Becoming Ever More Monstrous: Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness

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What is This?
Introduction: Being Transgender, Performing Instructor

It is an unusually warm Tuesday morning in March. This is the first semester I am teaching my own class. I am 31 years old, but I appear to be 20. As I am young-looking, I wear a costume to make my class believe I am the instructor: professional khaki pants, dress shoes, a button-up shirt, an argyle sweater, and a tie. For the first 2 weeks of the semester, I am so nervous to perform “instructor” that I do not sleep the night before I teach.

For today’s class, we have read an article on trans people’s experiences in workplaces. I have some personal experience I could share regarding this topic, as the classroom is my workplace and I am trans. I explain the differences between “MTF” (“male to female”) and “FTM” (“female to male”) and several other common transgender identities. My 35 students sit, intrigued expressions on their faces. I explain: “Someone who transitions from male to female is a trans woman, and trans women usually use the pronoun ‘she.’” Out of my earshot, a student retorts, “How can you call that a woman?” Oblivious to this comment, I continue. I face the board, and write the words “stealth” and “out.” I turn to face the students.

“What does this term, ‘stealth’ mean?” I ask, pointing to the word. A student raises her hand. “When a trans person does not tell people they are trans,” she states. “Good,” I say. Standing there, I am performing “stealth.” My students are not aware of my transness. I have not come out to them. I hesitate, considering telling them I am performing stealth as we speak, to demonstrate the concept. I would “out” myself in that speech act, and I would no longer be stealth. I feel lucid. It seems a perfect time to come out, since we are discussing the terms, but I do not feel at ease with the idea of them knowing this about me. It has been only months since my gender ambiguity has become less visible, and it has been a relief to receive fewer otherizing looks and comments in that time. But I am still hypervigilant about how I am being read. I decide to just go on with the lesson without mentioning my personal connection to the material.

I write the word “passing” on the board. I say: “‘Passing’ is when a person ‘passes’ as ‘not trans,’ intentionally does not come out as ‘trans.’ The term ‘passing’ is problematic though. Can you imagine why?” A student offers, “It assumes that a person is not ‘really’ who they are,” I reply, “Exactly. This concept can invalidate trans people. The term ‘stealth’ also suggests deception, which supports negative stereotypes about trans people.”

A student wonders, “Doesn’t a trans man benefit from male privilege when he ‘passes?’” “Yes,” I say, “he does, in many cases like any other man.” I have noticed how students treat me with more respect now than they ever did before I began hormonal transition. Before, I presumed that

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they read me as a gender-nonconforming female, and that they were confused about my gender. I want to share this but I don’t. And it is good that I don’t.

Because in the next moment, I notice a student gazing at my crotch. I feel a shooting of deep discomfort through my body. I presume that he wonders if I am trans and is looking for “evidence.” I can’t let on that I see his expression, because I need to remain in “instructor mode.” My job is to teach the class. I have to contain my anxiety, and I have to contain the 35 students who are looking at me expectantly, as well as the one who is looking at me intently, concentrating on the last part of my body I want attention on.

I feel mixed feelings, writing about this nascent teaching experience. I wonder whether it is ethical to write about you, my students. I wonder what you would think or how you would feel if you read this. I wonder whether it would surprise you to know that your subtle actions impact me, or whether it would shock you to know that I am trans.

As a transmasculine person, I encounter particular indignities in everyday life. Interpersonal interactions are often uncomfortable, sometimes painful. Analyzing the case of my transgender life, its melding with others’, and the parallels with the monster’s life in Shelley’s Frankenstein, I explore sensations of selves and others, separations within and between selves and others, and possibilities for reconnection and freedom. Claiming humanity in my monstrosity as a transsexual1, I make my monstrosity human. Charting my socioemotional gendered transitions on my gender journey, I expose others’ marginalizing actions, I question the locatedness of positonalities, and I make my many selves legible. I aim to build connections across difference, with you, reader, for cisgender3 people and for shape-shifters alike, so that we might see ourselves in each other, and that, together, we might work against injustice and distance, and toward a deeper kind of intimacy and freedom for us all.

Complicating Locations: Transgender In-Betweenness

It is April of 2012, a year since I began testosterone treatment. I am 32 years old. You might wonder who I am now. I am not a different self, but my social locations are shifting. I prefer to consider, not who, but how am I, now? Under what circumstances am I, now? (Minh-ha, 1989). What contexts shape me, what movements make me? I want to share with you about the last year and the few years before. In my journey, I have felt many feelings. I have experienced the world experiencing me in drastically different ways. People respond to me very differently when they read me as female from how they do when they read me as male, and when they cannot read my gender. Yet, I am the same person, even as I transition.

As we all are, I am a betweener (Diversi & Moreira, 2009). Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira define betweener as an “(un)conscious body experiencing life in and between two cultures” (Diversi & Moreira, 2009, p. 19). Betweeners who cross between two cultures are understood in terms of race and class differently depending on the cultural context. I am a slightly different kind of betweener. Though I do not move between cultures as often as they do, at different times, I am read differently within the same cultural context. My betweener-ness is complex. It is an in-betweeness. I live in the in-betweenness of genders and in the borderlands of oppressions. I live as different kinds of “oppressor” and as different kinds of “oppressed.” I move in the world as White and able-bodied, with socioeconomic and educational privilege, and as queer.

As a transgender being, my gendered shifting moves me into more betweenesses. I am queerly between: I occupy multiple positions at once, and different positions at different times, depending on how people read me—in regard to age and ability as well as gender. I am socially subjugated as transgender, even as I am beginning to experience in a new way what White male privilege is. And the subjugations of femaleness still shape my life. In social interactions, I still behave, perform, and position myself in the ways I have habitually done so, as someone who has been socialized female. I feel the feelings I have habitually felt as a result of being positioned as female and treated as inferior. Yet, now people often position me as male in social interactions. In many of these moments, I experience a feeling of inclusion that I have not ever felt, and in others, I feel excluded in ways I have never felt. Yet, at times, the femininity I continue to embody as a transmasculine1 being leads people to look at me funny. I feel new feelings particular to transness: anxiety, fear, hypervigilance. It can be dangerous to be a transsexual. It can be a lot of emotional work to navigate the cisgender world. I experience sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and White, male, able-bodied privilege. These positions and states feel very different from each other. These borderlands of oppression are places of astonishment, pain, humility, and deep understanding.

My age is queer: I look much younger than I am. Similarly, I am simultaneously enabled, constrained, and defined by disability. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2005),

People with chronic or acute illnesses, appearance impairments such as birthmarks or fatness, traumatic injuries, congenital impairments or anomalies, sensory impairments, latent conditions such as HIV or hereditary conditions, learning disabilities, and mental, developmental, or emotional illnesses are grouped together under the medical-scientific rubric of abnormality and its accompanying cultural sentence of inferiority. (p. 1558)

Mine is a complicated (dis)ability status. I take testosterone. The high levels of androgens in my body enhance some of my muscular abilities. I am also medically diagnosed with “Gender Identity Disorder,” which classifies me legally as
mentally disordered. This diagnosis is what allows me to obtain testosterone “treatment.” My androgynous might be understood as an “appearance impairment.” I am also simultaneously privileged and subjugated through the institution of gender. As I continue to change shape, I am becoming more transsexual, but my monstrousness is becoming less outwardly obvious than it was before. I am becoming new betweenings.

I am self and Other, self-as-Other, and Other-as-self: In various ways, I am becoming another social way of being. A multiple kind of outsider within (Collins, 1986)—as a queer female coming into a male body in a male-dominated society dominated by heteropatriarchal epistemologies, and as a trans person in a cisgender-dominated society dominated by cisgender epistemologies. This is a story about becoming different kinds of genderednesses and betweennesses. A story about being liminal, moving between bodies and between locations, and being in many bodies at once. And a story about being decidedly queer. “Being half in and half out of identities, subject positions, and discourses, and being fluid in a world relentlessly searching for stability and certainty” (Adams & Jones, 2011, p. 114). This story is a body of many stories and many bodies. An ongoing space-time-body of transit. A queer time and place (Halberstam, 2005).

**Becoming More Monstrous: Working Toward Freedom and Connection**

As we all are, I am becoming—never actually occurring, but “always forthcoming and already past” (Deleuze, 1990, p. 80). My movement is not a journeying from one static state to another. It is a state of constant movement. An articulating of movements rather than a sequence of moments. I am moving in multiple directions at once. My body is becoming what we call more “masculine” than it was before, even as I am becoming what we call more “feminine” than I am now. I am becoming more masculine in shape and yet, more feminine in movement. I find myself embodying a certain femininity that I did not feel comfortable in, in movements before, when my body looked more female. Though my voice now is in male-octaves, I am speaking more softly than I did. This is a masculine-bodied femininity. It is how my new movement is expressing itself in this new shaping I am taking. And, as I am “always forthcoming and already past,” this gendered expression is both new movement and remnant of itself, which has and will continue to change.

I am becoming more and less recognizable, in different ways, simultaneously. My body ruptures categories and threatens ideas of body normativity, renouncing “beauty” to be “beast,” while breaking the binary meaning of beauty and beast by being monstrously beautiful. This is a corporeal resistance. It is both intentional and unintentional. This “monstering” brings me freedom and joy, yet also danger and fear. Being “monstered”—being made into a monster through others’ eyes—can hurt. Like Susan Stryker, I relate to Frankenstein’s monster. Stryker (1994) says,

> I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (p. 238)

Though I am not a transsexual woman, but a transsexual male-ish being, I see myself reflected in this experience. As the descriptor “monstrosity” sticks differently to different monstered bodies, I wonder whether it is right to liken my particular, White transmasculine experiences—which afford me certain privileges—to transfeminine experiences, to experiences of trans people of color, or to those of any other Others, for that matter. While privilege is important to account for, it is also true that I too feel excluded from human community—the human community that grows between what we imagine as “Western,” White, able-bodied, cisgender, male, heteronormative, economically advantaged bodies. I too feel indignity and rage at my exclusion, and the effects of social trauma.

As I conduct research interviews, I find connection and resonance listening to other trans people’s stories. Sam tells me about how in his Japanese American family, there is a culture of silence. They do not talk about the internment of World War II. He tells me about the loud silence, the guilt, and obligation. Trauma gets regenerated in the next generation, but those in the next generation do not know where it is coming from or why they are traumatized. His family’s silence feels isolating. Their distancing and misrecognition is coming from or why they are traumatized. His family’s silence feels isolating. Their distancing and misrecognition of his gender almost feels normal to Sam, who is used to silence and isolation. I listen, relating to his stories. The knowledge of Judaism has been lost over generations in my family. I have not learned much about my Jewishness or about the trauma I have inherited. But the silence is there. The guilt is there. The anxiety is there. War traumatized me too. My grandfather fought as a soldier in World War II. He tells me about the loud silence, the guilt, and obligation. Trauma gets regenerated in the next generation, but those in the next generation do not know where it is coming from or why they are traumatized. His family’s silence feels isolating. Their distancing and misrecognition of his gender almost feels normal to Sam, who is used to silence and isolation. I listen, relating to his stories. The knowledge of Judaism has been lost over generations in my family. I have not learned much about my Jewishness or about the trauma I have inherited. But the silence is there. The guilt is there. The anxiety is there. War traumatized me too. My grandfather fought as a soldier in World War II. He tells me about the loud silence, the guilt, and obligation. Trauma gets regenerated in the next generation, but those in the next generation do not know where it is coming from or why they are traumatized. His family’s silence feels isolating. Their distancing and misrecognition of his gender almost feels normal to Sam, who is used to silence and isolation. I listen, relating to his stories. The knowledge of Judaism has been lost over generations in my family. I have not learned much about my Jewishness or about the trauma I have inherited. But the silence is there. The guilt is there. The anxiety is there. War traumatized me too. My grandfather fought as a soldier in World War II. He tells me about the loud silence, the guilt, and obligation. Trauma gets regenerated in the next generation, but those in the next generation do not know where it is coming from or why they are traumatized. His family’s silence feels isolating. Their distancing and misrecognition of his gender almost feels normal to Sam, who is used to silence and isolation. I listen, relating to his stories.
dehumanization by learning to speak, enacting subjectivity and claiming himself as a subject. He makes himself legible by speaking about his experience of exclusion. “Like that creature,” Stryker (1994) says, “I assert my worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face, and redefine a life worth living” (p. 250). We shape-shifters are making ourselves legible by speaking our truths. We are rejecting subjugation. We are invoking and claiming abject positions—femininities and queer genderednesses—as a form of resistance. We resist dehumanization by making ourselves, our pain, and our complex lives legible. We talk back. 

But, I wonder about the limits of language. I wonder about the limits of recognition as a strategy for liberation. And I wonder: Is it right to put the onus on us? We are not the only ones injured by our oppression. People suffer from their separation from us, from coercing each other into enacting harm, and in feeling remorse from that harm. We all suffer from this separation from each other. Oppression is a form of collective trauma. It is inside all of us. We are not singular entities separate from each other—we all have multiple selves, and we all form a collective body. Oppression separates us all from parts of ourselves as well as from each other. And we need to work together with ourselves and each other to transform it. 

What is monstrous? Who is a monster, and to whom? “Monstrous” seems to mean terrifying otherness—“Other” by definition, a definitional inferiorization. However, the capacity to evoke terror is a certain kind of power. I seek to claim that power through claiming monstrosity in myself. The word “monster” derives from verbs: “the Latin ‘monere,’ to warn, and ‘demonstrare,’ to show or make visible” (Botting, 1991, p. 142). “‘Daemon’—a term Shelley uses to describe the monster—“is the Latinate transliteration of the Greek daimon, [meaning] eros, or love” (Wittman, 1998, p. 89). And as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) observe, “It is not the slumber of reason that engenders monsters, but a vigilant and insomniac rationality” (cited in Botting, 1991, p. 161). I thus use this term in an oppositional way, by returning it to its roots, and returning myself to mine in the process. I “monster,” or make visible the dehumanization I have faced, which is a result of dominant, rational ways of thinking—what individuals deploy to render me “monstrous.” I take power in exhibiting others’ terrorizing behavior. Perhaps surprisingly, love has a part in shaping our stories of monstering and of being made into monsters.

**Monstering With Glee: Creating Confusion as Resistance**

It is 5 years ago, a time before I began testosterone treatment. My age is 27. My queer gender appears indiscernible to many people. It is a “discreditable identity’ that must be confirmed, repeatedly through discourse and action.” (Foucault, 1978; Goffman, 1963; Yoshino, 2006; as cited in Adams, 2011, p. 88). This is true of many identities. In particular, indigenous identities, like trans identities, are imagined in many contexts as mythological or as not “really” existing. However, being disavowed fundamentally defines trans experience. The hegemony of biological essentialism means that, for example, the existence of cisgender individuals is taken for granted. Their identities are not questioned—they are assumed to exist. Trans people, in contrast, are assumed to not exist; they are assumed to “actually” be something else—something that can be known by viewing their bodies. Biological essentialism thus discredits trans identity. Trans people must therefore continually re-assert their identities.

As a trans person, I occupy a particularly between kind of betweenness. Among my other legible positionalities, I am read as sexually deviant because I appear gender-deviant. In this historical movement, I enjoy pushing people to think about gender in a nonbinary way.

On the bus, I sit, on my way to work. I look out the window, thinking about the children I will see soon. In the next moment, I feel energy reaching out to me. I sense eyes following me. I am being watched—realization dawns in an instant.

Glancing up, I confront eyes querying me. Eyes wondering. Boy or girl? Man or woman? This is beyond curiosity. It is desire. It is the wanting to possess, the intention to extract, it is the mission to obtain for oneself information—no: Truth.

I feel a sense of amusement watching the eyes’ confusion, their concentration. I enjoy the chaos my body prompts. These eyes feel and imagine themselves to be legitimate knowers. How dare I, as Other, challenge their abilities to “know”? My very ambiguity challenges their understanding of themselves as omniscient. My ambiguity moves into their space, cornering their minds. They do not know which way to turn. My androgyny fucks with their imagined able-bodiedness: I impair their ability to categorize me. I challenge their conceptions of gender; I shake the foundations of their narrative. I upheave their ideas of Truth and their trusty methods to know it. I am successfully undoing gender (Butler, 2004) by being illegible. I am living the unlivable. Their failure to attribute a gender category to me makes my ambiguous gender performance a form of resistance. I take power in their confusion. I feel a rush of heat and euphoria in this moment of freedom—as I monster, gender-fuck and gender-terrorize.

**Political Economies of Looking:**

**Claiming Power With Movements of Rage**

It is 2 years ago, a time before I began testosterone treatment. I am 30 years old. My gender appears indiscernible to many people. In this moment, I wish my gender queerness were not so visible. I have been moving over the years toward a more
male identity, and I no longer enjoy others’ confusion about my body. Now, their energetic intrusions irritate me.

On the bus, I sit, reading. On my way to work. The fascinating, densely written book requires my full attention. My eyes trace lines of a paragraph. The words enter and exit my head, leaving no remnants. I am distracted, thinking about the deadlines I have to meet soon. In the next moment, I become aware of some other kind of discomfort. I feel energy reaching out to me. Eyes boring into me. The unease of being watched.

In the menu of gazes, there are many types. There are the double-takes, the trying-to-be-discreet-corner-of-the-eye extended glimpses, the persistent looks of confusion, and the more obvious, blatant stares. I encounter them all. Glancing up, I confront eyes reaching into me. Eyes opposite me, staring openly, shamelessly. Gawking. Eyes sitting to my right, trying to resist the draw to me, pretending to be uninterested. I feel their pull into me, the bodies facing forward, the eyes straining as far to the left as they can. Trying to appear like they are not looking. I feel their strain, the dull ache of overextending the limit of the organ. These eyes know well their own rudeness.

I feel the pull of their need to see, to discern for themselves. Eyes demanding—needing to know. Boy or girl? Man or woman? This is beyond curiosity. It is desire. It is the wanting to possess, the intention to extract, it is the mission to obtain for oneself “Truth.” This pull is based on their imagining themselves to be legitimate knowers. Within the act of staring is the entitlement to stare, to know, to determine, to proclaim (Serano, 2007). The internalized belief in oneself as omniscient being: “If I don’t know, it does not exist.” The logic of reality through self-determination, through self-proclamation. And of course, I, as Other, am not “able” to speak, to know, to determine, to proclaim. (Spivak, 1988). How dare I, as Other, challenge their abilities to “know?” My very ambiguity is an assault to their understanding of themselves as omniscient. My androgyny fcks with their imagined able-bodiedness.

The gender-normate to my left tightens her body movements. Unease with my body. This same experience as staree—the receiver of stares—5 years ago brought me a feeling of excitement. I had felt a triumphant rush of joy, knowing that I had successfully confused the people on the bus. I took power in their discombobulated state. I was a successful gender terrorist. Monstering successfully.

Now, the cumulative experience of strangers’ attention to my gender ambiguity feels like stigma. Eyes exercise power through interacting. Eyes express feeling, and they elicit feeling. The exercise of looking and being looked at creates a structure of feeling—a feeling of surveillance.

The eyes are still staring. The energy is smothering. Suffocating. I feel cornered. Suddenly, I feel hot with rage. Can’t they see it? Their gazing is a continuous attack. Their confusion, which used to feel exciting to me, now feels like relentless probing. Their faces say: “You are a freak. You are less than human, a monster.” Like Frankenstein’s monster, I wonder, is “there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me?” (Shelley, 2003, p. 211).

How dare they? Have I lost the power of monstrosity? How have I allowed them to make me a monster? How can I find my gender terrorist joy again? How can I return my monstrous power to myself?

According to Diversi and Moreira (2009), “We cannot erase the oppression in the marked body. But we can allow the wounds to speak up in their own bodies.” So, I can speak. I can speak “from the wound in my mouth” (Weems, 2003). I can speak in many ways, with words and with actions. Perhaps speaking through my wounds can create a new way of seeing.

The starers see me seeing them. I feel the corners of my mouth curling, a growl rising in my throat. My jaw opens to strike out, to bite them. I look at them, staring back. My face speaks my anger. Like many starees do, I dare them to keep looking when they can see me seeing them gawking at me (Garland-Thomson, 2009).

The eyes to my right look away, then. But their energy has not moved; it remains in my space. I still feel their attunement to my movements, their awareness of me. After a moment or two, they try to sneak back in. These looks are “microaggressions,” or often unconscious, often indirect, othering actions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

**Microaggressions**

The blatant starers keep on looking. What do I do?

I revolt.
I glare back.
My indignant anger
Moves out of my body.
My eyes rip the anger out from inside me.
“Rage gives me back my body as its own fluid medium” (Stryker, 1994, p. 247).

I embrace the monster That I am continuing to become.

“Rage throws me back at last into this mundane reality in this transfigured flesh that aligns me with the power of my Being” (Stryker, 1994, p. 248).

I return the me that I lost to myself; I sit on my own side, alongside myself, and in so doing, take back my power.

“Through the operation of rage, the stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power” (Stryker, 1994, p. 249).

We, as shape-shifters, resist abjection by making our own selves. In so doing, we question and deconstruct dominant epistemologies, which assume the existence of an essential “self.” We acknowledge that ideas of what constitutes the human and how we know this are just ideas. We create trans epistemologies, which locate authority to know in the feeling about our gendered selves. I make “freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails” (Anzaldua, 2007, p. 22). I am not only challenging the ability of the person on the bus to know my truths. I am challenging the structures of knowledge and power in this society—the idea of a knowable, objective “Truth.” I am challenging this academy that claims itself as legitimate knower and knowledge producer and its methods that claim to be legitimate ways of knowing and producing knowledge. As a scholar and as a member of society, I produce knowledge. I am inside the politics of representation. And I participate in the politics of the material world. I challenge the structures of knowledge production even as I maintain them. And I question my own abilities to know, as I question others’. In so doing, I reclaim my monstrous self and power in my monstrosity. Yet, this self is not ahistorical or decontextual. As I remake myself, I see and feel the histories, contexts and movements that shape me and the meaning I make of myself and the world.

My embodied, affective resistance is human, more human than violent eyes. They are inhuman in their inhuman-ness, their unhuman performativity and performance.

**Becoming More Monstrous: Being in Movements of Joy, Considering Power**

I am 31; it is May 2011. Life feels fast in this moment, in these movements. It has been 6 weeks and a day since I began testosterone. I have been feeling overwhelming joy in this time. I have heard emotional narratives of other transsexual men and natal females of many genders who start testosterone. Some feel calmer than before. Some feel irritable or angsty. Some lose the facility to cry, and with it, the release crying brings.

In these first weeks, I feel an amazing joy. I am euphoric. I am overjoyed about the changes taking place in my body. The first day of testosterone treatment, I smell different. My face is oily. I have so much energy. This exhilarating auto-poiesis, this self-creation.

On the fifth day of testosterone, standing in line to order dinner in a restaurant, I cannot help but jump up and down. Frenziness in my chest moves into and through my legs and arms. My mouth is smiling of its own accord. Muscles are growing, moving parts of me into a more “male” form. As parts of my body are looking more “male,” yet other parts still appear more “female,” I am becoming more monstrous. And my monstrous joy is a powerfully queer feeling.

A week into my treatment, I run faster and further, and—extraordinarily—am not fatigued. I am in multiple bodies at once. My waifiness as sinewy and wiry is a faggoty masculinity, a boyish femininity. A leaping lizard type of body. What once was Tyrannosaurus Rex-like in masculine female form is returning to become a queerer monster. Hormones moving flesh in my body, shifting like tectonic plates, pushing fat deposits and muscle densities into new formations. A slight monster, evolving quickly, into a denser
monster. Becoming new names, so rarely realized. Voicing sounds never before heard, only almost imagined. Being and becoming many monstrous beasts in amphibious forms. Every week, a new body, a new beast. Living in two realms, moving to the next, learning to breathe and locomote in new ways. We are gating the drab landscape with our many queer bodies. Isn’t that so joyful?

I am going through puberty for the second time. But this time, I am loving every minute of it. I am ecstatic. What is this joy about? What does it mean, to be an “oppressor”?

A distinct discomfort at this thought. A position I want to move out of more than any other. What does it mean, to be an “oppressor”? Must an “oppressor” exist, for oppression to exist? Even as I am becoming, I am the same person I was. I am the same person I was, so there is no inherent power in any body—it is all created in the movement of people perceiving me, and I them; this creates the position. I will now be, in moments, in movements, a recipient of privilege in ways I was not before. In many ways, it feels to me that the world around me is changing, more than I am. How is it to be “oppressor” and yet “oppressed” in the same body, in the same life? What about the distinct person oppression that this binary conception of gender oppression leaves out? It is a distinct experience to feel many sides of the same oppression, in the same body. Am I becoming oppressor in moments when I am read as oppressor, though nothing I am doing is changing? What, then, is oppression? Is it oppression if a “new” “oppressor” is not oppressing, and has suffered the very same oppression? As betweener, we all are in some ways oppressor, and in other ways oppressed.

Oppression is not bodies themselves, it is the institutionalized movement of some bodies against others. Complex structural forces, not individuals, reproduce oppression. In my experience, there is more to power than the appearance of a body. Though I will read more as male, my gender will still be complex. I am a feminine sort of masculine being. I still have my life history of living in the world as female, I still have my feminist perspective, and I still identify with women. As I am aware of male privilege, I still make efforts to challenge sexism and misogyny, just as I always have. So, using the term “oppressor” for me is inaccurate. I resist oppression in how I am conducting research—interviewing trans people about their everyday interactions. How is my betweenness shifting? What is this new betweenness, which makes me? It is multiple betweennesses. The shift depends on the interpretive eye of the beholder. As my legibility as male (rather than female or “indiscernible”) becomes clearer to others, my monstrosity is becoming more visible in the parts of my body that are hidden from view, and less visible in the more exposed parts. I am becoming more monstrous, and I can’t remember when I have felt this happy.

As I embrace my monstrous body, my rage births joy. “In this act of magical transformation, I recognize myself again. I am groundless and boundless movement. I am a furious flow” (Stryker, 1994, p. 247). I return to myself and reclaim my power in the monster that I am being and becoming. “Here at last is the chaos I held at bay. Here at last is my strength. I am not the water—I am the wave, and rage is the force that moves me” (Stryker, 1994, p. 247). Enraged joy fills my monstrous chest. My beating heart reaches out beyond my body, spilling out through the wound in my mouth (Weems 2003). I am being and becoming a being—both human and inhuman. Am I not? I have come from a turning inward of pain, to a joyful rage of autonatality, a contentedly calming storm.

**New Legibilities, New Illegibilities, New Inclusions, New Exclusions**

It is 3.5 months since I began testosterone. I am still 31. I am conducting research—interviewing trans people about their everyday interactions. How is my betweenness shifting? What is this new betweenness, which makes me? It is multiple betweennesses. The shift depends on the interpretive eye of the beholder. As my legibility as male (rather than female or “indiscernible”) becomes clearer to others, my legibility as a person, as human, becomes clearer to others. I experience people in a new way.

As I walk through the airport, people engage with me, their eyes reaching out to welcome me: greeting me, inviting me, including me. I stand in line waiting to order a sandwich. From behind me, a middle-aged, White woman speaks. Her words smile out from her mouth like hands to touch me. “What are you going to order?” Her eyes and face are twinkling, open, soft, engaged. She is smiling at me. Her entire being is winking at me.
I am astonished. Confused. I wonder why she is talking to me. What does she want? Why is she acting so friendly? She does not think I am a monster. Then, a dawning thought: She sees me as a White, able-bodied, cisgendered, straight, male youth. This is the register in which I am legible to her. The first time in 6 years that I have felt this privilege of mirroring; she sees me as one of her kind: normatively gendered. For the first time in my life, I feel how it feels to be seen as a “normal” male body. This is the shape, the articulation of gender normative, White male privilege. Belonging is what this configuration of privilege feels like. The energy moving through the eyes: a way of looking that communicates inclusion, camaraderie, comfort. An ease in the taking of me as one of them.

For this moment, my gender queernesses are unseen. Moving as a gender outcast in the world for 6 years, I became accustomed to people distancing themselves from me: staring at me or avoiding eye contact. Belonging: the privilege of legibility.

Legibility does not always mean friendliness, though. Recognition as male and queer brings another complicated betweenness to navigate. I walk to the park, holding hands with my then-lover, another FTM shape-shifter. A truck barrels past us. A passenger yells, “Faggots!” at us as they pass. I feel a strange mix of excitement and fear. This is the first time I have felt recognized by a stranger for who I am: a queer, socially male being. It is exciting to be validated. It is also the first time I have received this particular form of hate speech. I feel an acute vulnerability and terror. What an interesting welcome into this world of masculinities. I am again, a monster, in a new form.

Tensions of power live in between the different position- alities I inhabit. Though it is precarious, there is a power in “passing” as male—and as a White male in particular. This iterative accomplishment of masculinity is a movement that grants me cisgender male privilege—benefits of the gender power structure. Alternatively, being seen as a gender-defying male threatens the ideology of masculinity and this same gender power structure. Masculinity is inherently fragile because its ideal instantiation is not achievable and therefore, it is always in need of being accomplished (Kaufman, 2001). Gender-fucking while being legible as male is a form of resistance against oppressive gender systems—patriarchy and cisgender normativity—as it makes the fragility of both masculinity and gender as we know it visible. Being gender-illegible in this way can claim a particular power because it disrupts the ideas of gender stability and masculinity. However, gender-fucking and “passing” as male are both precarious; in moments of trans visibility or “discovery,” I am vulnerable to violent gender regulations. Thus, I receive particular forms of power in movements when I incite or escape confusion in others. I also always face risks. What creates vulnerability also threatens the gender power structure.

My betweenness is moving. I am a multiple betweener. Receiving belongingness privilege when I am seen as a straight male, the me I have been my whole life up until now is angry at the me I am today. This old me is still fully me, though others could not and cannot see. I occupy new illegibilities: the erasure of my gender complexity and of my history, the erasure of my humanness in my new, more masculine, queer monstrosity, the erasure of me as myself. I do not know what to make of these new illegibilities. They come about because of cisnormativity, the assumption that people are all cisgender. Few imagine possibilities for multigendered identities and histories. Few imagine we might be trans. Being seen as a straight male frustrates me even as it protects me; being seen as a gay male frightens me even as it validates me. I am not transitioning as much as the world is transitioning around me.

**Becoming More Monstrous, Becoming More Separated**

Six months on testosterone. In boxing class at the gym. I’m helping Bill rig the punching bags. He addresses me, looking me in the eye: “So, you’re in graduate school?” I say: “Yes, I’m in sociology.” As I speak, he attends to my chest, as if it is speaking. I feel distinctly uncomfortable. My head feels dull and thick. I slow down. I feel like I am not who I am.

**Alienation**

*n.* Being isolated from a group; loss of identity in which the self seems unreal, thought to be caused by difficulties in relating to society.

Dissociation is a familiar sensation. An odd feeling of being displaced out of my body—that my chest is not mine. It is an uneasy feeling of deterritorialization: feeling forced to psychically vacate myself, because I am being taken for something I am not. Losing myself a little bit for a moment each time I encounter interactions like this one, when I am scrutinized.

Since starting testosterone, my chest is the most conspicuous remaining feminine marker on my body. The thing that most easily reveals my monstrosity now. Receiving stares into the chest made me squirm before I came into my trans-ness, when I was female-identified. A life of familiarity with everyday sexual objectification. In this moment, I experience a mix of feelings. Indignity. Disbelief. Anger. For me, gender dysphoria is a result of interactive experiences like these.

This intrusion is a normal way of interacting with me. People are not hateful, or even overtly transphobic. They just look at my body in a way that disregards the fact that I might feel uncomfortable with them looking at me that way. They look at my face, then my chest, then my face. It is a kind of double take specific to transmasculine experience.
transmasculine-specific microaggression. I am still squirming inside, but it would create more discomfort for me, were I to say anything about his action. It would draw more attention to the issue that I want to be a nonissue.

The class comes in. I feel the energy of the teacher looking at me with wonderment. He’s not looking at anyone else this way. As the class starts, we begin calisthenics, and minutes pass, the students silently following me with their eyes as they exercise. I have everyone’s attention, and I do not want it. I try to move my body in a “masculine” way, punching the bag, weaving. Trying to convince them that I am not interesting enough to be worth looking at.

They feel entitled to look at me, still. After 6 months on testosterone, my voice is deeper, my face and body are more masculinized, I am growing more facial hair. And yet, after 6 months, I am still a spectacle. I’m looking more like a guy but something about me is still feminine enough, makes me monstrous enough, to make them wonder. No one in these attentive audiences says anything, but their silence does. The silent stare is a statement. Looking and not speaking is also speaking.

After 6 months on testosterone, how am I now? I am again and still, a betweener. I feel like a different creature from “women” or “men.” My gender and sexed transience move my betweennesses around into new configurations. My sex-gender journeying shifts the shape of my social being in other ways, too. I feel this shifting through the energy of how other people interact with me. I resist the inhumanity of their eyes. I am fully human in my gender-fucking, transsexualizing monstrosity.

**Humiliation, Humility, Humanity**

It is 9 months since I began testosterone. I am still 31, almost 32. It is my first time designing and teaching my own course on the sociology of gender. I shave my beard when I return from break. I do not like how food gets stuck in it, and it grows in patchy, so I want to try for a clean start with the semester. I soon realize how important facial hair is for male gender attribution.

I go out to eat with a friend. We sit in the cozy, dimly lit restaurant. The server, an apparent young, White, pony-tailed woman with a spritely smile bounces toward our table: “Hello, Ladies!” Startled, I exchange a look with my friend. *Ouch.* This hasn’t happened for a while. My jaw is tight. I feel like I am not really there. Invisible and unrecognized. I feel like a monster. Alienated. And humiliated. Again.

I hold the feelings like they are a plate of 20 candles burning, hot wax dripping onto my hands and pooling on the floor. I don’t know how to not hold the feelings, the candles, the fire. I am used to it. A lifetime of learning how to hold burning candles. Not knowing how to put them down, how to ask someone else to hold them, how to put them out. We order drinks, and the server flits away. My friend asks: “Do you want me to kick her ass?”

It is only the server. She has no idea she has caused me discomfort. She didn’t mean any harm. I do not want to draw attention to myself. I do not know how to tell her that the rules of gender ascription just failed with me. She made a mistake. I do not want her to feel embarrassed. Even though, I do. My female socialization is driving. So I say: “It’s not worth it.”

I stop by the drugstore to buy some last minute groceries. Standing at the checkout, the cashier looks at me. He hesitates. Searching my face, my body for cues. “That’ll be $5.45,” he tells me. As a guy, I estimate that he normally interacts with men and women in different ways: in a collegial way with men, and in a reserved, polite way with women. He cannot categorize me, so he does not know how to interact with me. Collegial? Reserved? He does not know how to address me. Am I a “sir” or a “ma’am”? The rules for gender attribution that usually help him are not working now. I pay. “Thanks, have a good day,” he opts for a neutral salutation at a moment when “sir” or “ma’am” is customary. I say gruffly, “You too.” I hope that he can tell by my voice how I want to be read.

On Thursday, in my gender class, we discuss transgender issues and possibilities for “undoing” gender in order to undermine gender inequality (Deutsch, 2007). My students share with me how anxious they feel when they see some- one they cannot categorize as male or female. They want to interact with them appropriately, but they do not know how.

After feeling so much pain when experiencing others’ fumbling treatment of me, I soften. Many people are doing their best. They do not mean to be disrespectful. They just do not know how to follow rules of gender attribution when people break rules of gender performance. I ask them how we might be able to undo gender if we are constantly trying to categorize people. Is there a way we can interrupt our own process of wanting to place people in binary gender categories?


And

| Still |

**Subjugation.**
The origin of the word “humility” is the Latin “humus,” which means earth. “Humility,” “humiliation,” “human” all come from “humus”: bringing to earth through different journeys, different affectivities. I am privileged: I have access to resources to transform myself. Many do not. I am humbled, even as I am angered, experiencing the privileges accorded to White maleness. I am humbled by my encounters with people who do their best, but are still confused, interacting with me.

**Rejection and Reconnection in New Bodies**

It has been almost a year that I have been on T. I am about to turn 32, about to finish my 3rd year of doctoral study. I walk across the space, my luggage rolling behind me. Sunlight streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. I am looking for her. A part of me fears seeing people I used to know. I wonder whether they would recognize me. I hope I do not see anyone because I do not want to deal with their awkwardness. I am slightly afraid that she will not recognize me.

I spot her. She is smiling, sparkling. She recognizes me. I smile too. Her small body looks more faded than it used to. More wispy. She stands with her hands clasped. “Hi! How was your flight?” she asks. I say, “Not too bad.” I hug her. She feels older to me. We walk to the car. She asks what I want to eat, where I want to go, what I want to do when I am in town. I am not sure.

“We’re going to Steve and Maureen’s for Christmas Eve,” she says. I picture the scene at Steve and Maureen’s. Dainty White women in sundresses, long bleached blonde hair, paint visible on their faces, painting their faces with smiles. Chatting about polite things: families, children, events at the church. Acting interested. Making their bodies small, perching uncomfortably on chairs, moving calculatedly, holding themselves the way they hold their plates of food: tentatively, carefully, precariously. Aware of the space around them. The group of men moves more deliberately, standing as if they own the place, gesturing with sweeping hands, seeming at ease. Equally interested in the ball game on TV as they are in interacting with each other. They hold their beers and their bodies as if they mean it, as if they are meant to be there. As if the action in the space moves around them. Exclaiming collectively when something of consequence happens on the screen. A moving body of bodies.

This scene, this place, these people. I feel uncomfortable thinking about going to this event. There is no place for my reality there. This differently gendered transsexual I am. I do not see others like myself there. Others like my many selves. The places I go are foreign to these people. They do not ask about them. When I say I am in school, they ask which college? They call me “young man” and think I am that. No one sees that I am an adult. They erase my life history. The last 10 years, a third of my life. They ask how many years I have left before I finish. No one asks about what my work is about. No one asks about my personal life. Perhaps the idea makes them uncomfortable. They do not want to acknowledge that a queer transsexual exists in the midst of their middle class, White, straight, Christian life. I feel invisible and conspicuous at the same time. I do not feel free to bring myself into the space. There, I try to hold my body in a way that does not impose on their culture, but I do no matter what. My very being is monstrous there. They tell me in indirect ways that I am a monster.

I jolt back to the present moment. We are getting in her car. She says, “We’re going to the Christmas Eve service at Someone’s church.” I am not sure I want to go, but am curious, interested. But perhaps I will not have to go.

The next day she tells me when I wake up that we are not going to the new church for Christmas Eve. Why? I ask. She refuses to answer. I ask why several more times, and she does not look at me. She looks pained. She says, “Someone is worried.” And I should talk to Someone about it. “OK” I say. I am surprised. I did not anticipate that this would happen.

My phone is on silent mode but I see it ring. Someone is calling me. I wonder how this conversation will go. I answer. “Hi,” I brave it. Someone says, “Why do you want to come when you haven’t wanted to in years?” No greeting. No hello. No “How are you?” No indication Someone wants to interact. Strictly business. Someone seems distrustful, defended, worried. I say, “I thought it would be easier, a new space. People will not know me. They wouldn’t know anything about me.” Someone says, “I am worried that people will give you dirty looks.” Fear of my monstrosity. Fear of others’ feelings, fear of my feelings. Fear that they will hurt me. And couching discomfort in a shield of other people.

“But no one would know anything about me.” I try to reassure Someone. “People just see me as a guy now. They have no clue about my history.” Someone does not tell me I am unwelcome. But Someone does not say I am welcome, either. Someone says “I told people in the church you are a woman.” I feel foggy. I thought I told Someone I was trans. Someone’s church. I am not sure I want to go, but am curious, interested. But perhaps I will not have to go.

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desired love and friendship, and I was still spurned” (Shelley, 2003, p. 211).

I feel pain, like tearing. My heart feels like it is slowly tearing from being stretched so much, from this distancing. The distance that I too create. I pull away because I do not feel at ease, I do not get acceptance here. I so fear their rejection, that I withdraw from them, and then I feel alone. Feeling their pain, feeling my pain. Their feeling of loss makes me feel lost. Now they feel defensive.

I hear Someone say that I “should consider what I am doing to the family.” Like Frankenstein’s monster, I wonder, “Is there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me?” (Shelley, 2003, p. 211). I am at a loss. I do not feel like I am doing anything to anyone. I am not doing anything. What I am doing feels no different than eating—I must do it to nourish myself, to be healthy, to survive. I obviously eat; I obviously transition. Transitioning does not feel like transitioning as much as it feels like others are coming closer into seeing me the way I see myself. I feel hollow.

Why does Someone respond this way to me? Perhaps Someone sees my transition as a self-re-creation—as a challenge to God similar to how Victor Frankenstein’s creation of life in his monster dispenses with God (Ozdemir, 2003). According to Stryker and others, “Frankenstein’s monster is his own dark, romantic double, the alien Other he constructs and upon which he projects all he cannot accept in himself; indeed, Frankenstein calls the monster ‘my own vampire, my own spirit set loose from the grave’” (Shelley, 2003, p. 74, cited in Stryker, 1994, p. 238). Is Someone projecting onto me her own gender complexity, which she cannot accept in herself? Does Someone see my transition as an abandonment of my parents, as a being they created? As an abandonment of Someone, herself? We were formed in parallel anatomical sex configuration, born to the same family. Certain aspects of my body appear different, now. Someone does not seem to see that this transition is me, that I am still me.

This conflict reflects the tensions between different knowledge about gender. According to scholars, gender is a social system of oppression and an interactive process involving performances and interpretations of bodies. Trans communities know gender as a sense of selfhood, which in some cases, may shift. However, Someone appears to understand gender in the culturally conventional way—as an individual’s essence, equivalent to anatomical sex. For Someone, by transitioning, I have become an entirely different person. Perhaps Someone sees my transition as a rejection of myself, and thus, of our relationship. And so Someone is rejecting me. This is what transgender oppression feels like. Though I am hurt, I try again.

“Would you like to get together while I’m in town?” I venture an invitation. Even after the rejection. “We’re all booked.” Someone is cold. Like ice. I wonder how Someone is feeling underneath the ice. I say, “I understand. I won’t come.” And I hang up the phone. There is no space for me in this part of myself, this part of my family’s self, this space between us, anymore. The glimmer of belonging I once felt, momentarily, in this community, is gone. I did feel welcome there one time. No longer. I must run away from this part of myself. I must save myself.

I did not know that leaving the girl I used to be also meant leaving relationships. I should have known. By transitioning, I alleviate the profound discomfort I feel being seen as female, and in so doing, I create profound discomfort in others. Displacing my dysphoria relocates it in them. But why? I feel exasperated. It is not their life. Why do they think I am becoming a different person? I am the same as I have been. I am just making it possible for them to see me. This crushes them because they have a fantasy of who I am. Otherwise it would not bother them.

But I am not only me. I am part of the space between us. And I am shifting that space. And that space is part of them too. In transitioning, I am transitioning them. I am monstering us all. Writing this, I question whether I should write these words. What right do I have, to fix these moments in time, to write about family in this way? How would you feel, if you read what I write? Why do I do this? I am searching for the parts of myself that are lost. Parts of you and me you do not let me see because you feel too much pain. Too much fear. Too much shame.

I go to spend the night with my friend, Rachel. We make latkes using my mother’s mother’s recipe. Light candles. Sing blessings over the candles. The light, the sound refract around the space, reorganizing the fragments of me that I cannot see. In this ritual, I reconnect to myself, to my past life, to all the lives before me, who made me, to our past life, when Rachel knew me as a girl. I bring our past connection into the present one. I ask my mother and my aunt to teach me. We make latkes using my mother’s mother’s recipe and the same grater that she used. And we sing blessings over the Chanukah candles.

This part of me I find again. This part of me I have never had. I find belonging here, in this forbidden part of myself. Am I an imposter? I wonder. The unfamiliar Hebrew words feel right, the feeling feels right. Kind of like my transition. New and unfamiliar, but old and right just the same. Always forthcoming and already past.

At the end of Shelley’s story, Frankenstein dies of exhaustion after pursuing the monster with the goal of ending the life he created. With no hope of obtaining a female like himself to share his life, who he had asked Frankenstein to create, the monster departs, declaring his intent to take his own life, and finally find relief from his miserable isolation. As the monster appears to exist in this story as a projection of Frankenstein himself, not in his own right, and as self-destruction is a form of internalized oppression, I want to write an alternate ending to a story about monstrosity. I
want to find selfhood, love, and resistance, and hope for justice within monstrosity. To find these things, I look to a contemporary transsexual work of art.

In *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Hedwig, a transsexual woman, and her band offer a take on love that we might consider in finding freedom. Their song “The Origin of Love” (Trask, 1999) adapts a story from Plato’s *Symposium*, describing a time before love existed when there were three sexes—the female–female, the male–male, and the male–female or androgynous—doubled people with two faces, and two bodies in one. When they planned to revolt, Zeus severed them, dividing them into two separate beings: our current bodily configurations. The words describe the origin of what love is:

Last time I saw you we had just split in two.
You were looking at me. I was looking at you.
You had a way so familiar, but I could not recognize,
’Cause you had blood on your face; I had blood in my eyes.
But I could swear by your expression that the pain down in your soul was the same
as the one down in mine.
That’s the pain, cuts a straight line down through the heart; we called it love.
So we wrapped our arms around each other, trying to shove ourselves back together.
We were making love. Making love.

Here, there is a familiarity between people who presumably see “their other half” and the pain of separation is the desire to be one person again, which draws people to love. Thus, separation is where love comes from. Besides the origin of love, the trauma of severance in this story can also represent the creation of and segregation between socially differentiated groups: racial groups, social classes, sexual beings, colonizers and indigenous, able-bodied and disabled people, gendered beings—cis men and women, trans and cis people, and any other combination of those.

We experience social and collective traumas in our bodies in forms of chronic stress and at times, in gaps in memory or consciousness—disconnection from ourselves, and at times from each other. Perhaps blood on the face symbolizes social subjugation; perhaps blood in the eyes symbolizes the inability to see the Other’s humanity or one’s role in perpetuating oppression, such as is often the case for people in privileged positions. Though the speaker here cannot “recognize” the Other, she senses a familiarity. Through the difference between the two, the speaker feels a resonance with the same pain of separation that they both feel, and the pain of separation is itself love. The potential for love is created by the pain of separation, manifest in oppression, and taking place in interpersonal rejection, intrapsychic fragmentation, and institutionalized social devastation, even war. Love itself is an antidote to the pain of separation. The original androgynous doubled being is love between men and women embodied in the form of singular trans beings; the all-male and all-female beings are love between men and between women, embodied in the forms of singular male and female beings, respectively.

This story speaks to the pain of oppression that all involved experience—both oppressors and oppressed—perhaps speaking to our status as betweeners. Uniting in love is a response to the deep pain we feel in our separation, and is an attempt to merge again to repair the wounds of separation. Trans people, by integrating different gendered parts of ourselves, perhaps regenerate some of the power Zeus aimed to immobilize when he separated the androgynous being into two. Thus, the monstrosity of androgyny exists in every being—as being formerly joined to another gender if not in current multigendered form—and can be a cathartic form of resistance. Perhaps we can find freedom from pain through attaching again—to the fragmented parts of ourselves and to those who are separated from us. Perhaps we can claim the Others within ourselves, in our own betweennesses, and claim other Others through restoring their place within us and our place within them to reconnect and rebuild our/oursevles.

I want to claim all the rejected parts of me. All the dis-dain, all of the shame. Claim all the ways I am Other. Bring them into my full being. I claim friends as family. I try to connect, as much as we both will allow, with my blood family. Fighting the legacies of institutional trauma. Growing my fragmented selves and fragmented relationships together.

**A New Belonging**

I have been on T for a year and 6 weeks. I am 32 now. I have just finished my doctoral coursework and my 3rd year in graduate school. I run, in the crisp, warm morning air. As I lope past a jogging track, a man rounding the bend smiles and waves at me, calling out, “Take care, brother!”

I am floored by my feeling. I have never been called “brother” by a stranger. I never knew how it could be, how it could feel, in relation with him. A new sensation of belonging. He does not know the feelings this evokes in me. Recognition as male. Embodied feeling of brotherhood. Connection across color lines. When I read as female to others in the world, Black men—or any men—did not greet me as warmly. Probably because they have been taught not to.
In the U.S. historical context of race relations, White people punish Black men for giving attention to White women. In sometimes murderous ways. Can being read as a White male perhaps open up a feeling of relative safety between myself and men of color? Where they might feel more comfortable being friendly with me, because no one would claim they tried to rape me? In transitioning gender, I feel that I am transitioning race, because White maleness is socially different from White femaleness. I am learning more about the intricacies of male Whiteness and the devastating manifestations of racism and sexism. I feel in my body the pain of separation between White women and Black men. I only notice this extent of pain because I can compare it to the connection that I am now feeling, being seen as a young, White man by an older, Black man. Connection and belonging is what White male privilege feels like.

There is loss and gain in this becoming. I am still a betweener, though my positionalities are shifting. I am moving into a heightened, at times visible, embodied monstrosity. With it come inclusions and fears. With this sometimes less visible monstrosity comes a sometime privilege of being enveloped back into “humanity”—knowing so recently and intimately the feeling of not belonging.

I must always hold my many experiences with different subjugations close to my heart. My gender that refuses assimilation is my home, a wound that runs down the length of my body.

My gendered body is a wound that runs down the length of society, embodying the trauma of gender, and the separation that cisgender normativity and all systems of oppression create. The assumptions that cisgender people are normal, and that trans people simultaneously do not exist and are “crazy” and inferior plays out on my body and through my interpersonal interactions. My body “wounds” society, disrupting normative ideas of gender, challenging the system. My body, in its ambiguity, brings the separation between binary genders to the fore. And I feel the effects of these social disruptions in my body in the emotional wounds of traumatic stress.

Cisgender normativity creates separation. Separation from myself. Separation from you. Your own separation from the gendered complexity within you. We are not separate beings. We are a living, breathing collectivity, we are a body. The idea of difference is a trauma both on our gendered selves and on our collective body. My gendered body is a wound; it is also a suture healing itself. I am trying to put myself back together. I am trying to sew us back together. The betweenness between us. Our betweenness, what separates us and what joins us. Our common wound of separation. And you? Are you also trying?

I am writing into the spaces between us. I speak through the wound in my mouth gives me back my power as the monster I am becoming. Always forthcoming and already past, the wounds of my gendered life are rebirthing me and reshaping themselves. And now, I move into new movements. I make new monstrosities, new sensations. Rage, joy, insight, humility. Ever-shifting relationalities. We find connection and reconnection. And we make—and we take—new places.

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Notes
1. I use the term “transmasculine” to denote the general gender grouping I place myself within. Some in this group might also describe themselves as “female-to-male (FTM) spectrum” or “masculine-of-center.” The adjective “trans” can describe people whose gender and/or sex identities, expressions, bodies, and/or histories depart from normative conceptions.
2. Transsexuals are targets of trans-specific hate violence in addition to discrimination. For more information, see Kidd and Witten (2008).
3. “Cisgender”: nontransgender. “Cis,” a prefix used in chemistry to refer to molecular structure, means “on the same side”; “cisgender” refers to people whose gender identity and expression match their assigned gender.
4. How do I know how I am being read when I state that others cannot categorize me? Can I really claim to know what these others know or aim to know? This is an important epistemological question. I do not know in every case, but the repetitive evidence that accompanies many baffled expressions—such as stares at my chest—lead me to gather that this apparent confusion is about my gender.
5. Incidentally, there is no reason for my transition. This seems to be a question that many people are curious about, and I have no answer for them. What I can share is that how I felt about myself just started shifting until it was a different shape than before. I did technically decide to start hormone therapy; that felt like a natural step for me, like how I presume puberty is for most people. I started T because it became more and more painful for me to be invisible and disregarded—perhaps some of that comes through in my story here. If you are asking this question—why did you transition?—I encourage you to question yourself: Why do I not transition? Then, you might see the absurdity of the question. Obviously, you do not transition because it is not you. I transition because to transition is to be me.

References


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