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To cite this article: Karol Kovalovich Weaver (2018): Paying your respects: Transgender women and detransitioning after death, *Death Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/07481187.2018.1521886](https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2018.1521886)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2018.1521886>



Published online: 12 Dec 2018.



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Paying your respects: Transgender women and detransitioning after death

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ABSTRACT

This paper asks how do the deaths and the postmortem detransitioning (the verbal, visual, and material rejection of a person's gender identity) of transgender women impact trans activism? After analyzing the case studies of Jennifer Gable and Leelah Alcorn, I outline how the contentious memorialization of transgender women and the disenfranchised grief of survivors influence trans activism. I conclude that activism is characterized by respecting the wishes of the deceased, by preventing the violence which transgender women experience, by advocating for trans elder care, by educating about end-of-life issues, and by lobbying for laws that protect transgender men and women after death.

How do the deaths and the postmortem detransitioning, meaning the verbal, visual, and material rejection of a person's gender identity, of transgender women impact trans activism? In considering this question, I hope to foster a conversation about transgender women and death studies, a topic that has not been addressed in the current literature. This article relies on the case studies of two transgender women (Jennifer Gable and Leelah Alcorn) who were detransitioned after their deaths; the study considers how contentious memorialization and disenfranchised grief prompted activism including respecting the wishes and desires of the deceased, recognizing, publicizing, and working to prevent the mortal dangers that transgender women face due to transphobic violence and suicide, advocating on behalf of trans elders, educating about end-of-life issues, and lobbying for federal and state laws that stop the lives and histories of women from being altered, silenced, and erased.

Gender identity and death

This study of postmortem detransitioning of transgender women is grounded on three theoretical foundations: the idea of gender performance; the theory of reproductive futurism; and the concept of disenfranchised grief. Butler (1990) sees gender performance as repeated bodily gestures and rituals that may uphold or challenge established gender norms associated with femininity and masculinity. This study applies this

idea to question how family members and friends perform the gender of the dead via dress, material culture, and memorialization, and what impact that has on trans activism. This article also considers transgender bodies and dead bodies through the investigative lens provided by queer theorist Edelman (2004), who argues that the emphasis on heteronormativity, on life, and on the future, connections defined as reproductive futurism, is balanced by the association of queerness with death. What impacts has heteronormativity had on dead bodies and how have these effects influenced activism by transgender persons and their allies? Finally, this article considers disenfranchised grief, or "grief ... not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly observed" (Doka, 2002, p. 5) that is experienced by the family, friends, and loved ones of transgender women and the influences it has on respecting the final wishes of the dead, on trans education, and on trans activism.

Method

Two case studies

I explore detransitioning and its impact on trans activism through case studies detailing the deaths and detransitioning of Jennifer Gable and Leelah Alcorn, two young women who died in 2014. Both women's gender identities were negated after their deaths. Juro (2015) eloquently described this negation as "forcible de-transitioning in death" (para. 9). Friends,

associates, activists, and strangers fought against this negation in a variety of media.

Jennifer Gable

On 9 October 2014, Jennifer Gable died unexpectedly and suddenly of a brain aneurysm at the age of 32 in Boise, Idaho. She died while working at her job at the Wells Fargo Bank. Born and raised in Idaho, Gable attended college in Oregon and Idaho, pursuing a music major. She was a talented musician, a skilled baseball player, and a dedicated friend to animals (Magic Valley Funeral Home, 2014). Upon her death, her father made the decision to detransition Jennifer, to present her postmortem as a man in an open casket viewing, and to identify her as “Geoffrey Gable” and with masculine pronouns in an online memorial (Rothaus, 2014).

Leelah Alcorn

On 28 December 2014, Leelah Alcorn, who was born in Kings Mill, Ohio, took her own life in Warren County, Ohio, by stepping out in front of a passing truck after posting her suicide note on her Tumblr page. She was 17-years old. At the time of her death, Alcorn was attending the Ohio Virtual Academy. Her suicide note documented a conflicted relationship with her parents. On television news programs and in an obituary, Alcorn’s parents made the decision to refer to her as “Joshua” and to describe her relationship with family members using masculine terms and masculine pronouns (Frantz, 2015; Farrell, 2014).

Data collection

I analyzed the contentious memorialization of Jennifer Gable and Leelah Alcorn via obituaries, online funeral memorials, op-eds, and newspaper articles (Brydum, 2015; Coolidge, 2014; Farrell, 2014; Fieldstadt & Newell, 2015; Frantz, 2015; Hensley, 2014; Hettesheimer, 2014; Kellaway, 2014; Juro, 2015; Magic Valley Funeral Home, 2014; Marr, 2014; Pepper, 2015; Riley, 2015; Rothaus, 2014; Smith, 2015). Family members used obituaries and online funeral memorials to perform the gender of their loved ones. Other people contested these decisions via online written and visual commentary posted on funeral memorials. Op-ed writers saw these postmortem actions as opportunities to highlight the discrimination that transgender men and women endure and to advocate for social and legal change. Newspaper articles recorded the deaths of the women, the gendered presentation of corpses, and the activism that resulted

from these events. In sum, the sources document the deaths of Leelah Alcorn and Jennifer Gable, offer comments on their passings, and suggest changes that need to be made in order to honor the lives and deaths of transgender women. The sources, which are drawn from the internet, are publicly available and have been published elsewhere. The author, a historian, is guided by disciplinary standards related to internet research ethics and is aware of the sensitive nature of the subject (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2018).

Findings

Memory and the dead

The ways that transgender women are memorialized, in writing and in pictures, are contentious. The conflicted memorialization of transgender women starts with the obituaries that are crafted to announce deaths and to invite family and friends to attend services or viewings. In the case of Jennifer Gable, her father crafted an obituary that identified Jennifer as “Geoffrey,” addressed her using masculine pronouns, and highlighted masculine activities, hobbies, and life experiences. Her online obituary read, “Geoffrey Charles Gable, 32, Boise, passed away suddenly on October 9, 2014 while at his job at Wells Fargo Bank.” It continues, “He was married to Ann Arthurs in 2005 in Hawaii. They were later divorced.” The affirmation of a masculine identity includes, “Geoff loved baseball and was a catcher for many of his little league teams, as well as playing one baseball season in High School” (Magic Valley Funeral Home, 2014). The father’s choice then impacted the physical presentation of Jennifer at her viewing, where she was dressed in a suit and groomed with a short haircut.

An obituary of Leelah Alcorn identified her as “Joshua Alcorn” and highlighted her connection to her family as “beloved son, brother, and friend” (Frantz, 2015). The accompanying photograph also represented “Joshua Alcorn”. In an interview with CNN, mother Carla Alcorn stated, “But we told him that we loved him unconditionally. We loved him no matter what. I loved my son. People need to know that I loved him. He was a good kid, a good boy” (Frantz, 2015). A Facebook post by Leelah’s mother did not acknowledge her suicide: “He was out for an early morning walk and was hit by a truck” (Frantz, 2015).

Many people disputed these memorializations. In the case of Leelah Alcorn, her own suicide note was the initial response to the detransitioning that she underwent. The suicide note, posted on Tumblr, is

signed, “(Leelah) Josh Alcorn” (Farrell, 2014). Highlighting her strained relationship with her parents and criticizing the counseling she had received, she understood the very real possibility that her identity would be disregarded by her family, friends, and faith community. Her mother’s appearance on CNN and media coverage of it stressed the family’s decision to memorialize their son. Leelah’s friends and neighbors and people moved by her tragic death and memorialization resolved to recognize her identity and address their memorials to Leelah, not “Joshua”. Jennifer’s friends did likewise. A friend posted on social media: “I am disgusted. A great and dear friend’s mom went to the funeral today. It was not closed casket. They cut her hair, suit on. How can they bury her as Geoff when she legally changed her name. So very sad. Jen you will be missed and people who know you know that you are peace” (Rothaus, 2014). Commemoration did not stop with words, but also included visual testimony such as photographs, drawings, and other artwork. Images of Alcorn included the phrase, “Rest in Power,” (Frantz, 2015), and depicted her in a white dress with black trim. Such verbal, visual, and material memorialization was designed to resist the ways that language, photographic, and television media, and physical presentation of corpses were combined to detransition Gable and Alcorn.

Grief and mourning

The posthumous detransitioning of transgender women plays a part and impacts grieving processes for the bereaved. Family members who choose to detransition loved ones seek to mourn an identity previously lost. Loved ones who contest the gender expression presented at viewings and funerals and in memorials and remembrances can be said to experience “disenfranchised grief” (Doka, 2002). In cases of detransitioning, the dead’s family of origin, members of the funeral home industry, and religious organizations dictate the parameters of grief and mourning through explicit denial of transgender people. Doka (2002) has argued that, “for many disenfranchised grievers, funeral rituals may offer little benefit” (p. 137). In the case of detransitioning, the funeral rituals may compound the grief. The dead themselves are excluded from the funeral rituals. Doka (2002) further suggests, “The role of the friend or similarly close relationship may simply be ignored—unrecognized or unacknowledged” (p. 137). Disenfranchised grief is part of political or power relationships that regulate whose deaths are most valuable and most

deserving of being mourned. The publication of posthumously detransitioned transgender women’s obituaries and online memorials disallows others from paying their respects to people they knew, loved, and honored.

The remarks of Gable’s friend that were mentioned above point to the larger social systems that resulted in disenfranchised grief. The friend indicts both Gable’s family and the funeral home at which her viewing was held. The friend’s use of “they” (Rothaus, 2014) refers to the decisions of Gable’s father and the services provided by the funeral home. The friend accessed social media to share her grief and to highlight how both the family and the funeral home compounded the pain that Gable’s friends already felt; she chose to communicate this grief and pain with phrases such as “disgusted” and “so very sad” (Rothaus, 2014).

In the case of Leelah Alcorn, her family decided to postpone the service and funeral marking her passing. Instead of a public celebration of her life, the family held a service at a local funeral home where the body was scheduled to be cremated (Fieldstadt & Newell, 2015). Smith (2015) succinctly described the complex misery associated with disenfranchised grief: “We’re all upset, we are all grieving, and we’re all angry. After a year with one saving grace—an increase of trans visibility and legal protections—comes a death that we were powerless to prevent; we were then as equally powerless to prevent her family from erasing her chosen identity further.”

Death as activism

Contentious memorialization and disenfranchised grief prompted activism including actions to respect the wishes and desires of the deceased, the dissemination of information recognizing, publicizing, and working to prevent the mortal dangers that transgender women face due to transphobic violence and suicide, advocacy on behalf of trans elders, education about end-of-life issues, and efforts to make changes in federal and state laws that prevent the lives and histories of women from being altered, silenced, and erased. Friends and acquaintances actively contested the detransitioning of Jennifer Gable through social media. They shared photos of Gable on the online memorial obituary. Reporters, op-ed writers, and human rights activists shared their expertise with newspaper readers, emphasizing other examples of postmortem detransitioning, drawing attention to the lack of legal protection for transgender persons, and highlighting recent legislation aimed at respecting the

gender identity of the deceased. Op-ed author Juro (2015) reminded readers that “no state laws in Idaho forbidding discrimination based on gender identity” played a part in the Gable case.

The death and detransitioning of Alcorn brought attention to the connections between transgender youth and suicide. Media reports of her death stressed the high rates of suicide among trans youth, especially among those who have experienced rejection by their families and discrimination and harassment in their daily lives. Alcorn’s death opened conversations about the hardships that trans youth face and inspired trans youth to speak about their experiences. In a letter addressed to Alcorn and published by the Cincinnati media, Hettesheimer (2014) shared: “It often shocks me when people not connected to the transgender community are flabbergasted that a trans teen would commit suicide. Our narrative is often painted as being rather ‘sunshiny,’ with parents who will help us through with our transition despite having subtle disagreements, but the reality is far from it.” Hettesheimer (2014) continued: “My mother kicked me out and my grandmother refused to believe that my trans-ness was and is real and for a while, wouldn’t let me go to therapy.” Reaching out to Leelah and to living and struggling trans youth, Hettesheimer (2014) offered both hope and realism: “To Leelah and my fellow trans youth who have to and had to deal with abusive and or unsupportive family; I won’t tell you that it gets better, because I would be lying. Things do change, however—as time goes on, you have more opportunities to make a supporting family, to transition, to build a community.”

Letters like Hettesheimer’s were significant in the wake of the Alcorn tragedy because they provided spaces for trans voices and gave suggestions for how to cope via community building. Editorials written in the wake of her death shared information about resources that trans youth can access if they are considering suicide and if they want to connect with LGBTQA peers in their communities. They also directed parents to relevant literature about raising transgender children and teens, including *The Transgender Child* and *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Families and Professionals*, and encouraged the formation of parenting groups that included meetings for trans youth to come together, meet their peers, and make friends (Pepper, 2015). Finally, LGBTQA activists held rallies in memory of Leelah Alcorn, advocated for the extension of civil rights, and noted the violence directed against transgender men and women including the denial of health care and

counseling, social isolation by family members, and sexual, physical, verbal, and psychological abuse (Riley, 2015).

In addition to activism by family, friends, and experts, the dead themselves engaged socially, legally, and politically. Leelah Alcorn sought, by her violent suicide, to create change in both small and large social institutions. First of all, her death radically transformed her family, ending her living participation in its dynamic and severing her physical ties with parents and siblings. She perceived her suicide also as a means of questioning Christian teaching that supports reparative therapy. She wrote: “My mom started taking me to a therapist, but would only take me to Christian therapists, (who were all very biased) so I never actually got the therapy I needed to cure me of my depression. I only got more Christians telling me that I was selfish and wrong and that I should look to God for help” (Marr, 2014). Leelah directed that the material goods she owned be sold and that money gained from them should be used to finance civil rights and support groups. She clearly recognized the high rate of suicide among transgender people, understood that she was another statistic, and wanted her financial and social legacy to bring attention to this risk factor among transgender girls, boys, women, and men. In the wake of Leelah Alcorn’s death, two memorials emerged that were designed to address directly several points that Alcorn made in her Tumblr post and by means of her suicide by truck. Essentially, public and private activism coincided. A portion of the Ohio highway where Alcorn took her life was adopted In Memory of Leelah Alcorn on National Transgender Day of Remembrance in 2015. Further, legislation known as Leelah’s Law aims to ban the use of conversion therapy (Brydum, 2015).

Conclusion

The postmortem detransitioning to which some transgender women have been subject is part of a spectrum of transphobic violence. Transphobic violence starts with the language used to diminish individuals. It also includes the inability to navigate both private and public spaces, including homes, streets, and restrooms. The psychic violence of traversing hostile spaces is compounded by physical assaults that might take place there. For instance, the inability to urinate and defecate safely, privately, and comfortably may result in physical damage to bodies. The physical and sexual violence to which transgender persons are subject has resulted in many lives being ended in death. Bodies

have been mutilated during these violent and criminal acts. Ultimately, detransitioning after death is a potential and final link on a transphobic chain that binds the trans community. Unless legal documents have been compiled and can contest detransitioning, the dead are powerless to make their desires, wishes, and voices known. Postmortem detransitioning not only affects those subjected to it, those who loved them, but impacts the historical record. In the case of detransitioned transgender women, traditional sources of history, including obituaries, death notices, and grave markers, are altered. Especially troubling are mortuary markers that detransition transgender women—the rock-solid denial of identities via grave-stones distorts the past and effectively disappears people. These modifications influence the telling of history and silence the voices of transgender men and women who lived and died (Cromwell, 1999). Institutions and histories privilege non-transgender persons over individuals who are transgender and gender non-conforming.

Retrospective transitioning is the end result of social processes that shape connections between bodies and identities, sex and gender—social processes that start with pre-birth and birthing rituals. These rituals include ultrasounds, gender reveal parties, color coding of nurseries, medical and legal announcements and recordings of infants' genders, and color appropriate clothing. Postmortem detransitioning speaks to the continuing essentializing of persons that starts prior to birth, continues at birth, and ends at death. Reflecting on detransitioning after death prods us to study how transitioning itself entails dying and death processes, passings, grieving, losing. Trans activist and scholar Witten (2002) includes, in *The Tao of Gender*, a section titled, "Death." She writes:

The journey of the transgendered [sic] is often cloaked in metaphors of loss, denial, and even death. Many of us deny that part of our histories that brought us to the place where we began our voyage, our journey to this new place. And yet, did we really begin our voyage here? Where would we be if we had not been what we were? Some of us speak of our lives as if what we once were never existed." "Why add pieces of death to the little life that we do have." (p. 57)

Due to the risks of deadly violence faced by transgender men and women, postmortem planning is essential; end-of-life preparation also is crucial for trans elders. One important step is to make one's wishes known verbally, but also by means of legal documents including wills, birth certificates, and other records tied to identity. The National Resource Center

on LGBT Aging advises that one should complete a Disposition of Bodily Human Remains (DBHR), provides a sample disposition, and counsels seeking specific information, like whether the disposition needs to be notarized, related to one's state of residence. In addition, one is advised to update and to make these documents available in a location accessible to others like taped on the refrigerator, placed in one's wallet or purse, and communicated to trusted family members, friends, and medical personnel (Espinoza, 2014; Prachniak, 2014). Allies need to step up and take on the responsibility of being managers and executors of estates and insuring the final wishes of persons are fulfilled, respected, and recognized.

Trans activism also includes promoting legislation that deals with official documentation like death certificates and funeral businesses. California's recent law, Respect After Death, acknowledges the documentary and postmortem detransitioning that people undergo. Resulting from the experience of Christopher Lee, a trans activist and artist, who was misgendered on his death certificate, the law requires the authority responsible for filling out the deceased death certificate to record the person's gender identity as reflected on documentation like papers expressing the deceased's wishes, driver's license, birth certificate, or medical records noting transition. The purposes of the law are to respect the gender identity of the deceased, to diminish additional pain and suffering faced by the bereaved, to not hold liable coroners and funeral directors for information contested by the deceased's friends and families, and to provide greater guidance to persons, like coroners and funeral directors, who are responsible for filling out death certificates (Garcia, 2014; Transgender Law Center, 2014). Chino Scott-Chung, a friend of Christopher Lee summarized what sponsors of the bill hoped to accomplish and, at the same time, acknowledged the grief that loved ones and members of the transgender community experienced: "It brings us great solace to know that Christopher's legacy will live on to protect the dignity of other transgender people, and that their friends will hopefully not have to endure what he did" (Heffernan, 2014, para. 2). Legal Director of the Transgender Law Center Ilona Turner describes the pain that postmortem detransitioning causes, stating, "[It] sends a message, really a pretty strong signal to the rest of the community, that your wishes around your gender, your identity, your life as this person, who you are doesn't matter and can be completely erased once you're not here to stand up for yourself" (Welch, 2014, para. 7). The possible misidentification

of gender identity has significant implications, not only for the deceased and her loved ones, but also in relation to property claims, legal cases involving homicide, and the collection of vital statistics for public health problems and solutions.

Postmortem detransitioning of transgender women results in contentious memorialization and disenfranchised grief, which together prompt activism. Family members make decisions to present their loved ones using identities that the dead did not embrace or intend. These decisions impact viewings, obituaries, grave markers, and the historical record. These presentations are often contested by loved ones who valued the gender identities of those who passed and whose memorialization emerges from the disenfranchised grief that they experience from not only deaths that have taken place, but the hurt, pain, and loss they feel in relation to the postmortem detransitioning. Opposing memorialization and disenfranchised grief are then channeled into activism that includes respecting the wishes and desires of the recently deceased, recognizing, publicizing, and working to prevent the mortal dangers that transgender women face due to transphobic violence and suicide, advocating on the behalf of trans elders, educating about end-of-life issues, and acting to make changes in federal and state law that stop the lives and histories of transgender women from being altered, silenced, and erased.

Funding

This work was funded by Susquehanna University History Department.

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