



“It is Not Even My Body”: Trans Persons Experiencing Body Borders

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Abstract

The body is at the forefront of the relationship between space and sexuality, and its materiality is the basis on which social and individual conceptions of sex and gender are constructed. In this paper, we use the notion of body borders to approach the way trans persons experience heteronormativity in their bodies. Defined as those elements placed on body physicality that produce social distinctions and reorganize people’s social conditions, body borders are important in the processes of sex differentiation and gender oppression that negatively affect trans persons’ processes of identification/disidentification. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 10 of 43 trans persons from a wider study, who expressed their gender identities at different levels of intensity, we differentiate between four important body borders: man/woman, puberty, inside/outside and liminal zone. The findings reveal that body borders rely to a great extent on the gaze of others and are problematic for trans persons, especially at the beginning of their transition processes, or when their bodies are perceived as more androgynous. Although the experience of body borders is oppressive and causes conflicts to trans persons, they do not impede them from opening up possibilities for new models of transgender identities which defy non-heteronormative ideals and subvert the current gender regulation, which supports these borders.

Keywords Boundary · Frontier · Heteronormativity · Gender identities · Transgender · Micro-borders

Introduction

Heteronormativity, a system of organized beliefs between women/men dualisms and oppositions, regulates and provides support to the symbolical representation of gender in Western societies (Schneider, 2013; Whitehead & Thomas, 2013). Heteronormativity uncritically accepts binarism as the natural conception and construction of

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sex/gender. The body is a key feature of gender binarism as it supports the symbolic weight of the *authentic* representation of gender (Whitehead & Thomas, 2013). Through the body, "people sort each other into the category of 'male' or 'female' in social situations based on visual information cues" (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014, p. 4) and heteronormativity justifies gender oppression and discrimination through the body. As gender can be seen, touched, smelled, and noticed by means of its gestures, movements, and activities in the body, those bodies consistent with the normative ideals of gender binarism remain culturally intelligible and socially valuable, while those that are not tend to be abjectified, discriminated against, rejected, and harassed (Boyd, 2006; Planella & Pie, 2012).

The binary expression of gender is non-problematic for those individuals whose gender features correspond to their assigned sex at birth, although some people, including trans persons, do not conform so easily to the sex/gender binary system. Trans persons look to (re)construct new relations between their bodies and the heteronormative spaces they inhabit, expressing their femininity and masculinity at different levels of intensity and transforming their bodies accordingly. Those who need to express this at low levels may not want to initiate any physical transformation or only want to adopt minimal changes (Doan, 2007; Pereira-García et al., 2021). In any case, most trans persons' bodies struggle with gender binarism and heteronormativity, either to be recognised, accepted, or modified according to their gender identities.

In this paper, we call upon the notion of gender body borders as a theoretical and methodological tool to approach how trans persons experience heteronormativity in their bodies and in relation to society. Gender body borders appear as fictions that are vividly experienced by trans persons and can help them to understand the emotional impact heteronormativity produces in them. Borders are not only a sign of heteronormativity, they can be strengthened or weakened by (trans)gendered bodies and are also the key to opening possibilities of negotiation and change of gender regimes (McNay et al., 2004).

This article aims to extend the conversation between queer geographies and border studies to include trans persons' embodied experiences as a topic for discussion. Exploring the embodied experiences of 10 trans persons, who express their gender identities at different levels of intensity, we identify the body borders they consider to be significant and the ways they deal with these borders in a predominantly heteronormative and binary gender world.

Queer Geographies and Body Borders

Queer geographies focus on examining the relationship between space and sexuality, including how these relationships shape trans persons' lives (Doan, 2010; Hines, 2010; Nash, 2010; Rosenberg & Oswin, 2015). Queer geographers, influenced by queer and trans theories, have contested gender binaries and used concepts such as mobility and fluidity to express the unfixity of gendered bodies, places, and spaces (Hines, 2010; Johnston, 2016; Pereira-García et al., 2021). Interested in trans persons' lives and their everyday realities, queer geographers have usually focused their

research on this population's perceptions and ways of navigating their gender identities in queer and gender normative spaces such as public restrooms or workplaces, highlighting the negative consequences and discomfort these places cause in their lives (Browne et al., 2010; Doan, 2009, 2010; Hines, 2010; Johnston, 2016; Rooke, 2010). Some studies have shown the transformational potential that trans persons produce in these spaces simply by their presence and relationships (Doan, 2007). In these publications, the body is at the forefront of these relations, as its materiality is the basis on which social and individual conceptions of sex and gender are constructed (Browne, 2006; Doan, 2010; Rooke, 2010). Bodies can be regarded as geographical places in which human social relations are (re)produced and where gender politics are worn (Underhill-Sem, 2002). Insofar as "subjectivity is highly contextual and spatially contingent" (Knopp & Brown, 2003, p. 412), queer or abjected bodies can be mapped out according to their subjectivities and cultural inscription (Nast et al., 1998).

What a body can (or cannot) do, be or express is determined by the level that heteronormativity is embedded in people's subjectivity and intertwined processes of identification and disidentification with gender ideals. These processes are scrutinized as a public concern, particularly when they trespass cultural prescriptions assigned to a gender. Trans persons' bodies threaten the taken-for-granted fixed spatiality of gendered bodies, showing the potential malleability of the process of identification/disidentification (Knopp, 2004). Tensions between the malleability and stability of these processes affect trans persons in many ways, often making it difficult for them to express and perform their gender in their desired ways (Doan, 2010; Knopp, 2004; Knopp & Brown, 2003; Rosenberg & Oswin, 2015).

Heteronormativity permeates trans persons' subjectivities and bodies in multiple and violent ways. The concept of *body borders*, originally conceived as *border studies*, helps to indicate the violence and oppression that heteronormativity causes to them. Border Studies, as an interdisciplinary field, focuses on the analysis of the dual nature of physical and symbolic borders such as lines of distinction and places of regulation, meeting, and transition (Rieber, 2003; Yachin et al., 2015). Borders are multi-scalar and may take several forms which primarily include -on a larger scale- political dimensions through delineations of physical territories. However, they can be much more intimate and symbolic for individuals and social groups. Borders can reveal a mode of interaction, a set of practices and spatial relations imprinted by intimacy and shaped by power relations "connecting the body and that which is distant" (Pain & Staeheli, 2014, p. 345). According to this understanding, feminist authors have approached the notion of borders by emphasizing the body as a place of heteropatriarchal colonization that is intimately violated (Pain & Staeheli, 2014; Segato, 2016). Importantly, no matter how natural they may seem to some, the way body borders are delineated in society (re)produces the inequities of body/society dialectic, enacting many times as a source of marginalization (Shilling, 1991).

The interrelated concepts of *boundary* and *frontier* provide a more nuanced understanding of body borders; borders are contoured by boundaries, so that body boundaries call upon "the sense of being more or less separated from the world" (Dambrun, 2016, p. 91). They "represent the sense of the self as a physical entity (...) [and they are] a major component of the individual's being, essence, and

identity” (Talmon & Ginzburg, 2017, pp. 326–327). Within their boundaries, bodies are envisioned as a property to be preserved and defended from aggression and inequalities. These threats can be physical, but also symbolical or socially constructed, such as stereotypes and gender unfairness (Leivas, 2019). Body boundaries can be dynamically experienced, depending on who *feels* them, so that the embodied separation from the world can be either imperceptibly or strongly perceived. The dissolution of body boundaries is associated with high levels of happiness, while a strong distance or differentiation from the world is linked with high levels of anxiety (Dambun, 2016).

In relation to, though differing from, the idea of boundary, the concept of frontier refers to an “intermediate zone of contact between two or more distinctive cultures or polities” (Rieber, 2003, p. 23). The notion of frontier focuses on the characteristics of borders, as well as on their artificial process of constitution. Frontiers can be characterized along with a series of continua between opposite features: to a certain extent, they can be porous/impermeable, or open/closed, among other characteristics. The porosity/openness of frontiers allows dialogue and exchange, while their impermeability/closeness imposes a hegemony through the rejection, exclusion, or extermination of the *Other* (Domenech de la Lastra, 2016; Rieber, 2003). This intermediate zone or frontier is therefore not fixed and may be wide or narrow according to pressures and policies to keep (or not to keep) people on one or the other side of the frontier. When the frontier is wide enough it can lose its character of intermediation (and frontier) and be recognised as a proper culture in similar ways to which green is not seen as a mixture of blue and yellow. However, some interests may be wanting to impede this. For example, sex-testing in sports to detect and ban the participation of intersex women exemplifies how body frontiers turn into regulatory policies to forestall sex ambivalence (Borraz, 2019).

In this paper, we use *body borders* as an umbrella term to refer to those elements placed on a physical body that produce social distinctions and reorganize the social conditions of trans participants. However, following Rieber (2003), we specifically distinguish between ‘body boundary’ (the dividing line) and ‘body frontier’ (the characteristics of the borders) when we consider it important to differentiate between these two concepts, which allow us to reflect on how heteronormativity is embodied in trans persons and affects the identification/disidentification processes in constructing their gender identities. In the realm of heteronormativity and gender binarism, body borders entail tacit exclusion operations sensitive to the social relations of power and domination, which creates restrictive gendered spaces and situations of rejection and marginalization of non- binary people (Buarque et al., 2003).

Method

Participants

This study is based on a wider research project focused on trans persons’ experiences in different social domains such as sports and education. A total of 212 surveys and 43 interviews were collected during the fieldwork, mainly by contacting

Hospital Gender Units, trans/LGBT associations, and using a snowball strategy. The interviewees, the participants in this paper, were purposely selected according to the following criteria: (a) gender balance, taking into account a wide spectrum of the participants' gender identities, (b) wide age range, (c) different stages of transitioning, and (d) the different ages at which they disclosed their gender identities. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 min. Some of the questions they were asked, included: "When did you make your gender identity public?" "How was it socially received?" "Are you currently comfortable/displeased with your body?" "Which parts of your body do you like the most and which the least?"

Analysing the interviews, we inductively detected the relevance of body borders in explaining and conferring a sense of gender (dis)identification experiences in some of the participants. This paper thus does not aim to represent the whole collective of trans people, but to examine the ways in which heteronormativity is embodied in some of these persons. We used the information contained in 10 interviews with 10 participants, who were selected because of the rich and varied information they provided on the topics included in this work. The participants were aged between 18 and 49 years of age and all were European Caucasian and born in Spain, except Dario (all names are pseudonyms) who was born in Venezuela, grew up in the United States, and was living in Spain when interviewed. Although most of them defined themselves in binary terms as "woman" or "man", they constructed their femininity and masculinity in different ways. Following Doan's (2007) ideas, we can say that the participants needed to express their gender identities at different levels of intensity. For instance, while Carolina needed to express her femininity at a high level of intensity, altering her body through hormones and surgery, including a genital operation, other participants such as Anabel, Gloria, Rebeca, Mireya, Dario and Lucas expressed their gender identities at intermediate levels of intensity, without undergoing all these treatments, despite undergoing some body changes. On the other hand, Antonio and Beltrán expressed their gender identities in more non-binary ways as "trans" and "transsexual" men. They both felt *more* inclined to identify with masculinity but expressed this at low levels of intensity. Most of these participants were living their gender identities to the full during the interviewing period. Only Gloria and Dario had not revealed their gender identities to their relatives and people from other social contexts (see the participants' characteristics in Table 1).

Ethical Concerns

Informed by situational and relational ethics (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005; Lahman et al., 2011), a variety of ethical concerns were considered at different stages of the research project. Before the fieldwork, the design and procedures were submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of València. Before being interviewed, the participants signed an informed consent form that contained the aims of the research project, the guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any point in the interview. During the fieldwork, however,

Table 1 Participants

Name (pseudonym)	Self-defined gender identity	Age	Years since transition process started	Level of intensity of the gender identity expression	Gender identity is currently lived...
Antonio	Trans	32	5	Low	Full-time
Anabel	Woman	18	5	Intermediate	Full-time
Beltrán	Transsexual man	22	2	Low	Full-time
Carolina	Woman	40	17	High	Full-time
Darío	Man	18	2	Intermediate	Part-time
Gloria	Woman	26	4	Intermediate	Part-time
Lucas	Man	23	0	Intermediate	Full-time
Mario	Man	49	22	Intermediate	Full-time
Mireya	Woman	22	5	Intermediate	Full-time
Rebeca	Woman	40	2	Intermediate	Full-time

some dilemmas emerged that revolved around the possible reproduction of heteronormativity. We were especially concerned about the effects of our cissexuality and normatively gendered bodies. We thought carefully about the potential harm we could cause and ways of reducing it. According to this concern, we tried as far as possible not to reproduce gender binaries and structures throughout the research process that could cause symbolic violence and disturbance to the participants. We developed an ethical engagement in practice and tried to follow a non-heteronormative perspective in our interactions with trans persons (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). We provided careful attention to our body attitude and policed our language to be respectful of the participants and not to presuppose possible answers according to the participants' gender. Along with the interviews, our feelings also guided our ethical actions and omitted possibly disturbing or stressful questions when we detected ethical situations (Boden et al., 2015). In view of the confidentiality created between the interviewers and participants, the research team respected the participants' wishes not to include certain information provided during the interview when they explicitly requested it, even when the data could have enriched the research.

After transcribing the interviews verbatim, they were sent to the participants, who had the chance to modify, erase, or add information. During the data analysis, all the members of the research team discussed issues of disagreement until reaching a consensus to make sure that the themes that emerged from the analysis coincided with the statements' original meaning (Carlsson et al., 2017). We also respected the participants' gender self-determination in the writing process and they were allowed to choose the names and pronouns used to refer to them.

Data Analysis

The interviews were carefully studied to identify thematic categories in the data (Braun et al., 2016). The thematic analysis provides primary attention to the content of a story, to what is said rather than 'how,' 'to whom,' or 'for what purpose.' (Riessman, 2008). As suggested by Braun et al. (2016), the procedures of thematic analysis entail a progressive immersion and familiarization with the data. First author engaged in an initial coding that involved finding and tagging any potentially relevant piece with a code, after which the research team moved on to discussing grouping the codes into basic and organizing themes. The team members acted as critical friends or facilitators of the research process by developing their reflective and learning capacities in a supportive, cooperative manner. They also provided a theoretical sounding board, encouraging reflection on, and exploration of, the explanations and interpretations as themes (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Throughout this process, conceptual comments were made on the content of the transcripts, which involved moving away from the participants' explicit claims. Preliminary thematic categories were (re)elaborated, (re)shaped, and (re)defined throughout the analytical process, while tentative connections were made with various theoretical concepts. Finally, the idea of body borders was identified as a key concept in 10 of the interviews and adopted as a method of structuring some of the pre-eminent themes that emerged from the data. As mentioned above, the concept

of body borders was grounded on the specific characteristics of the collected data and not constructed or shaped by the pre-existing theories and the work of the academics cited in the introduction to this article. The literature on body borders and queer geographies was then accessed or revisited and finally used as an analytical and theoretical frame to provide an understanding of this particular aspect of the participants' actual accounts.

As a result of this process, the basic themes were grouped into ten organizing categories and four global themes, following the existing literature and our understanding of the topic (see Table 2).

Results and Discussion

Man/Woman

In Western societies, sex dualism, which splits bodies into two separate and opposing groups (men *or* women), appears as the first apparent rigid and unquestionable gender body border. Propped up on a biological basis, heteronormativity establishes this border through the scrutiny of individual bodies (Butler, 1993; Verhage, 2014). People judge gender identities by dissecting the body into different parts, to focus on those which (re)create gender. This collection of body parts that compound the body appears to be “invested with an almost autonomous significance” (Butler, 1993, p. 162), so that the physical body is divided into micro-borders that differentiate *men* from *women* (and vice versa).

The genitals play a vital role in the geography of the body in biologically defining and differentiating *authentic* women or men in Western societies. Regardless of other visible attributes and more important in identifying people's sex, such as fingerprints or DNA, the genitals play a vital role in regulating access to certain spaces (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). However, less vital although and more noticeable body features, such as hair, muscles, breasts, voice, and hips also play an important role and provide valuable information on sex (Maffia, n.d.). Although these body micro-borders include secondary sex characteristics, considered crucial for recognition of a gendered self (Nash, 2010), for trans persons other body parts can also be subjectively sexed, such as the smoothness or roughness of the skin. These body micro-borders can play an essential role in the transition processes that some trans persons undergo to “alter their gender expression to be consistent with their gender identity” (Klein et al., 2018, p. 556). In the first years of transitioning, the trans persons that self-defined in more binary terms and needed to express their gender identities at intermediate or high levels of intensity mostly relied on specific features of their bodies to successfully perform their genders. For instance, many of the trans women participants in this study considered their breast implants to be an essential component of their femininities. Mireya referred to *feminine* facial features, widening her hips and modifying her skin as the changes she wanted to obtain through hormone treatment. Interestingly, these bodily changes were also desired or imagined by Anabel. Controlling her body hair was a key issue for Carolina in creating her femininity because “erasing the body hair (...) meant erasing the masculinity”. Rebeca also

Table 2 From basic to global themes

Basic themes	Organizing themes	Global themes: borders
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gender recognition through body cues - Body parts can legitimate man or woman identities - Constructing femininity and masculinity - Embodied gender expectations and other's gaze - Undesired body changes - Menstruation - Resignation - Gender strategies - Flexible gender expressions 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Micro-borders 2. Body project 	<p>Man/woman</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Body disassociated with itself: This body is not mine or this is not what I am - Gender identity comes from the inside, not from the outside - The relevance of being recognised by others - Isolating from the others 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Body development in puberty period 4. The body materiality 	<p>Puberty</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Living non-dualistic gender - Trans persons threats to heteronormativity - Developing counter-hegemonic practices and resistance toward rigid heteronormativity system - Self-determination 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Relationship with oneself 6. Social interactions 7. Power relations 8. Agency 	<p>Inside/outside</p> <p>Liminal zone</p>

emphasised that she was preoccupied with softening her voice and modulating its inflection was of the utmost importance in her transition process, as has been found in other studies (Stewart et al., 2020).

Most trans men also considered changes in their facial expressions and voice were necessary to construct the model of masculinity they wanted to assume, e.g. Mario expected his hormone treatment to deepen his voice because his current high tone “infantilized” his male image. Otherwise, trans men generally wanted to masculinise their bodies’ appearance through eliminating *feminine* features such as removing their breasts or concealing them by wearing tight t-shirts or bandages. Mastectomy was vitally important to Darío because “the masculinisation of the thorax is more visible; everybody can easily see whether or not you have breasts”. Lucas also focused on breasts as the main hindrance to his masculinity because “you can have more or less hair on your head, have a beard or not, or shave...it does not matter. But the breasts are there”.

The relevance the participants gave to these micro-borders reveals the power of the cultural expectations of femininity and masculinity and the necessity for some of them to perform, reproduce and embody gender ideals in order to be accepted as legitimate women or men (Blackwood, 2011; Butler, 1990; Fuller, 2003). As cis-gender people who feel the pressure of heteronormativity, the participants who lived through these micro-borders dealt with problems when their actual bodies failed to match up to what was considered *normal* bodies for a woman or man (Breton, 2002). As described in Butler (1993, p. 163) “[Paul’s] body refuses to cohere in the ordinary sense, and the body parts which nevertheless hang together appear discordant precisely because of a certain happy and anxious refusal to assume the regulatory norm”. For Darío, breasts were “most annoying”, and Lucas said: “they [the breasts] bug me”.

Micro-borders can sometimes act as tokens of a *successful* transition. Once a body is modified to be more adapted normatively to gender binaries, the more binary participants felt that their gender identities were recognised. Mireya proudly referred to her *new* breasts: “My breasts are great! I love them! I can pass unnoticed in front of people and I can do sport and pass as a girl”. Other trans persons also obtained social acceptance as their bodies responded to the gender binaries society demands. When Rebeca was being interviewed, she could walk through the streets and felt “more confident” and “relieved” than before due to her “more clearly defined” feminine body. Anabel’s self-esteem also improved as her hair became more feminine, and others noticed it: “now people say to me: ‘I see you so much more beautiful, better hair. You are so pretty...’”.

Although the genitals are the basis of man/woman distinction in Western societies, the participants who expressed their gender identities at low and intermediate levels of intensity demystified their power to define people’s gender identities. Beltrán questioned this identity policy and Mireya objected that “a person is not more a woman because she has changed her sex than another who decides not to”. Similarly, Anabel argued: “transsexual women are 100% women, like cissexual women because what is important is the gender, not a person’s genitals”. And Rebeca said that “human beings should be valued not by what they have between their legs, but on how they feel [regarding their gender identities]”. Trans men often claimed not to

need a penis to be a man, while some of the trans women accepted their penis as part of their feminine bodies:

I do not want to have male genitals (Beltrán).

Many people hate them [genitals] and cover them when they are having a shower but that is not my case, I can live with them perfectly well (Anabel).

Even if they had preferred to modify their genitals, the present difficulties in obtaining genital surgery in the Spanish public health System would have forced them to look for alternative strategies to construct their identities, while the high cost of private clinics makes it difficult to undergo these operations. In fact, Carolina was the only participant in this study that could afford it and expressed her gender identity at high levels of intensity. She acknowledged that her naked body and her *new* vagina provided her with the final "passport to be legitimate in locker rooms if someone had any doubts".

The participants provided evidence that the man/woman body boundary relies to a great extent on the Other's gaze. The authenticity of men and women's bodies is judged in interactions and to pass social perception and be accepted, recognised and feel secure in gendered spaces. Trans persons' decisions on modifying their bodies may have been more influenced by social than biological or medical definitions of a *proper* man or woman's body. Surgically modifying the genitals may not be a priority for some trans persons as much as more visible body micro-borders, like breasts, hips, or hair. As they usually remain hidden and are easily disguised or faked, genitals do not impede them from either performing femininity and masculinity or obtaining the benefits linked to the expression of normative genders. However, this may not be the case for other trans persons who find that their genitals are a problem in the intimacy of sexual relations. For them, post-surgical genitals can be essential to increase their body and sexual satisfaction (Bradford & Spencer, 2020).

Puberty

Body borders are immersed in time and can gradually change along with their lives. However, in the process of growing up, bodies pass through different stages that involve violent struggles with body micro-borders. Puberty is the period of life in which the transition from childhood to adulthood begins and is a key time in the construction of personal identities and body development (Kroger, 2007). If children's bodies are more alike before that period, when puberty begins their bodies lose their undefinition and the micro-borders that make up the man/woman frontier become more relevant. This involves the maturation of secondary sexual characteristics, which are usually experienced with anxiety by adolescents (Hoxter, 2017). In trans adolescents, this period can involve even higher levels of distress and numerous mental health problems (Deardorff et al., 2019). The participants felt that this period was a temporal border that marked an unpleasant turning point in their lives and that their bodies developed in undesired ways, strengthening body dissatisfaction, as Carolina made clear:

A key moment for me was when my body changed, the beginning of puberty, and I started to notice these changes, that is to say what the hell is going on? (...) It was the time that I most clearly felt and perceived that my body was going somewhere that I didn't want to go.

Anabel, another trans woman, also felt upset in that period by her muscular development, the deepening of her voice and enlargement of her hands and feet. For some trans men, their first menstruation was also traumatic because it symbolized that they were irremediably becoming 'women'. For instance, Mario, who did not know anything about it when he had his first period, admitted that "It was difficult for me to accept that [menstruation] was very, very hard, and I was going to have it every month". For Dario "the physical sensation of 'I'm a boy' and then getting my period was a disgusting encounter with dysphoria" that kept increasing to the point where he "stopped touching" himself. This and other body changes in adolescence made him experience negative consequences in social relations:

Very bad, it was very bad because you change and you have to change your role, haven't you? I lived as a boy in primary school but when I arrived at secondary school I had to behave [like a girl], and the feminine secondary sex characteristics...I had no choice and I had to pretend to be a girl (...) and I saw my own body and I said 'this is all, I will have to be a girl because society imposes it on me and because I have no choice because it is what life has given me'.

The participants' actions were especially guided during puberty by the fiction of a single story of womanhood and manhood that forced some of them to abruptly fit into that dominant order, not even thinking about the possibility of trespassing or breaking the man/woman frontier. During her adolescence, Gloria pretended to be someone she was not and "to give other people the version of herself they wanted to see". Some other participants tried to fit into a binary gender by adopting a *proper* appearance and particular gendered gestures and behaviour in which they had to reproduce a constraining gender identity which they did not really feel (McLeod, 2005). Many trans persons felt they lacked enough social support to externalise their gender identities and be themselves at that time in their lives. For example, Anabel was still resentful of her parents because they limited her instead of letting her express herself freely. However, not all the participants opted to theatricalize a particular gender. Even though their bodies were developing in unwanted ways, some of them took advantage of a less rigid heteronormative context to perform more boyish or girlish gender behaviours. For instance, Beltrán, whose family respected his gender identity, recalled: "My parents gave me a lot of freedom, and that made me feel I could be a woman with short hair, without earrings, wearing boyish clothes...". Adolescence was also the period in which gender strategies were adopted. Boys, like Antonio, Mario, and Lucas, could adopt a body image in keeping with their gender identities, with short hair and wearing socially defined masculine clothes. On the other hand, some girls adopted long hair and waxing as strategies, like Carolina and Rebeca, to actively develop their bodies in accordance with their gender identities.

Even though these strategies could place them in a liminal zone, they also helped to blur the man/woman frontier and erase micro-borders in their lives.

Inside/Outside

Physical body boundaries, “defined as the boundaries of the body as an object”, are a necessary component in the construction of identities (Dambrun, 2016, p. 91). Far from focusing on micro-borders, these boundaries provide a sense of being separated from other people based on the body as an entire gendered entity. As factors of individuation, they enable action and possibilities of being in the world (Breton, 2002). They are relevant to define identities and play an important role in the formation of people’s identities and self-identification. When these physical body boundaries do not facilitate this process of identification, they can cause a personal crisis that is expressed in an inside/outside duality.

The trans persons who did not feel that their physical bodies were properly gendered were vividly aware of these body boundaries, especially before transitioning. The trans participants that needed to express their gender identities at low, intermediate and high levels of intensity often said they felt a distinction between an external shell (their bodies) and an internal self (their gender identities). This distinction was both an effect of heteronormativity and a spatial tactic they generated to create a safe site for forming their identities: a private and internal self rooted in their *true* gender identities (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Gorman-Murray et al., 2017). Antonio’s masculinity came “from deep inside” and Mireya explained that “a woman is born from inside”. Typically, the outside was lived *against* the inside, generating a struggle between the body and gender identity. For example, Carolina felt she “was a girl like the others, but inside a boy’s body”. People with a dissociated body feel their physiques do not belong to them and a lack of identification with the surface of their bodies (Frank, 1991). This produced a certain sense of embodied absence and expatriation in some of the participants.

I always had an attitude and function as if I had no image (...) I cannot and I will never be able to feel identified with a body that has nothing to do with me (Gloria)

I did not mind my appearance because I said, ‘in short, it is not even my body’. For me, it was not something that belonged to me (Lucas)

Darío also felt a “total rejection” of his body because it was an “alien presence” to him, something “that is not yours”, and Carolina tried to ignore and not to look at her own body, “you never ever look at your body, even when you have a wound”. For these participants, their bodies were entities that threatened their identities.

The inside/outside duality created a confusing and unhealthy relationship between their bodies and the world. For instance, Gloria sensed she was not like the people she “supposedly looked like in a physical sense”, and Rebeca felt “different things” than she should feel according to her gender. The perception of this duality was increased in relation and comparison with other normative gendered bodies. The participants’ statements reflect how others made them feel abject in

social interactions, heightening the distinction between trans persons and those who surrounded them, between being inside or outside a social group. It was precisely in situations in which they broke the dominant gender discourse that the inside/outside boundary became more visible for the participants and many of them were conscious of the social conflict caused by what their bodies revealed (Kurki, 2014). This conflict led some of them to think about resolving inside/outside duality. Lucas, for example, stated that “if my body is not male, then people are not going to consider me as a boy”, while Gloria, who had not disclosed her gender identity when she was interviewed, argued:

People are concerned about physical appearance. It works this way: ‘you look like this, you are this’, (...) ...it does not matter how you feel as a girl, they won’t see you like that.

Even Beltrán, who at the time of the interview was self-defined as a person with an ambiguous gender and needed to express his masculinity at very low levels of intensity, stated: “it is not the same to be perceived as a woman or a man” and there was a relevant difference “between being a little ambiguous with a feminine appearance and being ambiguous with a male appearance”.

Some of them thought that not having enough strategies or not knowing how to deal with the inside/outside boundary became a barrier to their relationship with themselves and others and the difficulties of coping with this situation brought on moments of depression that negatively affected the personal and social spheres of their lives. For instance, Lucas stopped meeting his friends because he did “not look forward to going out of the house”. Antonio and Rebeca also stopped seeing other persons or groups with which they did not identify, as Antonio recalled: “I did not feel myself to be either masculine or feminine (...), in the end, you are in the middle and stay fucking alone”.

Liminal Zone

Multiple social conventions create dualistic gender body borders that separate men from women. Segregation and permanency in that role seem imperative for both women and men in order to fix binary gendered ideals and gender power relations (Gorman-Murray, 2012). However, some people present different gender expressions, challenging the fictional body immobility and are frequently placed in a non-dualistic position or a liminal zone characterized by a mixture of qualities socially attributed to men and women. According to Anzaldúa (1987, p. 3), this liminal zone, or what she calls *borderland*, is “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural construction” and inhabited by the ‘forbidden’ people. Translated to the intimacy of body borders, some trans persons perform their genders in non-heteronormative ways from this liminal zone, as in the case of those with ambivalent and ambiguous bodies, e.g. trans men with voluptuous breasts or trans women with facial hair. Although liminality is uncertain, unfixed and created in social interactions with people, its existence and effects are very real. In strongly heteronormative societies, trans persons placed in liminal zones are systematically

considered to be outsiders, as they are never recognised as belonging to either of the two socially-established gender categories (Turner, 1996). For many binary trans persons, the liminal zone is mostly embodied in the early stages of transitioning, when bodies are not socially considered mannish or womanish enough to be defined as men *or* women. In this period, their liminality affects their access to certain gender binary spaces and limits their experiences. Rebeca explained with anguish why she was not allowed to play in a girls' team: "the problem is that I am transitioning, I am neither one thing nor the other, that is my problem and it makes me feel very sad". This sort of violence that pressures bodies into adjusting to a certain materiality respecting the man/woman frontier and seeps into trans persons' intimacy is foundational in heteronormativity (Pain & Staeheli, 2014), while not fitting into sex dualism often relegates them to the anomalous sphere. Mireya believed trans women would always be considered as fetish beings unless they underwent sexual reconstruction surgery. Being labelled as 'weird' hindered Anabel's ability to express her femininity as she would have liked, "if I smarten up, I am going to be more of a drag queen for people. If now I am defined as a cross-dresser, then I am going to be a total drag queen". Feeling 'out of place' in a society that pressures non-cissexual people to perform gender norms was one of the reasons that made Darío move from Venezuela to Spain, and, like him, many other sexual and gender dissidents leave their communities of origin or restrict their movements in public spaces to be enabled (Browne, 2004; Gorman-Murray, 2007; Langarita Adiego, 2020).

Liminal zones are unnatural spaces constructed to control dissidents such as trans persons as they create social tensions and question the presumed authenticity of heteronormativity that characterizes the relationship between bodies and spaces (Bell et al., 1994; Solís-Domínguez & Martínez-Lozano, 2012). Whether consciously or not, purposely or not, trans persons' liminality threatens to bring down the walls that separate the genders, i.e. heteronormativity, and queerize the spaces they occupy (Doan, 2010). They are often sanctioned for this (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Doan, 2007; Lombardi et al., 2002) and violating heteronormativity also had negative consequences for our participants. For instance, Anabel felt her femininity was ignored and even punished when she was at school, "when I started transitioning, the more stupid girls used to say 'even if you have artificial hair and breasts, do not think that you are like us, as a woman'". These social critiques undermined her self-confidence and self-esteem:

I used to be very insecure. When I saw myself in the mirror I hated myself. I said, 'I am dreadful because I thought I was very ugly', maybe due to the people that made me think that and I thought 'I look hideous' (Anabel).

This quote reflects the unequal power relationships between those who are placed in a liminal zone and the rest of society. The power dynamics that take place there are precisely what characterize liminal zones (Solís-Domínguez & Martínez-Lozano, 2012). Following Delgado-Ruiz (1998), trans persons can be considered as colonised by others when they have to adopt an image, rules and behaviour that belong to the social majority, like the performance of hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity, but they also exercise anti-colonial resistance when they happen to modify these practices. Some of the participants who wanted to express their

gender identities at low and intermediate levels of intensity exercised this anti-colonial resistance by transforming liminality into a legitimate space to live (Jackson, 2016). For instance, Anabel claimed her right to form her self-identity apart from gender conventionalism and Beltrán and Antonio embraced their “ambiguous” bodies as a political option. For these three participants, the liminal zone was a realm in which they could resist the heteronormative society. They invoked counter-hegemony to challenge the images of femininity and masculinity that contribute to maintaining heteronormativity and claimed the creation of new models of femininity and masculinity:

I saw those men and I thought ‘I do not want that’. And I started to know other trans men, a different world...and there are ways of being a man that differ from the model you see every day in the streets (...) I needed other male references (Beltrán)

I am myself and I have to create my own femininity, my own identity for myself (Anabel)

These statements do not refer to the need to adapt their bodies to micro-border requirements to avoid being placed in a liminal zone and its possible effects. Instead, they imply a need to deconstruct the man/woman frontier so as to enhance alternative attitudes towards gendered bodies. Along these lines, Antonio stated:

Maybe people should stop trying to detect others’ [gender] identities. I think that this is one of the basic problems we have to solve, to get away from all that categorization (...) and to understand that we can jump from one category to another without giving it much importance.

Preferences for liminality or ambiguous bodies also influenced the spaces in which some participants felt comfortable. As many women athletes had somewhat masculine bodies, Beltrán opted to get involved in sports that would allow him not only to obtain the ambiguous body he desired and also to be close to the people he identified with.

Conclusions and Final Comments

This paper provides evidence and insights into ten trans persons’ experiences of gender body borders, timely and relevant knowledge to better understand the impact of heteronormativity in some trans persons’ subjectivities and bodies. We detected and analysed four body borders: woman/man, puberty, inside/outside and a liminal zone.

The woman/man border compelled most of the participants to keep their own bodies under surveillance by focusing on the many micro-borders that can threaten the social recognition of their gender identities and may have pressured them into expressing their gender identities at high levels of intensity and passing as a cisgender woman or man. Those who are initiating a body transition process or present less binary bodies are placed in a liminal zone and most of them suffer the corresponding isolation, incomprehension and marginalization involved in this situation.

Before disclosing their gender identities, many participants referred to experiencing a process of non-identification with themselves and others that the concept of the inside/outside boundary helps to make sense of. This struggle is experienced more vividly during puberty, a period characterised by rapid body changes that stress this non-identification, especially by those who need to express their gender identities at intermediate and high levels of intensity.

Although some trans women and men may be socially compelled to fulfil binary gender models and avoid being placed in the liminal zone, the participants that wanted to express their gender identities at low levels of intensity and another that expressed her femininity at an intermediate level found it easier to inhabit and alter the meaning of the liminal zone and that this space was suitable to live in, performing their gender identities according to non-heteronormative ideals and exemplifying alternatives to the traditional gender expression. This performance favoured dialogue and contact between different gender expressions and promoted the subversion of hegemonic regulation and the de-materialization of borders that maintained the distinction between men and women (Solís-Domínguez & Martínez-Lozano, 2012). Another participant's desire to construct her femininity in her own way also creates more fluid spaces to live in, questions the power relationships inherent in the liminal zone, and establishes the basis on which a new and more plural society can emerge.

The study's limitations mainly lie in the small number of participants in the sample, especially those of non-binary people or persons who need to express their gender identities at low levels of intensity, and the ontological character of the gendered body border metaphor. As the concept of body borders was grounded on the inductive analysis of the interviews, we did not ask the participants any questions more clearly related to body borders that would have provided a larger sample and a better appreciation of the relevance of these borders. The underrepresentation of less binary trans persons may have been due to the process used to contact the participants, which was largely through medical gender units and LGBT associations, in which many binary people that needed to express their gender identities at intermediate and high levels of intensity were predominant. Further studies focusing on their experiences would be necessary to nuance the understanding of the body border metaphor and its relevance in approaching trans persons' heteronormative body experiences. On the other hand, it is arguable that the body border metaphor may oversimplify the spectrum of these trans persons' embodied experiences of heteronormativity. To some extent, this metaphor risks not recognising the peculiarities of individual experiences and hinders their nuances in experiencing gender. We did not find many experiences of those trans persons who live out their genders during puberty without problems and those who manage to escape from heteronormativity and body border effects. Even though we focused on corporeality, the body borders do not only exist on the surface of the body but spread out beyond the physical body. Future research should consider other relevant elements in the gender performance of borders, such as movement, expression or time in a perspective throughout trans persons' lives.

Despite its limitations, we consider that this study also has important strengths; the body is implicitly considered in many works addressing the idea of gender in queer geographies. However, the physical spatiality of actual bodies has not often

been a focus of study. The body border notion emphasizes and allows us to identify relevant aspects of the dominance of gender binarism and heteronormativity within the body/society dialectic and how these hegemonic conceptions impact trans persons' body-selves. For instance, the notion of body border has been shown to be useful in providing an understanding of the strict gender regulation of trans persons' bodies in geographies regulated by heteronormativity. The ways in which trans persons are permeated by these body borders or affected by them ultimately influences their access to other spaces and places. This concept therefore becomes useful in re-shaping policies for attending to trans persons' needs. Our results show that it is important to develop policies to decolonize bodies and dilute body borders by promoting and enhancing an open and visible expression of gender identities and body diversity. The recognition, acceptance, and celebration of fluid borders and creating inclusive gendered spaces for them is essential to their wellbeing. In heteronormative contexts, the first step would be to guarantee and provide secure spaces in which people explore different gender expressions in different social contexts.

Restricting the idea that only binary genders and bodies are legitimate would free trans persons and non-binary cisgender persons from violence and social pressure and would help to reduce their discomfort and isolation. The information provided here will help to foster recognition and justice not only for trans persons. As anybody, especially those with non-normative bodies, may experience inequities associated with body borders throughout their lives, reflecting on the conflicts and possibilities of body borders in this paper can be theoretically generalized (Smith, 2018) to other issues experienced by trans and cisgender persons, such as aging, illness, or disability.

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