

**Piper G.**

Knoxville, Maryland

*Decomposing Identity*

Fiber and cyanotype

This artwork is a visualization of the synthesis between nature and human experience. I worked to embody this in all aspects of the process. I used cyanotypes because of their reliance on the sun. The connection to the cyclical patterns of light and shadow helped me align with nature's patterns. My identity as a genderfluid person inspired the direction of my project. It encouraged me to consider liminality and impermanence in gender transition. I was raised in the woods and am heavily influenced by transitional spaces in nature. The decomposition occurring on the forest floor was an accurate analogy for transitioning. The process of renewal observed there, that of mushrooms, worms, beetles, and bacteria consuming leaf litter to return it to soil, reflects that of the trans experience. The employment of quilting reminds of the threads that hold communities, both trans and nature, together. The tree ring-like concentric circles around the embroidered moss represent transitioning as a non linear process, one of constant self-realization. In decomposition nothing is lost, it's the same for transitioning.

*The portraits included here are those of some of the trans students at Oxbow. Special thanks to Krow, Sawyer, Ollie, and Atlas for their participation.*

Decomposing Identity:  
A Braided Essay of Transness and  
The Forest Floor



Piper G.

The Oxbow School

OS47

*Author's note: This paper reviews the relationship between humanity and nature. It explores the understanding that can be garnered by comparing experiences of liminality in natural and human contexts. It examines the decomposition occurring on the forest floor as an analogy for trans identity and transition. Liminality is a process of renewal, embrace it and see what is carried into new forms.*

Nothing is lost. Science tells us that energy cannot be created or destroyed. Energy may change states, shifting from one organism to another in the process of decomposition. But change and loss are two very different things. Transition, another word for change, such as that of the decomposition of leaves on the forest floor and the transition of transgender people illustrates the reuse of memory and material. Each is a liminal space. Liminality is not linear, it does not follow a prescribed path. On this journey of renewal, it's important to consider what core elements of the self are carried with us as change occurs.

In my eyes, transitioning and liminality are beautiful processes. However, many fear them. This is especially true in relation to transgender people and their gender transitions being seen as scary, disgusting, and revolting. Decomposition and decay are similarly perceived (“Decomposition and Decay”). This paper weaves decomposition and gender transition together to highlight their beauty and necessity. This dispels the myth that they are something to turn away from. It asks how relating human and natural experiences can deepen our understanding of self.

Above all else, this project is for my younger self and all those searching for themselves. It's a reminder that change, transition, and liminal spaces are beneficial and healthy. It's a call to release fear and embrace uncertainty. As Zinnia Jones points out, trans folks are “given so little exposure to the conceptual, metaphorical, and literal language needed to recognize and describe

who we are” (Hoffman-Fox forward). This paper provides a metaphorical explanation to those searching for themselves. It's a rocky journey but the view is incredible.

### **GREENER IN TRANSITION**

Decomposition is a process of renewal. The key balancing factor in eternal chaos. A common place to observe decomposition is the forest floor. The forest floor is an intricate mass of networks connecting and overlapping to create a liminal environment. Energy and mass are constantly cycling through the forest floor in the form of leaf debris. The leaves that flutter down from the looming trees feed an ever-turning cycle. From life to death and back again. In general “decomposition consists of two simultaneous processes: (a) the associated mineralization and humification of lignin, cellulose and other compounds through a series of actions by microorganisms and (b) the leaching of soluble compounds into the soil whose carbon and nitrogen are gradually mineralized” (Krishna and Mohan 2). Mineralization refers to the breakdown of compounds so the nutrients contained in them are returned to the soil and can be used by other organisms. Humification is the creation of organic matter in the soil. It uses such elements as lignin and cellulose. These are molecules in plant tissue that provide structure to the cell wall. Detritivores are the flora and fauna that facilitate this decay. Fungi, bacteria, beetles, worms, and countless other organisms process dead and dying organic materials returning them to the soil to be used by the next organism. Decomposition is the foundation for the reuse of materials in a forest. Organic material from the ecosystem that has served its purpose is passed to the detritivores. Decay is constantly occurring to match the demand of living things. Without it, the plants working to grow green and tall would lack the sustenance to do so. They would wilt away. Decomposition is the foundation for renewal in a forest ecosystem.

Transness is experiencing an authentic self. Being transgender is a specific identity and an umbrella term used for trans-binary and trans non-binary individuals. In this paper, it is used as an umbrella term. Generally, it denotes the experience of not having one's gender identity align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Transitioning is considered to be "the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place, rather than any particular destination or mode of transition" (Susan 1). Transition can be subdivided into medical and social transitions. Medical transition is the changing of one's physical form through medical intervention, such as hormone replacement therapy and surgery. Social transition usually encompasses such things as coming out, changing one's name, and dressing to affirm gender identity. Transitioning is a non-linear process that extends through all of a trans person's life. It's a process of renewal rather than loss.

My transition started in the forest. The Appalachian mountains hold my self-discovery. When I hike, I spent much of my time staring at the ground, watching the leaves and moss rush by. The quiet of the forest surrounds me. Twigs crunch under my sturdy hiking boots. My transition is just as winding as those old mountain trails. It doesn't have a defined start or a concrete end, only mile after mile; a journey. I didn't leave an old version of myself back at the commencement of my hike. I carry her essence with me, the lessons she valued serve as the fuel for my fire. I'm learning to let go of personal misconceptions and embrace renewal. Transitioning is the renewal of self, it's a constant reevaluation of existence aimed at finding a more authentic place to rest. Dara Hoffman-Fox, a licensed therapist and author of *You and Your Gender Identity*, says it best "the journey of discovering your authentic self is one you will be on your entire life" (xxx). It's terrifying to set off without a defined destination, but it also gives you the chance to branch off and see where the wandering takes you. Finch recalls that "When I started my gender journey, no

one gave me the permission to be uncertain or afraid” (Finch and Hoffman-Fox forward). Embrace uncertainty. Each day will bring new challenges just like the leaves falling to the forest floor about to join the process of decomposition.

When I lay on the forest floor amongst the leaves, twigs, soil, fungi, bacteria, insects, and animals I felt grounded in my body. The earth supports me from beneath; interconnected. As the leaves fall all around me, each drifting slowly to the ground where they rest, I felt my past self drift with them. She left her mark with me, all the skills I needed but she took what I couldn't carry.

### **THE BEAUTY OF DECAY**

The mossy logs laying on the forest floor don't resist their shift to humus. Fungi slowly grow over the fallen deadwood, eating away at the exterior bark. Beetles chew through the rings, carving new patterns. As the rotting log transforms from a looming tree to rich earth, a deeper cycle is at work. This liminal space is vital to the health of the forest. Decomposition is in no rush. It occurs as it needs and as conditions allow. As leaf litter decomposes, it settles, slowly sinking, culminating into smaller biological components. With the help of worms, fungi, bacteria, and other creatures, leaf litter returns to the earth.

Transgender transition often stems from a moment of realization. A tree falling to the forest floor. Origination with the spark of one fire jumping and lighting a new blaze. My moment of realization came from Youtube. I chanced upon a video of trans people talking about their gender identity. Experiences started adding up, I felt a profound resonance. Self-realization is startling. That moment of clarity is soon broken by all the questions of actualization. What does this truth

mean for me, where do I go, how do I move forward? Gender exploration is terrifying, but in the pursuit of authenticity it's important to remember

- “1. This is your discovery process and no one else's.
- 2. Only you get to decide how to describe your identity.
- 3 You are allowed to take as long as you need to explore your gender identity.
- 4. Everyone's experience is different and is to be respected.
- 5. You will figure some things out now and others later.” (Hoffman-Fox xxvi).

### **LET THE LEAVES TAKE YOU**

Decomposition and transitioning are processes of enrichment. In decomposition, fungi hide under the leaf litter as mycelium grows upwards feeding off of the old. It slowly gains more and more, finally able to produce mushrooms to float its spores out into the forest. In transition, you come to understand and uncover a bit of yourself hidden away under the leaves. The roots of self-discovery brush on buried truths. They must be incorporated and brought to the surface. Finch recalls that “Looking back at the beginning of my gender journey, I wish someone had reminded me to be curious. To be joyful. To remember that exploring who we are doesn't have to be a painful, dramatic, gut-wrenching experience” (Finch and Hoffman-Fox forward). Joy and liberation are at the heart of transitioning. Nourish the facets of your identity coming to light.

### **CONTROLLING CONDITIONS**

While decomposition is a critical cycle, there are external factors that influence its function. Both biotic and abiotic factors affect the rate of decomposition. Abiotic factors include “Climatic features, like temperature, rainfall, humidity, and seasonal variations affect the rate of litter

decomposition” (Krishna and Mohan 1). Biotic factors include the abundance of detritivores, larger forest fauna, and human influence. Generally, the soil temperature is the key factor controlling decomposition - higher heats link to increased rates of decomposition (Krishna and Mohan 2). Additionally, soil texture which in turn affects pH is a considerable factor in litter decomposition (Krishna and Mohan 3). These factors influence how decomposition cycles and how well it acts as a conduit for liminality.

The medical and social transition of trans people is influenced by a multitude of external factors. Trans people must consider their access to accessible gender-affirming care while searching for medical transition options. Trans people can struggle with access to non-discriminating, safe and supportive housing as they share their identity with a wider network. A supportive home life and community are also critical during transition. Finding a community of other trans individuals provides a safe space for gender experimentation and exploration. They can also share knowledge and experiences, deepening the communal understanding of the trans experience. Changing legal names and gender markers is a daunting process but living in a supportive area lessens this burden. These factors and more must all be considered during transitioning. While transitioning is a deeply personal and vulnerable process it is often intruded upon by external limitations. A disruption during transition is a threat to the safety of trans people.

## **RESISTANCE AND RECOGNITION**

While decomposition can be interrupted, it cannot be halted indefinitely. After I realized I was trans, it wasn't something I could unsee. I drifted back and forth but, deep down under my fear, I knew I was trans. My questions about my gender were always about how others would react. I wasn't grounded in my trans experience, I was focused on the pain others could inflict because of



who I am. It's hard to let go of that fear. Embracing my identity is one of the most vulnerable experiences I've ever encountered. However, reflecting on the growth I've made since accepting myself is astounding. I don't know if my younger self would recognize me now, but I do know that she'd love me with all her heart because I'm learning to love myself. Author and poet Lee Mokobe reminds that "It had nothing to do with hating my body, I just love it enough to let it go, I treat it like a house and when your house is falling apart you do not evacuate, you make it comfortable enough to house all your insides" (00:01:42-00:01:53). Transitioning is a process of love, recognizing that while your current body has got you this far it's time to embrace all of yourself. No more hiding. You recognize yourself as enough.

You've always been trans, you just might not have had the words for it. Nature is a self-correcting cycle. Forest fires consume the debris on the forest floor. But after the gluteus flames have died young seeds sprout and rise. New leaves fall, beetles and fungi hiding under the soil return. Decomposition reestablishes itself. Transition is by no means linear, it can't be. Exploration is a winding path. My medical transition was slowed by the gatekeeping of gender-affirming surgery. I found that, as Hoffman-Fox points out, "choosing to give in to this drive to become your authentic self can be nerve-racking and full of risks. Nonetheless, the suffering that can result from not doing it can feel worse than any of the possible consequences that would result from exploring your gender identity." (xxv).

Human and natural experiences are related through the lens of liminality. By synthesizing gender transition and decomposition each can be understood in a new light. An authentic self can be crafted from knowledge renewed from past experiences. The atoms of the leaves remain but their structure in relation to each other shifts as the forces of decomposition break them apart. Old material is incorporated into new growth.



## Bibliography

“Decomposition and Decay.” *Trees for Life*, 19 July 2021, <https://treesforlife.org.uk/into-the-forest/habitats-and-ecology/ecology/decomposition-and-decay/>.

Hoffman-Fox, Dara. *You and Your Gender Identity: A Guide to Discovery*. Skyhorse Publishing Company, Incorporated, 2017.

Krishna, M. P., and Mahesh Mohan. “Litter Decomposition in Forest Ecosystems: A Review.” *Energy, Ecology and Environment*, vol. 2, no. 4, 10 July 2017, pp. 236–249., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40974-017-0064-9>. Accessed 2022.

Mokobe, Lee, director. *A Powerful Poem About What It Feels Like to Be Transgender*. *TED Talk*, TED Conferences , 2015, [https://www.ted.com/talks/lee\\_mokobe\\_a\\_powerful\\_poem\\_about\\_what\\_it\\_feels\\_like\\_to\\_be\\_transgender](https://www.ted.com/talks/lee_mokobe_a_powerful_poem_about_what_it_feels_like_to_be_transgender). Accessed 2022.

Stryker, Susan. *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*. Second ed., Seal Press, 2017.

Walker, Nicole. “The Braided Essay as Social Justice Action.” *Creative Nonfiction*, 11 Aug. 2017, <https://creativenonfiction.org/writing/the-braided-essay-as-social-justice-action/>.