relation between the skin (dermatological disorders) and mental state (psychic upheaval) (Prosser, 1998). We must have a skin of our own to feel as ourselves (Anzieu in Prosser, 1998) and we have the ability to create this skin of our own. Prosser proposes that subjectivity results from a “psychic investment of the self in skin”: the feeling that one owns one’s skin (Prosser, 1998). Many transsexuals describe their sex reassignment surgery as ‘coming home to the self through body’. I argue that the tattooing process, by re-appropriating of the surface of the body, is another method of finding a sense of “home” in the body.

Tattooing provides a “psychic investment of the self in skin” by allowing the

tattooed subject to create artistic self-inscription on the surface of their body. The tattoo suggests inner-meaning and psychological thought that can be presented on the skin. Thus, the tattooed person can embody difference and create individuality through this difference. Furthermore, “the realization of identity hoped for and/or brought about as a result of the manipulation of the material surface of the body can be substantial; skin is anything but skin deep” (Prosser, 1998). Some tattooed people use their corporeal outside for sensations of mental pain in order to bring the mental pain to the outside. The thought that goes into each tattoo, the meaning behind the artwork, placement, and even sensation of the tattoo needles inscribe what Michael Atkinson calls “cultural emotion work” on the body. By tattooing a piece of narrative on the body, one etches “controlled representations of emotional experience [and] manage ‘problematic’ emotions stirred through social interaction” (Atkinson, 2004). Certain tattoos communicate ‘desirable’ messages about the self, even though the tattoo itself may have been emotionally painful. An example of a highly emotional experience that may use body projects, such as tattooing or sex reassignment surgery, is bodily alienation- a common theme among trans identified individuals.

In their work on transsexual surgeries and self-demand amputation as practices that have produced individual bodies and subject positions, which have been excluded from the body politic and from social integration, Susan Stryker and Nikki Sullivan expand on the prevailing ontology of the self trapped in the “wrong body”. They suggest that there is a distinction between mind and body and that through many narratives of transsexuals and self-demand amputees, the body is conceived as the inappropriate object

for the subject who inhabits it:

Here we can clearly see how the very concept of ‘wrong body’ as a somatomorphic legitimation strategy acts as a transposable citational practice, in which the subject is configured as having alienable rights in the private property of its own body, with a concomitant right to act upon that property according to its sovereign will. (Stryker and Sullivan, 2006)

Today, if we have the money and are able to access the resources, our ability to change our bodies through cosmetic, aesthetic, or medical procedures is less restricted by instances of power and more obtainable as we have more rights over altering our bodies to suit our self-image. Diprose (1994), using Foucault’s concept of productive techniques of power, suggests: “it is the body which is the locus of this self-formation: an individual ethos is constituted via work on the body. The individual subject is produced through this operation of power” by subjection to others, where the body is object to disciplinary power, and by self-knowledge, where the body is the object of self-reflection (Diprose, 1994). The subject is able to resist certain aspects of power and overcome bodily alienation and act upon that alienation according to its sovereign will, thus producing a body that asserts ownership over itself through acts of self-production.

Continuing her work on *Tattooed Bodies: Subjectivity, Textuality, Ethics, and Pleasure*, Sullivan (2001) applies an insightful model of subjectivity based on Michel Foucault’s analysis in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978) regarding his desire for a different economy of bodies and pleasures, and the ways in which the subject is comprised in and through its relations with others and within systems of power/knowledge. This form of subjectivity is important as it forces one to consider how explicitly marking the body is justification for interpretation by others. Foucault’s

concept of the confession as the “heart of the procedures of individualization” (Foucault, 1978) suggests that technologies of confession and self-decipherment are features of a particular form of self-formation where one comes to know the truth about oneself. Sullivan uses Foucault’s concept of the confession as a truth-effect of power and a “normalizing mode of self-formation”, which further creates a disjunction between self-knowledge and the interpretation of that knowledge by others (Sullivan, 2001). Relating this to tattoos, assuming to know the meaning of all tattoos is ludicrous. The history of tattooing is too diverse and stretches across cultures where meaning is no longer definable. Since “the tattooed body provides a possibly unique opportunity to (re)read and (re)write subjectivity” and these works on the body provide a “reliance on an expression-reception model of communication that assumes that both meaning and identity are decipherable and definable” (Sullivan, 2001), tattoos will represent different significance depending on the embodied history of the tattooed person. Each one of my tattoos symbolizes a shift in my subjectivity and I have the ability to choose how much of myself I disclose when describing my tattoos. Each tattoo brings different (inner) meaning to the surface of my body, and to my mind. “If we accept that both imaginary bodies and social imaginaries [images, symbols, metaphors and representations that help construct diverse forms of subjectivity] are heterogeneous, nonunified, and in a constant state of (trans)formation, then we must also recognize that pictures such as tattoos never simply tell *a* story” (Sullivan, 2001). The tattooed body is a text that hides meaning, or truth, as its meaning is often obscure to viewers.

Victoria Pitts’ (2000) ethnography on queer and trans tattooed subjects found that

tattooing and other forms of body modification were considered gratifying because the tattoos rendered the subjects' visibility as queer or non-normatively gendered subjects. One subject explained that he felt pleasure in self-authorship by claiming his body and his right to do so (Pitts, 2000). This constitutes a form of pleasure that creates autonomous bodies that disrupt heteronormative frameworks. Furthermore, Pitts' participants related certain body modifications as methods of creating agency within a community of stigmatized identities and practices (Pitts, 2000). While Foucault has shown us that the body is indeed a site for the exercise of power that contributes to the maintenance of the status quo (Foucault, 1978), significant body alteration, such as tattooing and SRS as practices can facilitate the creation of community and "by constituting a community in terms different from those of the mainstream, resistance movements do change some aspects of the system" (Rosenblatt, 1997). Certain communities of trans boys have resisted the ways in which the trans body has previously been viewed by exhibiting their trans bodies, in all stages of transition, as attractive, self-governing bodies.

There are many communities of trans boys who share pictures and meanings of their tattoos. Bodily inscription is a method of communicating identity, much like similar communities that discuss SRS procedures and compare scars. Even if there is no discussion about the meaning of tattoos, their significance is often perceptible within a community. One community in particular exhibits interest in exposing tattoos; the XXBoys, a group of female-to-male transgender and transsexual individuals sharing their stories through photographs. This community of FTMs will be explored in the following

section.

## FTM Photography: The XXBoy Subculture

A fast-paced exchange of words and images, out of tune guitars and raucous shouts, accompanies the awkward poses, defiant gestures and blasé posturing of this adolescent undertaking. Gutter punk girls and gender transgressive boys play dirty in toilet cubicles. Pink mohicans clash against graffiti-covered walls. The close-up of a testosterone-induced dick-clit, a head in a urinal, a body in transition. A playful 'fuck you' from the girl with the cute panda print pants. Snapshots of gripping flesh, frantic fumbling, sweaty fists, hard and lingering. Zoom in on chipped red nail polished fingers. Cut to strap-on trannyfag action in an alleyway whilst, nearby, a love-bitten girl exposes herself behind a gravestone. In another frame, a genderqueer cockily performs an interventionalist pissing whilst a girl submerges herself in a bathtub of strawberries, creating bloody stains on virgin whites. Cut lip and a bruised eye, the scarred chest of a female-to-unknown. To describe the photographic oeuvre of female-to-male transgendered photographer, Kael Block, is to re-enter and prolong adolescence. (Bailey, 2008)



Figure 1. Photographer Kael T. Block. XXBoy Kelly (2006). Digital Photograph. (<http://20six.fr/xxboys>). Reprinted with permission.

*Figure 1* would not have been documented generations ago. This particular genre

of photography reveals the transsexual subject by exposing a narrative on the body's materiality. Prominent scars and tattoos help to create the photographic identity of this XXBoy. "Photographs may be the closest we get to another's autobiography [...] because in our life we view them through our eye and our I, photographs that have significance for us are often autobiographical" (Prosser, 2005). Photography has been used for generations to document transsexual identities. For instance, the first and second waves of transsexual autobiographies provide pictures of the subject both "before and after" transition. Usually photos taken in the subjects' younger years where they are highly feminized or masculinized are paired with photos taken once the body is transsexed. Past images are arranged with present ones to illustrate a narrative of the changed body. "As narrative, photographs demand that we concede that transsexuality makes a thorough difference to the body, and yet- part of the autobiography- that we discover consistent and continuous identity in that very place of alterity" (Prosser, 1998). The cover of Christine Jorgensen's 1967 autobiography demonstrates this with a small photo of Jorgensen as George in army paraphernalia and a larger image of Christine in highly feminized attire. It grabs the viewers' attention with a confrontation of two opposing photos of the same person. Furthermore, in the past, photographers of transsexual autobiographies were not trans identified and trust between the photographer and subject becomes more and more important as the subjects' body is changing. If the photographer is not able to understand the subjects' position, then trust may be lost. Thus, the transitional process was unlikely documented in past photographs of transsexuals. This trust may only be viable in instances of trans photographers



photographing trans subjects, which has recently become a new phenomenon.

Photographs of trans subjects in the past have concealed most corporeal changes. The alteration of the body as it is injected with hormones or surgically altered is what the past and present narrative photographs erase; they leave out images of the changing body, and focus on the changed body. The awkward, almost pubescent, bodily changes are concealed. This transitional phase reflects a second puberty- oily skin producing pimples, fat redistribution, hair growth, and growth of the larynx- that was not celebrated in previous transsexual documentation and as a result, the transitional process of FTM bodies had not been deliberately shared until recently. The autobiographical photographs today are geared toward illustrating each specific incarnating moment when bodies change. These moments are shared in a particular culture of female-to-male transsexual and transgendered subjects. This culture of FTMs is exposing transitional moments, paying close attention to surgical transformations, and discussing the meaning and placement of tattoos as processes of identity.

The rise of FTM visibility came with it an emerging culture of trans boys who use visual mediums to express their gender. Community awareness of transgender identities has sparked interests and advanced methods of exposing oneself that are geared toward a specific culture of technically inclined individuals. In the past few years, through technological advances and the increase of online networking and community building, FTMs have begun sharing documentation of their transitional process through Internet resources. Borrowing from Debra Ferreday and Simon Lock, the “tranniesphere”, a loose collection of web sites including web pages, discussion forums, photo sharing sites,

and personal web blogs, have allowed identity production to evolve (Ferreday and Lock, 2007). Making connections with other FTMs through support groups delegated spaces for trans boys to talk about their transition and share experiences in order to feel more comfortable about their bodies. This sharing of information creates a visible community that finds strength within itself. Visible hormonal changes such as hair growth, muscle gain, the shape of genitals, and changes in facial features are often photographed as visual signifiers of gender. Trans boys are not just talking about their experiences; they are visually documenting them. This form of documentation has gone from personal images kept privately and confidentially, to seeking out appropriate backdrops for the perfect photograph in order to depict a particular transitional moment in identity. There is less shame of being trans, and more empowerment over transitioning bodies. In the past transsexuals were forced to conceal their transsexuality by the medical establishment as it was required to live full time in the sex/gender of choice. Today, FTMs share these experiences over the Internet on FTM support pages and through photo exhibits that target a wider range of audience. New photo sharing communities are continuously arising over the World Wide Web on myspace, friendster, livejournal, and facebook. These online communities- dedicated to "FTM vanity", erotic FTMs, and FTMs beginning their transition- share portraits, photos and film clips of testosterone injections, images of chest and genital (re)construction in all stages of healing, photographs demonstrating the growth of genitals, and photos of erotic poses alone or with partners of FTMs. Some FTMs have even started their own websites to share their experiences with other FTMs and friends. Photographs are the most convenient method of demonstrating

the changes that transition brings. Although female-to-male trans individuals have revealed visual documentation to express their personal transitions more recently, beginning the mid 1990's the FTM subject/body was exposed through the lens of other FTM photographers.

Adding to the rise in visibility of the FTM subject, trans photographers are using trans subjects as models for their work. In 1996 Loren Cameron published *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits*, which introduces the FTM body at a raw phase. Although there have been photos of trans men published since then, this is the first compilation of photographs dedicated to the female-to-male transsexed body. Cameron photographs his tattooed, nude body injecting testosterone, holding a scalpel demonstrating the scars on his chest, and lifting weights to show his muscle definition. He shares images of three different types of FTM genital reconstruction, as well as three reconstructed chests. Cameron's work does not, however, provide a glimpse of the transitional process; his work focuses on the transitioned male. Cameron allows the reader to see the referential difference of the subject by exposing their surgical reconstruction, and capturing how transsexual men 'look' in Cameron's self portrait series (Prosser, 1998). The referential difference in transsexual photographs depend on the revealed subject before transition and the exposed subject after transition. Around the same time as Cameron's work on FTM bodies, trans photographer Del Lagrace Volcano was documenting more diverse forms of gender transition.

Del Lagrace Volcano's work centers on a multiplicity of genders. Volcano's photography illustrates intersexed, transgendered and transsexual persons, genderqueers,

and high femmes. His work with Judith Halberstam, *The Drag King Book* (1999), focused on the lives and communities of some of the leading Drag Kings in San Francisco, New York, London, and Berlin in the early to late 1990's. Halberstam and Volcano aided in the rise of FTM visibility during their work on this anthology as some of the King's identify as trans. In 2000 Volcano published *Sublime Mutations*, which "visually remaps the political and theoretical cutting edge of the queer avantgarde" while paying particular attention to manifestations of lesbian masculinity and the ways in which masculinity can be subversive. Volcano does this by celebrating the bodies of butch dykes, transsexual boys and other gender queers ([www.dellagracecolcano.com](http://www.dellagracecolcano.com)). *Sublime Mutations* offers a unique record of queer bodies that includes FTM subjects. Volcano's work on female-to-male transsexual Zachary Nataf, like Cameron, presents the viewer an encounter with referentiality as it allows the viewer to see the subjects' transition. In this photo documentation, the subject and photographer capture the somatic transitional process very intimately (Prosser, 1998). A great example of the trust between subject and photographer is demonstrated in these photographs. The trust is indeed important given the extreme close-ups of the subjects' genitals. Cameron and Volcano's work offer glimpses into the lives of transsexual men and genderqueer persons. But, until recently, photos dedicated specifically to FTMs and transition processes of younger trans males, including the authority they have over their bodies to transform them, had not been spotlighted. The graphic representations of bodily changes, healing scars from surgeries, sexual imagery, identifying tattoos, and portraits of FTMs was not readily available until a young trans photographer began documenting and sharing his own

transition, then seeking out other young FTMs to be photographed.

In 2005 Kael T. Block began a website dedicated to the visibility and empowerment of a younger generation of FTM's. He began the XXBoys photo project in Paris at the onset of his own transition and has since then traveled within Canada, the US, and Europe to photograph trans boys in all stages of transition. An XXBoy must identify as boy/male/man and as trans. The arbitrary age requirement relies on each FTM to "look" a certain age. Block aims to fill the representational gap for the younger fraction of the FTM community by focusing on the representation of the transitional process of younger trans boys. Not only does this project present positive visibility of trans boys, it creates a space for sensuality in the trans identity. The project exposes diverse sexuality of FTMs as well. In the XXX (X rated) section, images of gay trans boys giving blow jobs to other FTMs are presented beside frames of FTMs masterbating, or making out with lovers of any gender. Sexually explicit images of FTMs and FTM bodies are illustrious in the XXboys project. The XXBoys are about celebrating FTM bodies: "trans boys are hot, and hotness comes from the empowerment of the reappropriation of your body, your personal gender expression, [hotness] is a state of mind, hotness is a decision and a point of view...yours" (<http://20six.fr/xxboys>). The website provides a space for FTMs to portray pride and affirmation in their bodies and identities and expose themselves to a community of trans boys without intentionally exploiting or sensationalizing the FTM body. Each XXBoy must write a segment about himself to accompany his photo, and each photo can be commented on by anyone who views the website. This awards a sense of community building within and outside the project.

Along with the XXboys website, there is a XXBoys myspace page where anyone is welcome to join, and FTMs have the ability to participate in photo contests and discussion forums.

The marginality that forces us to constantly invent ourselves- invent our lives, our bodies, our attitudes, our pleasures- shows itself and directs itself in these images. We are forced to create our life in the present because our generation arrived after the party and we have no golden age to regret. Therefore the people inhabiting Kael T Block's photographs must face life and try to make it a rich and exciting experience despite the difficulties of such an undertaking [...]

To be photographed by Block and to pass in the space of image and representation, is to become in turn an icon, if only for a private circle of friends, or for an internet community. The advent of Internet, digital photography and video permits one to create a micro- system of representation and one's own star system in democratizing picture's production and accessibility. (Vincent Simon, <http://xxboys.20six.fr/>)

A variety of FTMs are present in the XXBoys project, however there are evident themes on the site. Portraying a 'tough' persona, showing off reconstructed chests, and embodying tattoos are all common themes of the XXBoys, whether intended or not. Projects on the body are photographed as identity markers. Tattoos and SRS scars are intriguing aspects of individual qualities, though marked bodies are not required in order to be an XXBoy. Portraying a 'tough' persona may not be tied to individual identities, but may be played out on camera for this particular project. The photographs signify a particular genre of photography, as well as a specific subculture of FTMs. The background for many of the photographs is grungy, tagged (graffiti) walls, in bathrooms and alleys. The urban appeal of the photographs allows the subject to stand out in their colorful surroundings and the background points to a particular style of the artist, which may take away from the authenticity of diverse identities within the project by portraying

each boy in a similar fashion.

XXBoy images reveal a gamut of boys who are confident, defiant, shy, and awkward. It becomes a struggle for each model to represent individuality since the style of the photos places the models in a similar gaze. Posing is a form of self-representation, a desire for control and authenticity. The XXBoys posing for Block's project embody forms of self-representation, which become conscious and unconscious as they "struggle between intentionality and convention, the essential and the objectified" (Jay, 1994). Posing must not interfere with the precious essence of individuality. There is an imperative desire for individual self-expression and the appropriating desire of the photographer working simultaneously (Barthes, 1981; Jay, 1994). The subject, while posing, is imitating himself, thus authenticity is lost. In posing, "the very nature of this essential self becomes paradoxical; its subjectivity is linked to a notion of authenticity, yet any image of that self is a sign of its objectification, and hence, its inauthenticity" (Jay, 1994). There are two things working against one another; there is an imperative for this desire for individual, non-conforming self-expression, and an appropriating desire of the photographer to capture what he wants to see during this ritual of posing for a project that aims to capture the essence of this FTM subculture. Although "authentic" identities are often lost within this project, due to the way in which the photographs defy the diversity of the subjects, the building of a community of young FTMs is empowering.

XXBoys focus on 'sexy' bodies; genitals, reconstructed chests, surgery scars, explicit sexual material including blow jobs, raunchy bathroom sex scenes, and back alley fucking. Conversely, in autobiographical transsexual photographs, "photographs

that establish gendered realness do not *reveal* transsexuality, for in them the subject passes as nontranssexual” (Prosser, 1998). Block’s XXBoys, much like Cameron’s work, challenge the previous notion of “gendered realness” as passing as non-transsexual by exposing marked bodies, and by including a textual account of each boys experience as an XXBoy. Marks of transsexuality in the case of XXBoys invent a different perception of masculinity, one that does not depend on erasing markers of transition. Being visibly trans seems to be a heightened form of masculinity for the XXBoys. The images allow the boys to collectively portray FTMs in a new light- as attractive, autonomous bodies.

“Never another magazine article, medical research study, movie or tv talk show done about us- without one of us operating the cameras, microphones and pens” (statement accompanying an XXboy image, <http://xxboys.20six.fr/>).

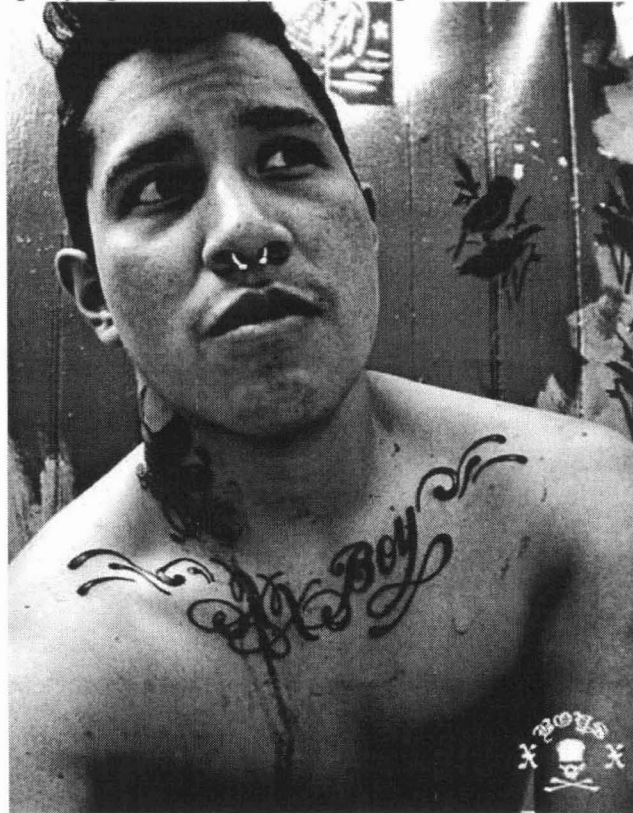


Figure 2. Photographer Kael T. Block. XXBoy Kael (2005) (<http://20six.fr/xxboys>). Reprinted with



permission.

In *Figure 2*, XXBoy model Kael (also the photographer of the project) demonstrates some of the themes apparent in the XXBoys project. The close up of his face and the dried blood running from his neck tattoo down his chest gives him a perceived “toughness” and displays some of the corporeal changes that come with being a post operative FTM. The tagged background of the picture indicates he is in an urban setting aiding in the appeal of a younger audience. Block’s chest tattoo marks him for life and for the project as an XXBoy. Thus, he has not concealed his transsexuality; his tattoo illuminates his identity as a trans boy. This tattoo signifies a shift in the subjects’ identity, as well. In earlier photographs of this subject, his chest is bare. “A tattooed person is identifying himself to himself and others; he is communicating something about a relationship with other persons or things that he believes he possesses, or wishes to possess [...]” (Edgerton and Dingman, cited in Sullivan, 2001). In previous photographs of transsexuals, specific identity markers, such as tattoos and SRS scars, are not focused on as signs of identity since what is made visible is the erasure of transitioning (Prosser, 1998). The XXBoys explicitly reveal tattoos and SRS scars as indicators of masculine gendered identity. XXBoys are photographed to look more masculine by the very markers of their transition from female-to-male. “In the field of the transsexual subject the photograph functions as an incarnation; the photograph appears co-natural with the body, and may even begin as more referential of the self than the body” (Prosser, 1998). Prosser’s theory on transsexual photographs in autobiographies does not hold true for the

XXBoys project. He argues that the clinical narration of transsexual reassignment is to erase the former sex of the body and that in autobiographies, “photographs of transsexuals are situated on a tension between revealing and concealing transsexuality” (Prosser, 1998); there is an autobiographical imperative to mark one as trans. The XXBoys are revealing their trans identities by becoming members of the project and expressing their identities simultaneously, as exemplified by Block’s tattoo. The project may capture a moment of autobiographical truth about each subject, but the concealment of transsexual bodies is not purposeful. “XX Boy” implies a chromosomally female body on a male subject position. The title of the project points to an obvious type of trans identity. This clear statement about one’s trans identity is different from the traditional transsexual narrative that relies on the subject to abandon their previous sex.

## **Conclusion**

Representations of trans identities have shifted from the traditional medical model of identities in need of psychiatric care. Trans subjects have passed through deafening battles with the medical establishment and the women’s movement- specifically during anti-inclusion debates- and have moved on to representations of valor through autobiographical texts. Trans discourse and identities have made their way into activism, academia, queer and postmodern theory, feminism and more recently, transgender studies. Gender categories emerging out of queer and postmodern theories allowed some trans identities to flourish and create their own communities. These communities, such as the trans boys discussed in this paper, mark a significant shift in thinking through trans subjectivity. Along with these flourishing identities come genres or subcultures of trans

boys who mark their bodies with identity signifiers, such as tattoos and sex reassignment surgery scars, and use these markings as expressions of individuality.

Although tattoos and SRS scars mark the body in differently invasive ways, our current understanding of projects on the body allows us to make sense of and make use of the commonalities that these two projects entail. Trans projects on/in the skin can be viewed as positive self-transformations, rather than essentializing and pathologizing theories of trans embodiment. We can view these forms of embodiment as examples of ambiguous and complex ways that bodies are continually changed and changing (Sullivan, 2006). Tattoos can be viewed as markings that aid in the development of particular trans identities. Tattooing on or above SRS chest scars signifies a specific experience of a transforming body. The manipulation of the material surface of the body can be substantial as there is a “psychic investment of the self in skin” (Prosser, 1998). The body becomes a place where a sense of self is projected.

This form of projection has been taken to a community level where trans boys have begun sharing their stories through photographic exploration. The XXBoys photo project has exhibited FTM bodies in a sexy, affirmative light, thus breaking traditional views on trans bodies that were previously concealed. Tattoos in this project are aesthetically pleasing art pieces and identity markings, strategically placed above, or covering SRS scars, worn proud on a body that must fight to be seen, tolerated and accepted. Tattoos are stories waiting to be told. “What is written in the flesh is much more than mere body-decoration, or simply marking one’s status in the community. The human body [...] its surface, is filled with hieroglyphs telling one of the stories of

corporeality in history” (Falk cited in Sullivan, 2001). The images of these hieroglyphs, such as tattoos and SRS scars, create the essence of the XXBoy photographs and fashion the XXBoy community. The XXBoys who chose to tell their stories through their tattoos, such as Block’s ‘XXBOY’ tattoo, indicates a clear statement of identity. Shifts and breaks within personal developments of identification become a significant aspect of the ontological process of creating identity. One’s identity is a combination of a variety of experiences where people engage in a permanent re-ordering of identity narratives at which a concern with the body is central (Kleese, 1999). Body projects are an attempt to construct an articulate viable sense of self-identity by giving attention to the body, specifically the surface of the body.

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## **Appendix A: Notes on Terminology**

**Ally:** someone concerned for the well being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex people; and a belief that heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are social justice issues.

**Androgynous:** a person appearing and/or identifying as neither man nor woman, presenting a gender either mixed or neutral.

**Boi:** a male identified person who chooses not to use 'boy' as it may symbolize a CIS gendered person.

**Cross-dressers** periodically wear the clothing of the 'opposite' gender as a vehicle of self- or sexual-expression.

**Drag kings** and **drag queens** adopt the dress and mannerisms of the opposite gender for entertainment purposes.

**FTM:** female to male transsexual or transgendered person.

**Gender Expression:** A person's choice and/or manipulation of 'gender cues'. Gender expression may or may not be congruent with or influenced by a person's biological sex.

**Genderqueer:** A person whose gender expression is a conscious rejection of standard gender norms or ideals. Gender queer persons may experience a gender that's in-between or outside the standard male/female binary, and they may prefer gender-oppositional or gender-neutral pronouns.

**Grrrl:** a female identified person who chooses not to use 'girl' as it may signify a CIS gendered person.

**Intersex:** intersex persons are born with an anatomy that doesn't neatly fit social standards for a "male" or "female" physiology. Their sexual anatomy might be gender-ambiguous or their sex chromosomes may not be xx or xy. Thus "intersex" is an inclusive term for different forms of biological variance.

**LGTBQ:** lesbian, gay, transgender/transsexual, bisexual, queer.

**MTF:** male to female transsexual or transgendered person.

**Pangendered:** a person whose gender identity is comprised of all or many gender expressions.



**Questioning:** individuals in the process of questioning their sexual identity.

**Trans:** generally used as an umbrella term for transgender and transsexual, and often for genderqueer and gender questioning individuals. Trans people break away from some of the cultural norms around sex and gender.

**Transgender:** A person who lives a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex. Transgender refers to people whose appearance and behaviour do not conform to the cultural 'norm' for the gender they were born.

**Transsexual:** a person who identifies psychologically and emotionally as a gender/sex other than the one they were assigned at birth. Transsexual persons usually wish to surgically and hormonally transform their bodies to match their inner sense of gender/sex.

**Transman/transboy/transguy/tranny boy:** identities sometimes adopted by female-to-male transsexuals to signify that they are men but still affirming their history as once females.

**Two-spirited:** although the definition of this term varies across Native American cultures, generally a two-spirited individual is biologically one sex but fulfills the gender roles of both sexes. Two-spirited persons often occupy a space of great reverence and respect in Native American culture.

For more information on these terms or other queer and trans terms visit:  
[www.otterbein.edu/diversityGLBTQ/definitions.asp](http://www.otterbein.edu/diversityGLBTQ/definitions.asp) and [www.trans-academics.org/trans\\_sexuality\\_termi](http://www.trans-academics.org/trans_sexuality_termi)

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**Exploring Vancouver's Queer and Transgender Youth  
Organizations**

## **Introduction: Key Roles of Community Programs for Youth**

The number of visible lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual and queer (LGBTQT) people in Canada is growing (Lepischak, 2004). As a result, queer and trans (QT) youth<sup>1</sup> are coming out and transitioning at much younger ages now than even a generation ago, yet they are particularly vulnerable because they are still in school, and financially and emotionally dependent on their families. Youth who are financially rejected from their families are at risk of unemployment, and thus, may become involved in street life. (Owens, 1998; Lepischak, 2004). These rejected youth may turn to their LGBTQT communities for help if they are in an urban centre, but adult community centers may not offer the age appropriate, strength based services that many QT youth need to thrive. Youth Programs are often separate from the functions of adult communities. As a result, adolescents are not provided ample opportunities to be a part of the fabric of their communities (Nitzberg, 2005). Vancouver offers a variety of services for QT youth such as information about coming out to parents, workshops on gender and sexual orientation, group camping, social events, and drop-in centers. However, the effectiveness of these queer and trans<sup>2</sup> youth programs in Vancouver has not been previously tracked or studied. This paper aims to evaluate the current resources in Vancouver to determine if the developmental needs of these marginalized groups are met and if QT youth are choosing to take advantage of available programs.

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<sup>1</sup> QT Youth' refers specifically to queer and trans youth

<sup>2</sup> 'trans' is used as an umbrella term for the transgender/transsexual/gender questioning community. Refer to Appendix A: Notes on terminology.

Joel Nitzberg's research on youth development and community building suggests that:

Youth development is the ongoing growth process whereby youth engage in meeting their own personal and social needs: where they work with adults to help secure environments where they feel safe, cared for, valued, useful, and well-grounded; where they help themselves build the skills and competencies that will allow them to function as effective members of society and to have fulfilling daily lives. (Nitzberg, 2005)

In order to assess community programs in Vancouver, it is necessary to establish the particular developmental areas of need for youth. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (2002) is published by the National Research Council (NRC) and is written by a committee of experts on community-level programs for children, youth, and family. This report, which is the result of a two-year evaluation of youth programs in the United States, focuses on the essential elements of the well being and development of children and youth such as emotional, intellectual, psychological, and physical progress. This project does not specifically address the unique needs of all marginalized youth populations, but provides a detailed description of the methods used to promote youth development for all youth regardless of (dis)ability, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender. Although this is an extensive study, only short paragraphs are used to *mention* that some specific needs are essential for diverse ethnic groups, LGB groups, and "special needs" children (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). These paragraphs point to a sense of belonging that all youth strive for, and suggest that "whether one is a member of a minority group, the dominant culture, or has not decided, there are important issues to be faced about how one fits into the diverse and sometimes conflicting marketplace of cultural messages and identities" (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Even though all youth strive for "a sense of belonging", for youth who need to identify with a marginalized



community within the society at large, specific criteria for support programs are required to maximize their positive development. According to the NRC report, intellectual development, psychological and emotional development, and social development are three key contributing factors to positive youth development and overall well being.

The Nation Research Council admits that the list of positive development features is a provisional list based on current research. This list “is likely to have omitted features important to various cultural groups” (Eccles and Gootman, 2002), but suggests that programs for youth in general should focus on some combination of these development features. Additionally, Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets are concrete, common sense, positive experiences and qualities essential to the development of successful young people (see Appendix B or [www.searchinstitute.org](http://www.searchinstitute.org)). Search Institute adheres to the same principles as the National Research Counsel, as do many child and youth agencies in North America according to the NRC. The positive developmental features begin with physical and psychological safety for youth, which means protection from basic health risks, environmental hazards, unforeseen threats, and sexual abuse. Studies have shown that any forms of violence acted upon or even seen by children or youth have dire psychological consequences on their development including posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, dissasociative reactions, emotional disregulation, aggression, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, an incapacity to learn efficiently, and retributive violence (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Owens, 1998). Violence of any breed threatens the healthy development of youth. Thus, safety from these threats is essential for positive growth.

Positive social development of youth requires adult supervision and a consistent program structure. Youth development studies show that at least one consistent relationship with an adult can increase youths' success (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Nitzberg, 2005). A stable, predictable program allows youth to socialize and learn in a cohesive way and benefit from clear rules, discipline, and consistency (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Supportive relationships with adults in settings that suit each adolescent are "critical mediums" of development. The NRC report states that supportive relationships with adults "provide an environment of reinforcement, good modeling, and constructive feedback for physical, intellectual, psychological, and social growth" (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Supporting Our Youth (SOY) in Toronto is an excellent example of a community-building, supportive framework for LGBTTTQ youth. The programs primary initiative is to enable QT youth to develop positive relationships with adults as mentors and positive role models. SOY pairs each youth with an adult mentor of similar sexual orientation or gender expression. For QT youth already living on the streets, the program provides a safe place to share a meal and conversation, and sometimes offers subsidized, nonprofit housing in the home of their mentor (Lepischak, 2004). In addition to mentor services, SOY provides youth with professional counseling, crisis intervention, and other traditional services that meet their goal of providing "community-based alternatives for youth seeking peer supports or contact with positive adult role models" and commits to the "underlying principles of broad participation, diverse skills, partnerships, coalition building, and grassroots ownership and direction" (Lepischak, 2004). This report on SOY's programs is useful in showing the importance of

incorporating into youth programs a sense of safety, adult role models, and opportunities to participate and contribute to the program and to the queer and trans community.

The following feature of positive development for youth outlined by the National Research Council is the core section of their study that mentions the needs of diverse groups of youth. An opportunity to belong, to participate in planning of activities, and to be involved in group cohesiveness is a primary feature of development, especially in community programming. Youth are less likely to participate in community programs if they do not feel as if they belong. Thus, it is important for communities to offer programs specific to diverse cultural groups and to assist in making alliances with mainstream youth groups (Owens, 1998). For instance, gay-straight alliances aid in inter-group relationships through inclusiveness, allowing for a greater sense of belonging, as well as, support from adult gay community centers where LGBTQ identity is a commonality and the risk of homophobia is a non-issue (Micelli, 2005). Due to instances of homophobia in and outside school settings, in the early 1970's, college and high school students began a social movement to lend support to LGB students. Students in the 1980's spoke up about their social stigma and high risks of suicide, which extended recognition of gay issues and an increase in academic and governmental research on the needs of LGBT youth (Miceli, 2005). In 1985, the Henrick-Martin Institute (HMI) in New York City was founded. The HMI is known as the Institute for Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth and provides support, social services and advocacy for LGBT youth who cannot access these types of services elsewhere (Miceli, 2005). At this time, the HMI played a significant role in the gay-straight alliance movement that continues, primarily in high schools, internationally today.

According to the National Research Council, adhering to positive social norms is a key feature of positive development for youth. Each cultural group may have different norms to abide by, which tends to shape behavior. “Peer influence” suggests that adolescents will come to view certain behaviors as appropriate, positive ways of acting (Brown, 1990 cited in Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Important for community-building and youth development is the opportunity for youth to be effective in making a difference in their community, to be empowered, and to have “support for increasingly autonomous self-regulation that is appropriate to the maturing individuals’ development level and cultural background” (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Providing services that are creative in helping youth establish a sense of importance is fundamental in youth development. Opportunities for skill building in a variety of settings provide youth with the ability to acquire the knowledge necessary to succeed in a social milieu. Lastly, according to the National Research Council, integration of family, school, and community efforts is a key feature of positive development. However, there has been little conceptual work on integration between community programs. Community programs have been noted to be more successful when they coordinate with schools, parents and communities (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). It is highly unlikely that one single community organization would be able to provide all-encompassing programs and services to assist youths’ positive development. The collaboration of families, schools, “and other social service and educational institutions, youth-serving agencies, policy-makers, community leaders, and young people” is fundamental in facilitating programs. These findings from the National Research Council’s 2002 study indicate the necessary needs for intellectual, psychological, emotional and social development of youth through community programs.

As noted earlier, the study's findings do not provide enough detail for the diverse needs of marginalized groups. There is little research that offers information for service providers who work diligently with queer and trans youth (Owens, 1998; Miceli, 2005; Ginwright, Noguera, and Cammarota, 2006) and even fewer resources in Canada (Lepischak, 2004). Therefore, it is important to investigate the potential of the Internet as a source of learning and community building for queer and trans youth, as well as a resource space where they feel they belong and have an opportunity to connect with their peers.

The Internet is a great resource, especially for queer and trans youth who live in rural areas (Shapiro, 2004). It is an efficient method of exploring options for youth in urban settings as well. Since locating a safe community is even more difficult for youth living in rural areas, they oftentimes use the Internet as a tool to situate themselves within a community. Shapiro, who conducted a study on transgender and transsexual organizing on the Internet, suggests "the Internet aids in community development and networking for highly marginalized groups in particularly salient ways. Because outing oneself online does not carry the same risks, many more people are willing to inquire about and become active in the community and its informational and social networks" (Shapiro, 2004). This is particularly significant for youth who have access to the thousands of trans and queer related sources that can be found on the Internet. The ability to access sites that reaffirm and validate identity, feelings, and social definition are vital, especially for youth. Kate O'Riordan proposes that cyber and queer as an intersection of identities can both be methods of "imagining reconfigured futures that have become discursively diffuse, shaping and describing ways to think about identity and communication"

(O’Riordan, 2007). Online communities offer queer and trans youth a variety of information, as well as a chance to communicate with their peers. Shapiro’s study indicates that in 2002, an Internet search for “transgender” pulled up over 800,000 trans focused websites. Today a google.ca search pulls up 7, 450,000 trans related sites and searching “transgender youth” generates about 1,800,000 results. Online resources that foster broad community development including web pages, discussion forums, photo sharing sites, and personal web blogs such as livejournal and blogger, as well as networking sites such as friendster, myspace, and facebook have millions of users from around the world who share their stories and experiences of living with queer and trans identities. The Internet presents a certain aspect of anonymity that allows QT individuals, who would otherwise be closeted, to talk about their issues and experiences. The Internet has allowed people to educate themselves, make connections, and organize without the risk of outing oneself publicly (Shapiro, 2004).

Many youth communities within Vancouver are accessible on the web. One in particular, YouthQuest!, who recently decided to pass its programming on to smaller organizations throughout Vancouver and the lower mainland (particularly Surrey and Abbotsford), devoted its services to youth in rural environments. By doing a simple search for queer youth communities in the city, the main organizations in Vancouver such as YouthCo, The Centre, and trans specific organizations such as the Three Bridges Transgender Health Program and its associate, the trans youth drop-in center, are readily available. The organizations, which offer online services, generally post their community programs along with their commitments to service oriented support. Although not all youth have access to the Internet, it is still a useful tool to examine considering the high

number of youth who are able to obtain online resources. In 2003 an estimated 7.9 million (64%) of the 12.3 million Canadian households had at least one member who used the Internet regularly either from home, work, school, a public library or another location ([www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)). This paper aims to discover what these organizations have to offer and whether or not the programs studied are being used to their full potential by the youth who choose to take advantage of their services. There is a plethora of information offered on the net that facilitates discussion around queer and trans youth identity, issues regarding the health and wellness of youth, locating support systems, building gay-straight alliances, support for queer identified youth of colour, and many other avenues both specific and broad for queer youth. This method of information is available on the net, but it is not being offered in Vancouver's community. Thus, I will attempt to discover what kinds of expectations online services are creating for queer and trans youth in Vancouver and determine if they are met by the real-life services.

## **Section One: Queer and Trans Youth Programs in Vancouver**

The effectiveness of child and youth programs outlined by The National Research Council in the introduction of this essay has offered a starting point at which to establish the emotional, intellectual, psychological and mental development of youth. Turning now to Vancouver's queer and trans youth programming, I will evaluate the efficacy of two prominent organizations; The Trans Youth Drop In and Youthquest!

Vancouver offers a variety of youth organizations and facilities to support the diversity of youth throughout the city, such as the Broadway Youth Resource Centre,

which offers youth positive, community oriented services to decrease the chances of at-risk youth becoming street entrenched ([www.pcrs.ca](http://www.pcrs.ca)); GAB at The Centre provides a drop-in program for youth aged 25 and under in a laid-back, positive social atmosphere ([www.lgtbcentrevancouver.com](http://www.lgtbcentrevancouver.com)); the South Vancouver Youth Center offers housing and support assistance, as well as help with developing skills for independent living and transition to adulthood; Check Your Head (CYH) by the Youth Global Education Network educates youth on issues related to labour rights, free-trade, and corporate threats in order to understand globalization and social justice; Kinex is a service where youth promote mental health and well-being of other youth; Leave Out Violence (LOVE) provides youth with skills and support to live violence-free; The Real Power Youth Society is dedicated to young women to work together on social issues ([www.vancouveryouth.ca](http://www.vancouveryouth.ca)); Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association promotes youth-friendly ways for urban Aboriginal youth to take interest in their communities and motivate societies, governments, schools to take an interest in Aboriginal youth's issues ([www.vancouveryouth.ca](http://www.vancouveryouth.ca)); and Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA) recommends services and programs to Native youth in Vancouver ([www.unya.bc.ca](http://www.unya.bc.ca)). Furthermore, there are organizations dedicated to employment opportunities for youth, educational initiatives, health promotion and awareness of health issues, such as YouthCo Aids Society ([www.youthco.org](http://www.youthco.org)), the Asian Society for the Intervention of Aids, and the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority's 'CONDOMANIA'. These services provide youth with information about sexual health ([www.vancouveryouth.ca](http://www.vancouveryouth.ca)). There are, however, fewer organizations dedicated specifically to marginalized youth, especially queer and trans youth. Due to minimal feedback from interviews, I will focus on two of the main



organizations in Vancouver that provide support and community services specifically for queer and trans (QT) youth- the Trans Youth Drop-in Center ([www.vch.ca/transhealth/youth](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/youth)) and Youthquest!. In addition to providing youth with opportunities to socialize with their peers, obtain support from adults and others “like them”, and granting youth safe spaces to be themselves, information about each organizations services is available online. Drop-in services do not operate as, or replace, professional psychological or psychiatric treatment. They are usually volunteer-run, social spaces available for youth to access support and obtain resources if further counseling is necessary. Particularly, drop-in centers facilitate positive relationships between the youth and their peers, program volunteers, and the community.

The Trans Youth Drop-in Center (TYDI, or drop-in) is a group of transgender and transsexual youth who meet once a month to meet other trans youth, discuss trans and non-trans related topics, go camping, make ‘zines, eat snacks, get information on resources available throughout Vancouver for transgender and transsexual youth, or just hang out. The TYDI also provides a free meal at each meeting ([www.vch.ca/transhealth/youth/](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/youth/)). The drop-in is a service implemented by the Three Bridges Transgender Health Program- an extensive program reaching transgender/transsexual persons of all ages, ethnicities, (dis)abilities, and classes in Vancouver. The web page for the Trans Youth Drop-in is a short, one page guide that includes the activities listed above, an email address of the coordinators, and a phone number and contact link to the Transgender Health Program page. The page also provides a list of welcomed identities, which fall under the umbrella term “trans”. These

identities include androgynous<sup>3</sup>, bi-gendered, butch, crossdresser, drag king/queen, FTM, gender bender, genderqueer, MTF, pangendered, questioning, sissy, trans, transsexual, Two-Spirit, none-of-the-above-thank-you-very-much, and allies including friends, partners, siblings, and any other trans-friendly individuals.

([www.vch.ca/transhealth/youth/](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/youth/)). The TYDI space is available to youth and their loved ones ages 24 and under. Offering suggestions of identities under the umbrella term “trans” is useful for youth who may not have a sense of their identity, or who may not completely identify as transgender or transsexual. Seeing a plethora of identities welcome at the drop-in suggests that identity is not a strict requirement of their services, which gives these youth a sense of belonging, something that all youth strive for (Owens, 1998; Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Lepischak, 2004). Since the Trans Youth Drop-in is a service provided by the Transgender Health Program, their guiding principles are developed through the extensive Health Program made available by Vancouver Coastal Health ([www.vch.ca/transhealth/services/](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/services/)). With the Transgender Health program’s assistance, the Trans Youth Drop-in has an encouraging organization supporting youths’ needs.

The “Support Services” outlined by the Transgender Health Program (THP) are based on five guiding principles. Firstly the THP supports and encourages transgender community members to make their own informed decisions by promoting self-determination. “All transgender community members have the right to request and refuse support from the THP; self-define their own gender identity, gender beliefs, and gender expression; and have personal boundaries respected” ([www.vch.ca/transhealth/services/](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/services/)). Secondly, the THP recognizes that there are diverse genders, identities, beliefs and

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for notes on terminology

values, cultures, languages, appearances, sexualities, and family structures. They value this diversity and strive to accommodate the needs of the transgender community.

Thirdly, the THP's services are available for anyone in BC with a transgender health request. They state that they will not exclude on the basis of "gender identity/expression, transition status, history of substance abuse, source of income, mental health history, race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, disability, age, class, appearance, religion, or sexual orientation"([www.vch.ca/transhealth/services/](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/services/)). Fourthly, the THP welcomes anyone who requires support of their services. However, priority is given to those in an emergency or crisis situation, and those who have difficulties acquiring support services due to geographical, financial, linguistic, and cultural barriers. Lastly, the THP encourages feedback from the transgender community in evaluating their support services and is committed to constant evaluation of the quality and adequacy of their services.

These support service principles are important for drop-in coordinators, especially of a specific group of youth, in order to apply these tools of support consistently. Having access to health and social services are key for youth. The THP recognizes this and offers these services along with a group of staff and volunteers who implement these services and advocate for the transgender community.

Advocacy is another important community-building and community support tool for marginalized groups (Owens, 1998; Shankle, 2006). The Trans Youth Drop-in is required to abide by the leading principles of the THP, and thus has defined their advocacy as working to ensure that the transgender community has access to appropriate health and social services including "individual and systematic barriers that make it difficult for transgender community members to access health and social services,

helping people navigate the system, and offering assistance when transgender community members are not treated with respect and dignity by service providers [outside the THP]" ([www.vch.ca/transhealth/services](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/services)). This assistance indicates a sense of safety in the spaces that trans people use at the THP by assuring that the people working and volunteering there are supportive of trans issues. Safety, according to the National Research Council, is an essential quality of youth programs (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Advocacy for these services is an area where the THP strives to best serve their clients and can be found at other drop-ins geared toward QT youth.

Youthquest!, another youth driven organization dedicated to queer and trans youth under the age of 25, also ran a drop-in service before the organization shut down in November, 2006. Prior to the website shutting down, it stated:

Youthquest! is BC's largest GLBT youth society, serving queer and questioning youth in suburban and rural areas of BC. In every drop-in centre we operate, we provide youth support and opportunities for socializing, as well as community development services. [...] Visit our website and check out what we've got going on in your neighborhood. ([www.vancouverityouth.ca](http://www.vancouverityouth.ca)).

Youthquest ran primarily out of Abbotsford, B.C., a few miles from Vancouver- just far enough to make it difficult for Vancouver's QT youth to reach. However, they did open a drop-in on Vancouver's East side at Britannia Community Center that ran during the 2006 summer months. Since there is no longer a web site to gather information of Youthquest!, the information I've used is from a volunteer package I received in February 2006 when I became a volunteer for the Abbotsford drop-in, and later the co-coordinator of the East Vancouver drop-in.

The volunteer guidelines assist in providing a basis of the commitments that Youthquest! offers youth by defining what is and is not acceptable behaviour. Volunteers

must maintain confidentiality of the information relating to the youth, volunteers, members, and staff, unless there is an instance of abuse, which volunteers are mandated to report. Completing volunteer training and orientation as well as attending other training programs recommended by the Regional Program Coordinator is required. Maintaining a log of volunteer hours, working as a team member with other volunteers and staff, supporting the empowerment of youth clients, understanding and working actively with youth issues, knowing and expressing personal limits, NOT imposing personal values and beliefs on clients, and refraining from consuming alcohol and/or the use of illegal drugs prior to or during assigned time with Youthquest! are requirements demanded of the volunteers. Furthermore, volunteers have the right to refuse services to youth/clients who are intoxicated, under the use of illegal drugs, or demonstrating abusive behaviour. The instances of substance abuse are high among many youth, especially in marginalized groups (Owens, 1998; Shankle, 2006). Youthquest's policy on alcohol and drugs is set to preserve the safety of the youth during the drop-ins, group events and outings and to encourage harm reduction outside of Youthquest! hours. The drug/alcohol policy statement proposes that the use of drugs/alcohol divides the participating youth into separate social groups, seriously compromising the goal of peer group creation, as well as places an unfair pressure on those youth who may have dependency issues, which in turn may reinforce the feeling of separation between them and the rest of the group (Youthquest! Volunteer Kit). Furthermore, the use of drugs/alcohol reinforces the reliance by youth participants on substances to relax or feel comfortable in social situations when condoned or ignored by volunteers.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people develop drug/alcohol dependencies 3 to 4 times more frequently than their straight counterparts. Years of pain, self-

loathing and wasted potential are the reality behind the statistics. Regardless of your own personal beliefs concerning the use of drugs/alcohol, you are obliged to set a standard that demonstrates to youth participants that drugs/alcohol are not a necessary part of social interaction. The use of drugs/alcohol at group events puts a profound public image problem for the Society. (The Youthquest Adult Volunteer Kit)

It is not suggested that volunteers avoid discussion around drugs/alcohol. They are encouraged to facilitate discussion without condoning the use of drugs/alcohol by drawing on a variety of perspectives. By facilitating this type of discussion the youth may be challenged on their biases and attitudes toward drug/alcohol use and may be discouraged from using as often in the future.

Since the drop-ins are generated in order to meet people, as well as offer supportive relationships, and because the volunteers are often only a few years older than the youth, Youthquest developed a Relationship Boundary Policy Statement (Youthquest! Adult Volunteer Kit). Volunteers are strictly there to facilitate, provide resources, and to be role models. Volunteers are considered to occupy positions of trust, maintain confidentiality, and uphold a professional distance that allows for an objective position. Additionally, these relationship boundaries will enhance the youths' ability to establish/maintain their own identity and discourage youth from developing romantic crushes on volunteers. These guidelines demonstrate the atmosphere anticipated during drop-in or activity hours and the relationship intended between volunteers and youth. As noted earlier, the supportive relationships between youth and adults are important for intellectual and social development.

The Trans Youth Drop-in and Youthquest! offer youth very similar activities according to the website and Volunteer Package. The difference lies in their ability to maintain supportive relationships, volunteer role modeling, and provide outside resources

to the youth that utilize each of these programs' services. The Trans Youth Drop-in is generated from larger trans and queer community centers and health resources that have the ability to offer a plethora of health related services outside of their drop-in hours. Youthquest's volunteer package does not attain to this, but since they are a youth driven support drop-in, they must pull from outside resources to offer any follow up assistance to youth in need. According to the drop-ins mandates, each drop-in suggests a variety of activities in no specific order, signifying that there is no distinguishable consistent programming implemented. Consistency in programming, discipline, and relationships are a central learning tool for youth (Owens, 1998; Eccles and Gootman, 2002). The interviews in the following sections will provide more information regarding consistency of programs for the Trans Youth Drop-in and Youthquest! as well as offer insight into each programs' developmental structure.

## **Section Two: Interviews with Volunteers of Youth Organizations**

In the first section of this paper I argued that there are discrepancies between what is proposed on the web page of the TYDI and the Volunteer Kit of Youthquest! and what is actually offered to queer and trans youth during drop-in hours. Although the Trans Youth Drop In does not offer professional counseling, their services reach youth through creating community-based options for those seeking peer support and/or connections with positive adult role models. Similarly, Youthquest! once provided peer support and positive adult relationships for youth prior to closing its doors in November 2006. I have conducted open-ended interviews with two volunteers in Vancouver. One participant

volunteered with Youthquest! for one year and the other volunteered with Youthquest! for two and a half years, along with a variety of other youth driven organizations throughout Vancouver, such as YouthCo Aids Society and GAB, intermittently over the past seven years. The interviews facilitated discussion in an attempt to uncover some of the truths about the types of programs and activities, personal development, and support offered during drop-ins. Since Youthquest! was one of the largest queer youth organizations in BC, the majority of the following information given by volunteers is centered on Youthquest!. The interviews conducted with two of Vancouver's queer and trans youth in the final section will offer more information on the Trans Youth Drop-in.

The importance of creating a drop-in where youth feel safe, and remain safe was the key sentiment voiced by participants. Youthquest's mandate, which was practiced at each drop-in, stated that Youthquest! created safe youth empowered space for queer youth at risk between the ages of 13 and 21. The role of the coordinators and volunteers was to serve as mentors, provide resources, and assure that a safe, affirming environment existed for QT youth. The volunteer package outlines the Youthquest! mandate, but does not define "safe space". "Safe space" was articulated by one volunteer as a space where queer youth can hang out with other youth "like them", such as other queer identified youth, and feel safe doing "regular" things that other non-queer youth take for granted. A 1997 study on the collaboration between gay and lesbian youth and adults found that by providing a safe space where gay and lesbian youth can meet others like themselves aids in the youths development of healthy self-concepts and self-esteem, and furthermore, provides validation of youths feelings about their sexuality (O'Donnel et.al, 1997). Queer youth do not publicly get the opportunity to show affection with their partners



without ridicule from mainstream society. Thus, safe space becomes crucial in the development of identity. Derogatory comments are not permitted in a safe space. There is no tolerance for racist, homophobic, transphobic, classist, or ableist comments, and thus, community guidelines were created by the youth and volunteers at Youthquest!. To reinforce these guidelines that secured safe space, and to ensure that newcomers were aware of them, they were read aloud each week by the youth.

In order to maintain a safe environment, it is important to know who the youth are at each drop in. Youthquest! used a sign-in sheet to keep track of who was using the drop in and who was coming consistently. Each volunteer added that, to continue providing a safe environment for youth, the volunteers would debrief following each drop-in. The debriefing allowed volunteers to confidentially discuss any issues the individual youth may have had and established an opportunity to determine as a group whether further action is necessary or if checking in on the youth the following week would be sufficient. For example, if a youth had a concern, or disclosed to one of the volunteers that they had a problem with family or at school that was beyond the outreach capability of the drop-ins services, the coordinator would have to refer the youth to outside sources.

“Safe space” was included as a means of personal development for youth. Being around adults who identify as queer and learning about the importance of community allows youth to feel empowered and create a community for themselves. Within safe spaces occupied by QT youth, Mallon’s 1993 study on gay and lesbian adolescents recommended that volunteers assist in creating environments where youth are able to develop effective interpersonal systems for dealing with conflict, peer pressure, friendship, safe sex practices, self advocacy skills, and to have opportunities to discuss

their sexuality or gender identity openly (Mallon, 1993). The volunteers interviewed for this study reiterated the importance of this sentiment.

I think it's important for [youth] to have space- non-judgmental space away from peers at school, and parents I guess as well, just so they can talk about issues that they're facing in those settings. Um and then really it was, the focus was on creating a non-judgmental objective space where we had no bashing, no bullying stereotyping at all. [...] To provide a space where no one felt that they were being singled out or looked down upon or anything.

Having the ability to be themselves in a safe space, or a non-judgmental space, where the youth can participate in activities maintained by volunteers is a central requirement of a drop-in. Without feeling safe, numbers will drop and participation will be minimal, ultimately leaving youth with less resources.

The activities offered from week to week designate which activities youth participate in. The types of activities offered in a social support network drop-in setting demonstrate the effectiveness of individual drop-ins. Youth are able to choose what types of activities and programming they are interested in participating in, and thus, efficiency of programs stems from consistency of youths' involvement. It is up to the coordinators and volunteers to provide effective programming based on youths' needs and desires. If these needs and desires are not met, the program suffers. One volunteer coordinator commented on the importance of youth having opportunities to choose activities, especially in youth empowered drop-ins, like Youthquest!

I wanted whatever the youth wanted to happen, [to] happen [...] you have to give them some suggestions, but basically I wanted to create a drop-in for the youth. I wanted to take their wishes and make it happen.

Giving the youth the opportunity to assist in creating a drop in that is suited to their own needs is fundamental for their development, according to the 2002 National Research

Council (NRC), as it allows youth to feel a sense of belonging (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). The NRC believes that structure and consistency in programming is another area where youth benefit from cohesive socialization and learning.

The activities at each drop-in vary from week to week. Sometimes guest speakers present on various topics usually by request from a youth member. Some topics for guest speakers include queer history, safer sex, self-defense, and drug and alcohol addiction or abuse. Often youth organizations will reach out to other organizations to provide youth access to more resources. Guest speakers from other organizations are beneficial to the collaboration of the groups and the youth. Workshops are integrated into drop in hours as well, including workshops on drag performance, safer sex, making zine's, body issues and collage making, and planned discussions that often required extra encouragement to participate. Genuine involvement and participation is a key component in youth development, especially in developing workshops and contributing discussions in a safe environment. Other activities include open mic nights, pizza nights, dances, and movies- that usually contain queer or trans content. These types of activities were present on the Trans Youth Drop In web page, but there was poor consistency in actually operating these activities. One volunteer mentioned at one of the Youthquest! drop ins, a guest from YouthCO presented a game called "step into the circle" where youths find similarities in experience by stepping into a circle together. This particular game was used as a performance based activity to build youths' self-esteem. All of these activities are based on the principal of providing a safe space for QT youth to engage with their peers. The discussions and activities such as "Step into the Circle" become validating and affirming to youth who may be low income or at risk youth in need of support, by

allowing them to talk about their experiences and learn about others' with similar experiences.

Granting youth the ability to choose certain activities is important, but it is essential that the coordinators and volunteers provide a consistent and structured environment. The check-ins that occurred each week became mandatory, as well as the reciting of Youthquest!'s mission statement. This statement was not present in the volunteer guide, but consistently became a component for the drop in according to the volunteers. One youth would volunteer to read the mission statement each week to remind the youth what Youthquest! was about and to refresh those present on the meanings and understandings of GLBTQ. One volunteer commented that structured drop ins did not always occur at Youthquest!.

Depending on the night, we had non-program nights and program nights. The reason we had that was because if you do strict programming activities every week [the youth] get tired of it and your numbers will drop. [...] [Structure is] something I'd like to implement more, just as far as discussions and workshops 'cause it's definitely difficult to get the youth to participate.

Structured programming became a difficult task for Youthquest!, mainly due to the lack of support from the board members and ultimately, lack of funding.

Youthquest! was provided an honorarium of fifty dollars per drop-in, by the grants they received, for Abbotsford meetings. At the East Vancouver location, they were given \$100 per month from the Britannia Community Centre; this funding did not come from the Youthquest! Board. More than seventy youth would come out to the three-hour, Abbotsford drop-in. Fifty dollars was expected to provide snacks, materials for crafts, and safer sex resources. Condoms were provided because Youthquest! could get them free, but unfortunately they were unable to provide dental dams due to lack of

funding. According to one volunteer, the Board of Directors did not sufficiently work toward attaining necessary finances for the group, nor did they maintain an adequate level of advertising, especially for the East Vancouver drop-in, which failed due to lack of youth joining.

They had a web site. I don't know if, I honestly think that Youthquest! lost funding. I don't think that the Youthquest! website is running anymore. [...] So its mostly through high schools that they did their advertising and again it think Internet access as well. I didn't know if they actually put things up in the community cause they realize that some youth do drop out of school before grade 10 or what not, that are troubled or at risk youth, so those advertisements wouldn't help them. So I do know they were looking to go elsewhere in the community but I don't know if they actually followed through with that.

With little advertising around the community, it is no wonder that the East Vancouver drop-in generated so few youth. The Youthquest! web page was not kept up to date, also due to funding. Since many youth use the Internet to research local resources, it is important to maintain a frequented site, especially for the "largest youth organization in BC".

The Internet contributes to the dispersion and expansion of information on queer and trans related organizing through list serves, e-mail, message boards, and web sites (Shapiro, 2004). This information is particularly useful to youth for purposes of locating queer and trans resources in their geographical location. However useful the Internet may be for accessing communities and help-lines, volunteers of youth organizations in Vancouver commented on the dangers of the Internet for youth. Sites that allow youth to post their personal information create a space for predators to take advantage. One volunteer commented, "NEXOPIA [an online community] is a very problematic site for teens because they can put all their information on the site, like their picture, their friends, where they go to school, where they live. It puts [youth] on a platter to pedophiles."

Youthquest eventually held workshops on Internet safety, once the youth had access to Internet services during drop-in hours. Learning how to use the advantages of Internet for locating resources, meeting peers, and building-community based alliances should be a focus for youth on the net and youth should be educated on ways to utilize the internet safely.

The Internet allows youth to locate resources in their area, but if those resources are not consistently updated, they fall short of providing effective services to youth. Youthquest! was one of the “largest youth Organizations in BC” and according to volunteers and coordinators of the programs, their website was not kept up to date.

The website is definitely very important. Just because, in 2007, teens are on the web constantly, and so that was always great because teens looking for other queer youth basically can google queer youth in Vancouver and then find Youthquest or GAB and that’s very important. And then go from there and find the help line, it was like, 1-800-notalone, or there’s that and again, that consistency is very important so once you have a web site up, and then checking it, checking the emails- it’s extremely important. You’ve got to do that every day. You’ve got to have someone on the phone line, that kind of stuff so that when someone does call there’s not like a dead single on the other end, or when someone does go to find the website, it’s not gone.

Youth often depend on these websites for resources, information and community. If web sites are not kept up to date, a youth may have mustered the courage to join a drop-in only to find closed doors.

Despite its considerable success in attracting youth to its programs, Youthquest! faced significant challenges. These included galvanizing activities, consistency of structure, initiating funding, and ensuring sustainability. Although most of Youthquest!’s activities generated success in participation, their lack of consistency sabotaged their program structure. Financial restrictions made it difficult for Youthquest! to expand their staff by the lack of effort put forth to attain funding from outside sources. Volunteer

training plummeted when the organization and staff were not sufficiently supervising and evaluating new volunteers. “[...] we’d know some people that were really good that we could like stand behind. You’d be like, all right, pull you off the street and be like ok come with us, volunteer for us”. The volunteer package advises that each volunteer fill out a form indicating their desires for becoming a volunteer as well as provide references. By pulling people off the street to volunteer, this vital procedure was not accomplished, even though they were in great need for volunteers.

According to volunteers of youth programming in Vancouver, there are certainly discrepancies between the online segments, volunteer packages and availability of real-life services. Advertising for “The largest Youth Organization in BC” is essential to the programs survival. Without youth, there can be no drop-in. The following section highlights the voices of two youth who currently use the TYDI and one who has used Youthquest!’s services in the past.

### **Section Three: Interviews with Queer and Trans Youth**

In this section, open-ended interviews highlight the voices of two youth living in Vancouver between the ages of 19 and 25 who use, or have used, at least one of the two drop-ins studied in the previous sections. Both Youthquest! and the Trans Youth Drop-in (TYDI) were consistently utilized by one participant, while the TYDI was consistently used by the other youth. Pseudonyms have been used for each youth in order to protect their identities.

The youth interviewed articulated the need for a safe environment in which they felt a sense of belonging. Accessing outside resources was not voiced as a priority for the youth interviewed, however, the availability of resource pamphlets and safer sex material was noted as a central feature of a drop-in. For the trans youth interviewed, support for transitioning was key, especially at the TYDI. Activities run during drop-ins and ‘out-trips’ were noted as significant for the structure of programming, but were not essential. Volunteer support was not a central theme according to the youth in this study, though the reliance of volunteers to run programming remains an inevitable necessity. The Internet was expressed as an essential element to locating resources within and outside of Vancouver. Not surprisingly, the first theme to emerge was the need for a welcoming, supportive and safe environment.

It is important for youth to feel safe and secure in a confidential, supportive environment. Youth participants in this study relied heavily on support from peers during drop-in hours. Locating a safe space to meet other QT youth with similar struggles was an impetus for returning to the groups. Felix commented on the significance of establishing peers in drop-in settings, and highlighted the value of familiarity in experience.

Youthquest! [...] was really laid back. I just felt a lot of people just needed friends and there was a lot of people there and it was like, it was a friendly space. [...] I found Trans Youth Drop-in to be helpful in the way that I met other trans people- that was nice. I made some friends there and it was kind of nice to have recognizable faces about when you come back there and people at least see in you, you talk and stuff and you have common ground. That affects your life.

Feeling a sense of belonging in a social group, regardless of one’s gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or disability is an essential aspect of social inclusion, social engagement, integration, and socio-cultural identity formation (Eccles and Gootman,



2002; Owens, 1998; Shankle, 2006), which is what Felix was looking for at Youthquest! and the TYDI. Talking openly about gender transitioning and feeling safe and comfortable during transition was considered an essential personal development tool.

Lisa, who found strength and encouragement from the TYDI, describes her experience:

When I started out, I...was nervous, you know pretty scared of, you know dressing up in public and things like that, and you know I remember my first meeting I came completely still in boy mode. I had my girl clothes packed in my back-pack with me and I darted into the washroom to change just before the meeting [...]. And, I cannot emphasize enough just how much support I've gotten from this group [TYDI]. I can honestly say if it weren't for this group I would not be as strong as I am today. You know, I mean, I'm at a point now where I can be out there and say ya, I'm trans to just about anybody. I can answer whatever questions they may have, in fact I encourage it now. You know, but back when I started I was just so incredibly timid and I have to attribute at least in part to the drop in for being able to give me that courage.

Commenting further on the importance of maintaining a group, specifically for trans youth, the value placed upon the Trans Youth Drop-in for some of the youth who use it, is immeasurable. "There's a pretty big gap between the needs and issues between younger transitioners and the needs and issues of older transitioners and it can sometimes be scary for younger transitioners." Through attending all ages' groups, this youth found she had a difficult time relating to older transitioners experiences and thus, values the TYDI for its focus on trans youth. . Furthermore, outlined on the Transgender Health Program page is a section dedicated to ensuring that anyone involved in the TYDI has the right to self-define their own gender identity, gender beliefs, and gender expression. Additionally, their rights are granted to have personal boundaries respected and the THP recognizes that there are diverse genders, identities, beliefs and values, cultures, languages, appearances, and sexualities ([www.vch.ca/transhealth](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth)). Lisa commented on this feature at the drop-in:

Some of us are finished our transition, some of us are um, in the process, some of us are just starting out, and some of us are even you know, still exploring who we are. You know not even knowing if we're trans or not. You know, it's not like we say to these people well you should transition no matter what, right? I mean, if someone is genuinely, you know they realized that maybe they don't need to transition, you know we're supportive of that too right.

Lisa was unaware of most of the youth programs and communities in Vancouver. She read about the Trans Youth Drop-in on a poster at school three years ago and has been an active member ever since. Lisa values the group in immeasurable ways.

I don't know that I would have this much strength to stand my ground, like, if it weren't for the group. This group alone has given me a lot of strength. And I think that's really important to emphasize. You know, just to meet other people who are strong and having those people I can relate to that I can talk to about these issues. Someone, almost always someone, I can tell them what my problem is and almost always I hear someone say, oh ya I've been through that.

She values the TYDI highly and offers her assistance when she can by volunteering to cook for the other members, or offering her own home as a meeting place when the city workers strike affected the community center space. Other drop-ins have not been articulated as essential developmental organizations. But the TYDI is regarded as indispensable to both youth interviewed in this study. Although sparse in activities, the TYDI is highly regarded by the youth

The importance of activities outlined by the National Research Council and echoed by volunteers and in the previous section did not resonate with the youth as motive for joining the Trans Youth Drop-in or Youthquest!. Furthermore, activities mentioned on the web sites and by the volunteers of the drop-ins were not restated by the youth interviewed. Although activities were minimal, especially at the TYDI, the generated discussion at the TYDI was considered the most effective, supportive activity. Additionally, the youth agreed that that discussion spawned the most participation at the TYDI and the youth valued the social 'hang-out' attitude of the drop-in.

It's generally just kind of...conversation is random, there's no set, you know agendas each meeting or anything like that. It's just whatever we want to talk about, we end up talking about. I mean it's more of a social gathering than it is any sort of organization that has any sort of agenda really.

The TYDI mentioned an activity that occurs once a month outside of the regular drop-in. The youth participated in movies, bowling, and laser tag as articulated on the web page. One significant group project the youth participated in was a float in the pride parade. This activity allows the youth to contribute to their community and build community-awareness with confidence. These types of group activities are very alluring to youth who may not be able to partake in them with a social group from school. Similarly, Youthquest! relied on a social 'hang-out' approach, although not as effective for youth participation considering the vast diversity of the youth involved. The concern with Youthquest! was that they would say they were planning on doing activities outside of regular drop-in hours, like bowling for example. But, Felix expressed concern with the level of consistency and professionalism.

I definitely think that being consistent with out trips [...], if you say you're going to do it once a month, you should stick with it. And, um one thing Youthquest! would do is that one week they would have, it would be really laid back and just kind of a social thing and whatever. The next week they would have like a game or something engaging [...] and that was cool. Um, so they fell back on that and they kind of, they just kind of turned into kind of a hang out and that's, I think, where the structure was lost and a lot of people started to, you know, it just become a, a gossip mill. So um I guess keeping structure if you're going to say you're going to do something, if this is how the plan was before, then keep to it.

According to Eccles and Gootman (2002), appropriate structure is a necessary condition of positive development. Without stability and order, youth have difficulty engaging in physical, cognitive, emotional, or social growth. Consistency has been a problematic recurring theme for Youthquest!. They had impressive plans to make their drop-ins successful and utilize the youths' wishes for certain activities. However, according to

volunteers, funding cuts and organizational issues did not allow them to follow through with their plans. Tribulations with volunteers may have also lead to Youthquest!'s termination. The "gossip mill" that Felix describes suggests a level of unprofessionalism detrimental to a youth drop-in.

Although the Youthquest! volunteer package stated that relationships between youth and volunteers were not tolerated, youth were concerned with relationships developing at Youthquest!. Felix left the group due to an unprofessional atmosphere.

Youthquest! became a big gossip mill, and it seemed kind of unprofessional at the volunteers level and like, I mean I think it's great to be friends with everyone there even the volunteers and stuff, but I felt like it became this big cesspool of relationships and um, you know, who's doing what and gossip and that was kind of the turn off and that's why I left.

The issues of relationships between youth and volunteers, especially in a youth run organization, are hazardous to youths' development and detrimental to the organization. Felix felt the need to leave the group, thus jeopardizing his trust in an organization meant to build his confidence and provide him with opportunities to learn communication and social skills. Appropriate adult supervision and the predictability of caretakers is an essential aspect for the development of trust and confidence in youth (Eccles and Gootman, 2002).

Perhaps part of Youthquest!'s failure had to do with the efficiency of the Internet and youth's ability to rely on the services of the web, rather than a drop-in center. The rural Youthquest! drop-in generated up to 70 youth at certain meetings, whereas the East Vancouver drop-in was bringing in two or three youth each week. Youth living in Vancouver have more access to resources and more avenues to pursue social activity. The Internet is host to a social milieu and has the ability to support and facilitate

community development. The efficacy of the Internet as it aids in community development is particularly valuable for youth. Youth have grown up with the Internet and many have advanced modes of learning with Internet sources. If youth need resources on gender, sexual orientation, or other related topics for themselves, they will readily locate these sites on the Internet. Using the web for purposes of social definition, or the validation of feelings and/or identity has become an alternative method of social interaction (Sandra Cole in Shapiro, 2004). The youth participants of this study shared their confidence in the Internet as well, as they care deeply about the needs and available services for youth.

The youth participants considered the Internet an important tool for the purposes of locating and communicating with other queer and/or trans people, mainly youth. The participants use the Internet everyday for communication. One youth has started a web page dedicated to trans youth with an online forum, information regarding transitional processes, and an event calendar. Her aim is to reach youth everywhere.

One thing I want to do with my web side is I want to turn it into like a National Group and perhaps even international if we get that kind of support. I would like to broaden the scope and make it available to any trans youth whether they [are] across the country or even across the world cause you know there are so many communities out there that don't have that and [I want to make these communities] available on the Internet. [...] I've seen a lot of on line forums and you know trans communities that exist on line but I don't see many that are geared to youth. Some granted, but there aren't that many and I'd like to be able to use my site to reach out to more youth.

Trans youth benefit from the Internet by researching avenues for accessing hormones, tips on binding, hair removal procedures and products, and different types of surgery and surgeons. Online forums and web pages dedicated to surgeries and hormones are progressively becoming available. Shapiro (2004) suggests that we cannot deny that the Internet has become a central arena for organizing around transgender

issues. However, it is fundamental that both the online and offline segments of the community continue to be integrated (Shapiro, 2004). This sentiment reiterates the need for youth programming that can supplement the Internet for the lack of face-to-face interaction and hands on support.

## **Discussion**

The National Research Council's provisional list of developmental strategies for youth, as well as the 40 Developmental Assets by the Search Institute provided a basis to assess the current queer and trans resources in Vancouver. Emotional, psychological, social, and intellectual positive developments are key components of valuable organizations and programs. Both Youthquest! and the TYDI provided services where youth felt safe and were able to gain positive social development. Some of the NRC guidelines are practiced at the youth drop-ins studied, including assuring youth feel a sense of belonging, allowing youth to be effective in making decisions that affect the larger LGTBQQ community, and coordination with other youth groups as a means of contributing to the larger community. However, what emerged from discussions with QT youth and volunteers about the effectiveness of Youthquest! and the Trans Youth Drop-in in Vancouver were two completely alternate points of view. While youth and volunteers basically eschewed Youthquest! for its lack of structure, ineffectiveness, and unprofessional atmosphere, the TYDI was praised for its social support and efficiency. I cannot assume that these are the feelings and experiences of all youth who have used either drop-ins service. However, there was obvious lack of dedication to provide useful

services to youth by Youthquest! and to expand their financial capabilities through writing grant applications, reporting on funding, and organizing fundraising events.

Since the online segment of Youthquest! was unavailable for this study, the volunteer package and my experience as a coordinator allowed me to gain first hand knowledge on what was required of volunteers and to what capacity they must facilitate at the drop-ins. Although the volunteer package did not allude to activities offered during drop-in hours, the interviews with volunteers and youth provided useful information regarding the (in)effectiveness of the activities of Youthquest!. The lack of structure of activities left some youth disappointed. According to the interviews, Youthquest! presented youth with a chance to participate in dances, which was considered one favorable activity, especially for youth in rural environments with little access to larger city events. Nevertheless, Youthquest! evidently did not provide the necessary requirements for youths' positive emotional, intellectual, and psychological development due to funding cuts, lack of advertising, and eventually, its closure in November of 2006. This closure affected youth in rural areas more than the youth in East Vancouver, who had little chance to utilize Youthquest!'s services.

The Trans Youth Drop-in, although lacking in diversity of activities, supplied the youth with immeasurable social, intellectual, and emotional support and guidance according to the youth interviewed. The TYDI's success as an intimate drop-in setting relies heavily on the dedicated members of the group and the social hang out approach, which assists youth in social, emotional, and intellectual growth. Peer support was articulated by the youth interviewed as the most important aspect of the TYDI. The effectiveness of the TYDI is a model of community-building for trans youth in

Vancouver. Their presence in the community, although minimal, is effective in providing youth with confidence and the community with knowledge of a successful support group. Trans youth in Vancouver are fortunate to have the TYDI for social support. It is the only trans-only youth organization of its kind in Vancouver.

The Internet has become a key component to the advancement of youth organizations. It is no surprise that youth are using the net to gain resources, rather than using their off-line community programming to its full potential. For youth who are isolated, whether geographically or socially, the Internet provides them with a vibrant network and a place to locate community support. Many of the barriers to organizing within queer and trans movements have been alleviated by the Internet's resources. "By requiring fewer financial resources, providing a more physically safe space to organize and participate in activism, developing community, and combining support and political education, the Internet has played a critical role in minimizing many obstacles to movement formation and participation" (Shapiro, 2004). Youth may be choosing to use the net for its resources, rather than making the time to utilize drop-in center services.

There is not sufficient information on whether or not the Internet is the reason for the lack of youth joining QT organizations or using drop-ins in Vancouver. The usefulness of Vancouver's queer and trans programming cannot be solely based upon the information gathered by four participants. This study is merely a starting point at which to assess the current (lack of) resources for QT youth in Vancouver. The youth who seem to gain the most from queer programming are youth residing in rural areas. However, Vancouver has a social responsibility to offer positive support and developmental programming to all marginalized youth. Listening to what the youth have to say about



their experiences using Vancouver's queer and trans programs is the most valuable place to start to learn more about how to improve these services.

## **Recommendations: Visions for the Future**

This essay has uncovered some of the truths about what is being currently offered for QT youth in Vancouver, identifying potential areas where programs should be improved. It is Vancouver's responsibility to offer QT youth with the support services they desperately need. Creating a safe, non-judgmental, supportive space for QT youth to be themselves is detrimental to youths' development. Developing strong volunteer and community based support organizations where both youth and adult volunteers are committed and bring energy, expertise, and creativity on every level is essential. Youth need a space where they increasingly recognize their potential to make contributions in their communities. This strategy includes political education, community awareness, an emphasis on building an autonomous yet socially integrated and connected sense of self, education on the history and politics of queer and trans identities, community outreach, education, advocacy, and outreach to rural communities as well (Gambone, et al. 2006). Since YouthQuest! provided youth in rural areas with support prior to closing, youth in these areas have minimal access to openly queer and trans adults and support services, thus compromising QT youths' healthy overall development. Future programs would include rural youth in the development of gay-straight alliances in their schools, and within their communities. Providing youth with opportunities to travel to high schools to discuss with other youth about what it means to be inclusive and accepting of LGBTTQ youth and learning how to start Pride Prom (an event where the focus is on LGBTTQ

youth rather than straight youth) at their schools, would be beneficial to urban and rural QT youth.

By honoring youth with the opportunity to teach other youth and service providers about acceptance gives queer and trans youth a sense of importance and allows them to be leaders in their communities. Youth should also be granted leadership certificates when they accomplish something meaningful in their communities and accordingly, be publicly honored at larger community events (such as Pride). The availability and involvement of adult queer and trans role models greatly strengthens youth programs (O'Donnell, et al. 1997) by matching individuals of different generations with each other according to individual needs and interests. This will provide support to either younger or newer members of the LGBTTQ communities. According to the National Research Council (NRC), mentoring programs that pair a youth with an adult in a setting that suits the adolescent provides a 'critical medium' of development. Supportive relationships with adults allow for an environment of reinforcement, good modeling, and constructive feedback for physical, intellectual, psychological, and social growth (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). Youth also need employment initiatives where they are educated about the tools they need to find employment and succeed in interviews, as well as, assistance locating subsidized housing, especially for youth at risk, or street involved youth. Additionally, future programs should offer a community arts space where youth can learn use their creativity for performance art, writing, making zines, photography, and other forms of art, potentially while paired with an older adult mentor from the community. Moreover, it is necessary to present youth with AIDS/HIV/STI prevention workshops and seminars. Health awareness and information on locating specific health resources are key

factors in queer and trans youth's lifestyles. This could include guest speaker series where advocates from the community come speak to youth about health, the importance of Internet safety and how to navigate the Internet appropriately, and information on organizations and activities within the community that may be beneficial to their needs.

Transgender/transsexual specific organizations need to offer service providers with sensitivity training and educate them about the lived experiences of this diverse and complex population. The transgender Health Program grants service providers with this type of support, but ensuring that youth understand that they can confront their local services with confidence, knowing they have support from trans programs, to educate service providers on areas including increasing agency staff knowledge about common trans issues, identifying current barriers to access, building tools for service providers to move toward inclusion of trans people, reducing stigma, eliminating stereotypes, and addressing issues of marginalized trans communities such as sex workers, lower-income, homeless and street-involved youth (<http://www.the519.org/programs/trans/>). These recommendations for future queer and trans youth programs in Vancouver depend on shared community understanding of the needs of QT youth, significant and diverse community involvement in visions and direction, ownership by those involved to undertake the necessary work, attention to process and outcome, and sufficient financial and other resources to initiate and carry out the work.

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### **Websites Reviewed**

<http://www.the519.org/programs/trans/>

[www.lgtbcentrevancouver.com/](http://www.lgtbcentrevancouver.com/)

[www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)

[www.vancouveryouth.ca](http://www.vancouveryouth.ca)

[www.youthco.org](http://www.youthco.org)

[www.unya.bc.ca](http://www.unya.bc.ca)

[www.vch.ca/transhealth/youth/index.html](http://www.vch.ca/transhealth/youth/index.html)

## Appendix A: Notes on Terminology

**Ally:** someone concerned for the well being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex people; and a belief that heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are social justice issues.

**Androgynous:** a person appearing and/or identifying as neither man nor woman, presenting a gender either mixed or neutral.

**Cross-dressers** periodically wear the clothing of the opposite gender as a vehicle of self- or sexual-expression.

**Drag kings** and **drag queens** adopt the dress and mannerisms of the opposite gender for entertainment purposes.

**FTM:** female to male transsexual or transgendered person.

**Genderqueer:** A person whose gender expression is a conscious rejection of standard gender norms or ideals. Gender queer persons may experience a gender that's in-between or outside the standard male/female binary, and they may prefer gender-oppositional or gender-neutral pronouns.

**Intersex:** intersex persons are born with an anatomy that doesn't neatly fit social standards for a "male" or "female" physiology. Their sexual anatomy might be gender-ambiguous or their sex chromosomes may not be xx or xy. Thus "intersex" is an inclusive term for different forms of biological variance.

**LGTBQ:** lesbian, gay, transgender/transsexual, bisexual, queer.

**MTF:** male to female transsexual or transgendered person.

**Pangendered:** a person who's gender identity is comprised of all or many gender expressions.

**Questioning:** individuals in the process of questioning their sexual identity.

**Trans:** generally used as an umbrella term for transgender and transsexual, and often for genderqueer and gender questioning individuals. Trans people break away from some of the cultural norms around sex and gender.

**Transgender:** A person who lives a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex.

**Transsexual:** a person who identifies psychologically as a gender/sex other than the one they were assigned at birth. Transsexual persons usually wish to surgically and hormonally transform their bodies to match their inner sense of gender/sex.

**Two-spirited:** although the definition of this term varies across Native American cultures, generally a two-spirited individual is biologically one sex but fulfills the gender roles of both sexes. Two-spirited persons often occupy a space of great reverence and respect in Native American culture.

For more information on these terms or other queer and trans terms visit:  
[www.otterbein.edu/diversityGLBTQ/definitions.asp](http://www.otterbein.edu/diversityGLBTQ/definitions.asp) and [www.trans-academics.org/trans\\_sexuality\\_termi](http://www.trans-academics.org/trans_sexuality_termi)

## Appendix B: Search Developments 40 Developmental Assets

<b>EXTERNAL ASSETS</b>	<b>Asset Name &amp; Definition</b>	
<b>Support</b>	<b>Family support</b>	Family life provides high levels of love and support.
	<b>Positive family communication</b>	Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parent(s).
	<b>Other adult relationships</b>	Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
	<b>Caring neighborhood</b>	Young person experiences caring neighbors.
	<b>Caring school climate</b>	School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
	<b>Parent involvement in schooling</b>	Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
<b>Empowerment</b>	<b>Community values youth</b>	Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
	<b>Youth as resources</b>	Young people are given useful roles in the community.
	<b>Service to others</b>	Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
	<b>Safety</b>	Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.
<b>Boundaries and Expectations</b>	<b>Family boundaries</b>	Family has clear rules and consequences, and monitors the young person's whereabouts.
	<b>School boundaries</b>	School provides clear rules and consequences.
	<b>Neighborhood boundaries</b>	Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.
	<b>Adult role models</b>	Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
	<b>Positive peer influence</b>	Young person's best friends model responsible behavior.
<b>Constructive Use of Time</b>	<b>High expectations</b>	Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.
	<b>Creative activities</b>	Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.



	<b>Youth programs</b>	Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations.
	<b>Religious community</b>	Young person spends one hour or more per week in activities in a religious institution.
	<b>Time at home</b>	Young person is out with friends "with nothing special to do" two or fewer nights per week.
<b>INTERNAL ASSETS</b>		
<b>Commitment to Learning</b>	<b>Achievement motivation</b>	Young person is motivated to do well in school.
	<b>School engagement</b>	Young person is actively engaged in learning.
<b>Positive Values</b>	<b>Homework</b>	Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
	<b>Bonding to school</b>	Young person cares about her or his school.
	<b>Reading for pleasure</b>	Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
	<b>Caring</b>	Young person places high value on helping other people.
	<b>Equality and social justice</b>	Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
	<b>Integrity</b>	Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
	<b>Honesty</b>	Young person "tells the truth even when it is not easy."
	<b>Responsibility</b>	Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
	<b>Restraint</b>	Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
	<b>Social Competencies</b>	<b>Planning and decision making</b>
<b>Interpersonal competence</b>		Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
<b>Cultural competence</b>		Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
<b>Resistance skills</b>		Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
<b>Peaceful conflict resolution</b>		Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.

<b>Positive Identity</b>	<b>Personal power</b>	Young person feels he or she has control over "things that happen to me."
	<b>Self-esteem</b>	Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
	<b>Sense of purpose</b>	Young person reports that "my life has a purpose."
	<b>Positive view of personal future</b>	Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

This list is an educational tool. It is not intended to be nor is it appropriate as a scientific measure of the developmental assets of individuals.

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## **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

### **Interview Questions for Queer and Trans Youth**

#### Demographics

- What is your age?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What area of Vancouver do you reside in? Do you live with family?
- What is your occupation?
- What is your level of income?

#### Questions regarding the use of youth programs in Vancouver

- What is your gender identity?
- Do you present your gender identity consistently, or only in certain situations?
- Do you have Internet access? How often do you use the Internet for purposes of locating or communicating with other queer/trans youth?
- Do you know of any specific organizations that offer support for queer youth in Vancouver? Which ones?
- Do you know of any organizations or programs in Vancouver that are specific for transgender youth?
- How did you find out about these organizations?

- Do you now, or have you ever, used these services? If so, which ones do you use?
- Can you tell me a little bit about what types of activities or programs you participated in?
- Did you feel safe participating? How?
- Do you now, or have you ever worked for or volunteered at one of these organizations?
- Would you recommend them to your peers?
- Did/do you find these services helpful? In what ways? ie. Coping, participation or involvement in community, identity development, support, supportive relationships...
- Do you think the programs or organizations could be improved? How?
- Is there anything else you might like to add about the organization(s), programming or your experiences using the programs?

## **Interview Questions for Volunteers of Youth Programs**

### Demographics

- What is your age?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What area of Vancouver do you reside in?
- What is your occupation?
- What is your level of income?

### Questions regarding volunteering for youth programs in Vancouver

- How long have you been volunteering for youth organizations?
- What youth organization(s) do you work/volunteer with in Vancouver?
- Have you volunteered for other organizations outside of Vancouver? Which ones?
- What area of the city is the organization you volunteer for situated in? Do you get youth out from other areas of the city?
- Can you explain your organizations mandates/purposes for providing services to youth?
- Can you explain how to ensure a positive setting for the youth?
- Do you receive any funding from outside sources to run your programs?
- What types of activities/programs does your organization run?
- How do you advertise these programs?
- Approximately how many youth participate in these activities and programs?
- Do you think the organization you volunteer for could be improved? How?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about the organization(s) you volunteer for, their programs, or your experiences within these organizations?