Transfiguring desire: Divining the origin of species

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Transfiguring desire: Divining the origin of species

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ABSTRACT

In this piece, we combine autoethnographic and poetic methods/genres to examine intimate and social experiences we have had as two transmasculine queers with complex sexual and gender histories in an intergenerational relationship. If queerness/transness is a “species,” our title, playing on Darwin, promises an answer to oft-asked problematic questions of queer/trans origins. Refusing to address this question, we instead turn Darwin on himself and examine intimate moments in our lives to show how we have experienced the constant formation and personal evolution of desire and identity. Tracing memories reaching back 28 years for one of us and 58 years for the other, we describe our shifting desire and embodiment and locate ourselves in lesbian, gay, trans, and queer histories. We next investigate how illness, disability, and age difference in effect and shape the ways we understand and relate to each other and intersubjectively make meaning in our present relationship. Our inquiry illustrates our complex positionalities, examines how “dyke legacies” are embodied in our affection and interdependence, and challenges biologized, cisnormative assumptions. Thus, a knowledge formation starting from embodied trans-trans intimate lives can challenge the naturalness and intransigence assumptions in dominant notions of gender, heterosexuality, bodies, relationality, identity, and kinship.

KEYWORDS

Transgender desire; embodiment; intergenerational relationship; disability; queer; gender fluidity

I. Intimations of Desire (History and the Laws of Variation)

1988. I have a peanut butter cookie from the cafeteria on my lunch tray. It is my favorite. Patrick sits across from me. He has big beautiful lips and nice long eyelashes. We are talking. He asks me if he can have my cookie. I say, No. But I don’t eat it. I save it for later because I actually want to give it to him. The lunch bell rings and I put the cookie in my sweatshirt pocket. I carry it all day with me and it crumbles in there. Now no one can eat it. I watch Patrick’s mom drive up and pick him up after school. I feel so sorry as I hold the crumbs in my pocket. I don’t know
how to tell Patrick I wanted him to have my cookie. Somehow my regret feeling becomes a love feeling.

For the next three years I love him. I never tell him.

1959 in the back of a car a dungeon inside my dream inside a shadow the need to pee an elastic film a balloon with no exit a suffocating dark inside a small stone room a night of sweat against a rack a reptile of cold naked and alone a boy tied to a bar like a pony under a whip she delights in my struggle to stand upright to control myself until control becomes impossible to find a way to pull my hands down to my sides

The first desire a fist a finger a thigh a caress a taunt stronger than admonishment found in a boy’s eyelashes that would be me be mine skinny with priestly hair uncopied and undressed as watched as hunted as imprisoned as rescued as touched as wanderer as lost as fuck

It is 1991, the summer in between elementary and middle school. There is a girl who looks like a boy at camp and I can’t stop staring at her. She is so beautiful and handsome. I am beside myself. I want to be near her but I don’t know what to say to her. She is in the bathroom so I go into the bathroom. I brush my hair. She brushes her teeth. Later, at the dance, she dances with a boy much taller than her. It is hard to pull my eyes away from her. I wonder to myself, Am I a lesbian? I know that word but I don’t know what it means to be a lesbian. The thought flits away and hides for the next ten years.

1964 on the green lawns of Cleveland a hill where my mother plants pachysandra I skid through the dirt into the trench of a war the war on the grass the missiles in the sea the war in Dallas the camps not 20 years gone I take off my shirt to tie it around my neighbor’s limb a boy soldier with me in the fire plants cling to the blood on his arm hanging imaginary off the bone

All through middle school, I have a crush on a boy I call Mrs. R, because his name starts with R and if anyone were to find the notes I write to my friend Patricia about him, no one would know who Mrs. R is, and they would probably not think it is a boy. Mrs. R is a surfer and I really want to learn how to surf, but every time she asks me if I want to go surfing, I say, No. I don’t know why, because more than anything I want to go surfing with her, but I still say, No. I try to be normal when she talks to me, but I get quiet and don’t feel like myself. I want to get to know her
better, but something in me silences me. I find a dandelion and blow the little seeds everywhere, wishing that Mrs. R will come and kiss me by the end of summer. On the last day of summer, I put on my favorite green dress and wait for her on the porch, but she never comes, and we never go surfing either.

1967 my arm too falls off the bone up the road toward the flowers on the ceiling of Severance Hall my dress a forced shame as I look at the doors and consider escape running naked into the streets to the boots the guns the blood on the pavement not 3 blocks away then a legato of jealousy for the boy who plays on stage his body protected under a white shirt bowtie and tails roving through Dvorak and what is between his legs pushing into the back of his instrument playing through his knees his sex spread and hidden by a plank of sonorous wood

1994. My first year of high school. I meet a boy with a mop of brown curls on my cross-country team. One day when we are at the library after school, he asks me if I want to go to the homecoming dance. I feel sort of like noodles because no one has ever invited me to a dance before. I say, Yes. I give him a little hug and rush off. The next day, when we are sitting across from each other at a desk in the library, he asks if I want to kiss. I say, Ok, and then we lean forward toward each other. His lips are very wet and it feels a little weird, messy like eating a peach. He tells me he loves me and I say, You too, even though I don’t love him. He pushes his tongue into my mouth. My mouth does not like it, but I tell my mouth, Play along, so it does. When we sit with my friends at lunch I am very quiet. I am not sure why. Two months later he tells me that he does not want to go out with me anymore. A new pain I have never felt. Sort of numb. Then, a dull and soon a searing ache.

1969 up the road under the smell of pine I capture her in my camera and hold her close our skins our scent under a thick blanket of needles and wine

1999. My second year of college, I spend Thanksgiving with Madeline’s family and the weekend with Tim’s in a cabin up the mountain. Madeline has to leave early. Tim and his brother are rubbing my feet in the hot tub and he takes off his bathing suit. Tim says, Madeline and I have an open relationship. I want both brothers’ skins on mine but I restrain myself, because of the terror I feel when I imagine telling Mine. When I get home later, I tell Madeline what happened, but she looks down, We don’t have an open relationship. I am glad I did not go there now. She is glad I told her, but I can see the pain in her eyes. She gives me a back rub, but I should be the one rubbing her back. It occurs to me. I would be with both of them.
But I am already with Mine. Madeline is short and sexy. Mine is tall. He is in the military. I love it when he lies down looking up at me with his beautiful eyes. Mine asks me what kind of hairstyle I want him to sport. I tell him, *Long hair.* He doesn’t like that answer. I don’t tell him that I love it when he looks up at me.

Absolved of her dresses her jewelry her sex at intermission I watch my mother flirt with my father’s friends absolved when my body runs into home base absolved when I lose my glasses and stare into the sky as the ball comes down past my glove absolved when I am a muscle who wants my sister to wrestle absolved when she does not and I put her in a headlock to pull her to the ground absolved when I rush down a hill with a rifle-like branch a body a girl a stance absolved when the socks the patent leather shoes when my pale face absolved when I pull down my neighbor’s pants absolved when my neck falls in line with my mother’s gaze when her cigarette smoke blows above my head when I take off my shoes and walk with those tiny white socks into the mud absolved when I stumble into the kitchen absolved in the dirt of revolt

I am 21 and it is 2001. I have just broken up with Mine. I meet her in the garden. Patty says, *Both of you will live here next year.* We shake hands. She looks like a boy. So attractive. Although no one says it, I know she is a lesbian. After dinner one day, I am rubbing her shaved head as it rests in my lap on the couch outside. She asks if I want to come in with her and cuddle. So I do. We climb into the loft. She plays Joan Osbourne, “What if God Was One of Us?” *Joan Osbourne is bisexual,* she says. She plays the song over and over. My hair is long falling all around her face. It is a beautiful night with her, so soft, so careful. She asks me many times, *Are you ok? Is this ok?* No one has been so respectful with me. She seems embarrassed about wanting me, she seems surprised that I am willing, but I am not embarrassed, and I am not surprised at myself. In the morning, I get up and go to class. When I return, she is still in bed, and I climb back into bed with her. She is surprised and happy. She gets up to take a pill, an antidepressant. I have never seen one of those before. I fall on my face in love with her that morning. The smell of her hair product mixed with the beer and cigarettes on her breath. I melt. I sort of like helping her up off the bathroom floor in the morning, where she falls asleep sometimes.

One evening, she kisses Valerie right in front of me. It hurts but I still want to be close to her. I can’t help it and I can’t stop myself. When she sees me crying, she says, *You’re so femme!* I don’t know what that means. She tells me, *You are not my type, goddess body is my type.* I am lean and muscular. I don’t know what goddess body means. She says to everyone, *It has been so long since I have had an orgasm.* I feel embarrassed. It seems like it is my fault.
She finds someone her type. Now, when I see her, I still want to smell her, but I do not allow myself. One part of me is protecting another part of me. I am learning. At some point after the memories of her face fade, I can still remember her smell and her irresistible mischievous grin. But I am glad she moved on from me. Because now I can move on from her.

Years later, I wonder, was I a straight girl to her? I think of the years that passed, my movements of embodiments, in many skins yet all the same skin, and I wonder who she is now.

With George in his parents' room where I crave his eyelashes his boots his cock and instead he wants my ass my legs my dress when I want his pants his ears I want his maps his hitchhiking thumb to summer camp and Lyn on the bed her cello in the corner her thighs around mine when a gallon of red wine takes us to a car and I wake to vomit in the woods to Rob's bed where he brings me off to the sound of Tab her dorm room above mine where I hear her walk and walk and close her drawers then open the door to make me believe I smell her through my ceiling her floor in another dorm with Luke our furtive lunch his small cock a pleasure in a night with Chris and Stefan her red pubes holding his seizures as he comes in bed with Ari where I want her hair her shirts her narrow hips when we throw dirt under a rubber mat and do not call ourselves man or woman lesbian or queer with Brett on a dirt road away from the coast into the deep pines and rivers of Labrador where she whistles to bring down the northern lights but fears recording devices and hidden cameras as we drink and fuck in a company hotel I turn to the high fjords a barefoot run at midnight hearing loons across the lake and the bed of a boy named John after eating smoked caribou and bread

It is 2004 and I am in San Francisco. I ask him if he wants to have tea one day. I mean as a friend but he means as a date. He touches the back of my head at the diner after our genderqueer support group meeting and it sends shivers down my legs. At my temp job he tells me to do pushups and then email him back. I share, This plant is sacred, but he is not listening to me. He rips it out of the ground and laughs, Let's have a sword fight! It is a date, so I play along, even though it hurts my self to not say, Ouch, on behalf of the plant. He holds me down and kisses me. It is soft even though he is a boy. I am not sure I like kissing him. But later I like it, a lot. Some time later, I understand what he might have felt in new waves of testosterone.

II. Intimations of Love (Mutual Affinities of Organic Beings)

I wrote to the universe and asked for you and she told me go back she said no she did not say she pushed me the force pushing me to go back so I did I
listened the body that was me returned the knuckles that were mine knocked
and I was so glad you were awake

When you see me what do you see when you hear me what do
you hear when you touch the room when you know my body
when you tease when you see me in the dark

We looked and we saw we were both there we were strangers or we were new
friends the meeting of hearts the joining of bodies the beauty the hush the
ears you pulled it all out of me you called me sweetheart you were alone I felt
welcome to invite you to me and I felt invited to invite myself to you you told me
but you did not tell me your body told my body it was to be this we were to be
us

When I exist as us when I know you through your sex when I
call for you when I let you when it is over when daylight
when night

The most exquisite part of your body is the place you say fell with some
embarrassment I am beside myself I almost cannot touch for I will fall into
myself this is what life is for touching where you are shy the softness of your
back side

When your signs without swagger when muscle when animal
when cock when the fur along your calves when your belly
holds my back when your legs when your feet when the age
of you and the age of me when my beard when the rise of your
pelted cheek

The you of you your gentle eyes your witness your vulnerable head your
serious mouth your contented sigh the small of you the you who likes to be
squeezed the exposed invitation to trace the lines we’ve done before to listen to
top to stay to arrive when my mouth must have your mouth we extend our
inquiries to derive our selves the me the you and the us how we do this how
we know this an embodied knowing a knowledge of self a knowledge of us this
us the unique all the flavors and the usual your dimples when you chew your
cough your farts your sliding eye comfort me you are my favorite

When cock that is my trans cock when the hollows where you
fuck when the muscles of your arms when we give when we
hold each other at night when the currents of our genders
when I am at home when I no longer wonder what I know

I forgot my phone number but you remembered it you lost your phone and
I found it I could not stand so you cooked you could not see so I drove I
could not look so you told me you could not lift so I carried I could not
search so you retrieved I fell I wept I could not speak so you waited and you
listened

How is the body when I walk how is the body my heart how is the
body when I sing how is my body my body how is the
body free from fear how is my body you how are you my body
how do you touch me when I hear your touch how do I hear
you hearing how is my ear your chest how is your chest hair
beneath my fingers

You were here and you are here you sat with me when I could not sit you lay
with me when I could only lie you came with me to all the doctors you fought
the hospital you stayed with my shell when I was no longer there when I lost
my own life but was still alive you helped me bring myself back to life

You were bold and you were gentle you suffered the torture of times the pain of
the past the undeserved punishment when lovers were warriors and now my
love is gratitude yet never enough to undo the pain

How do I know when naked how does your body enter mine
how when I lose control how do I listen how do I imagine how
do I love how do I know what you know how do I roll over in
the morning how am I still intact when you walk down the stairs
how do I know your skin the hair on your legs

I curl my limbs around you my baby my creature my succinct body and yours
I cannot hold you enough can I hold you can I breathe into your voice can
your mouth shape my mouth can you be my sighted guide can I carry you with
me can I fold you into me can I keep you

III. Intimations of Time (on the Imperfection of the Geological Record)

I have known you without a knowledge of age when you
walk through the door the pause in my whats form a kiss when I
stop saying what when breath becomes a touch when a
shoulder and the line of your chin a two-hour night becomes a
cross country drive  when a dance on a mountain becomes a
refuge and a partner  a smile a knock on the door

Age is a kink perhaps  a kink of time  the kink of age  it just is  like you said that
one time to the insurance company on the phone  your body just is  and this  age
just is  we happen to be different in age  but  we have both been older than they
think we are  and  our bodies still tell the same truths

What kink of age  what kink of ability  what kink of gender  what kink
of sex  what kink of heritage  what kink of family  what kink of genes  what
kink of Ashkenazi  what kink of memory  what kink of pleasure

The see of you  my violet crust  your skin  my beard  your
beard  the hair above my cock  sometimes you are my father
sometimes you are my son  sometimes you are a dancer
sometimes I am sodden  sometimes I am younger  sometimes I
am embarrassed to be loved  sometimes my skin begins with
you  sometimes my chin crumbles along my neck  sometimes
the wrinkles along your eyes  sometimes I am your age  four
years sober in Williamsburg Brooklyn  1990 we are two lovers
walking upstate to the west

When at 36 I asked

When you are sick  will I care for you

When I am ill  will you care for me

When we kiss  will kisses last

Will we move again

Will I follow

Will I carry our child

Will joy

Will poems

Will I carry you  will I carry our baby

Will our child be a road

Will our child have a world
Will our child be a future
Will our love be our child
Will we
Will the quiet woods

Can we have a child can we have a future can we be the parents

We have seen the wind the rain the snow the frost we have seen the oceans on all sides and the earths in between and beyond we have slept in waters and waded in beds we have beaten the sun we have survived the bugs and the bacteria

We seek the hope of heat the promise of trees the freedom of water the comfort of wind the joy of sauerkraut at a table in a room as light as the day is long the possibility of a seahorse when the mercury leaves the body and it is safe to open the window

Leaving behind one long marriage a bucket of marriages to three women three dogs four cats a writing cabin in the woods after the drinking stops and the 82 lb. boy in black who never smiled wakes to walk across the frozen Ohio

They ask me will you marry I wonder what is this this institution this thing how can a paper govern what we create what we can be what we can mean how we protect each other and ourselves how we resist

Can tenderness and time can fiddleheads can a butterfly

IV. Intimations of Us (Hybridism)

Will we be unreadable
Will we be wary of those who wonder
Will the questions become more frequent
Will we be hunted

What will they make of us what will we say

No he actually is not my father Yes we are actually in love No I actually am much older than you thought No I actually have a uterus No he actually has
no sperm  Yes  I actually am sick  Yes  we actually want to find sperm to put into my uterus even though I am sick and I have a beard and he is older than me  Yes this baby is actually ours  No there is actually no mother  Yes we are actually both the father (even though we are actually both the parents)  But it is actually none of their business

Will we say

Or will we slide away

I want to tell you about a day you were born New York 1980 just back from a winter in Vermont  I might have been living in Sherman's building on East Broadway  on a day drinking alone or a night in bars Bonnie and Clyde's or the Duchess improvising with Jim in Princeton  thinking about traveling as far north as I could get on the east coast hitchhiking through New England Nova Scotia Newfoundland to arrive by boat in Nain with young Gabe at 12 he like me not girl not boy fishing for char with Sean whose skin reminded me that men could be soft then to 10th Street thinking I might be pregnant was it music was it the sound of water or the seed of you being born in those times to these the high plains where the Assiniboine sweeps through Winnipeg as it takes us to a lookout over the Gulf of St. Lawrence in St. Joseph du Moine

The day you were born in 1954  I was waiting for a bus in Cleveland  I was looking in the window  your mother was young and smiling  and your father  you were the only one  the first one  they were in love with you they were anxious new parents wanting the world afraid of their parents afraid of loss  when I was there with you I was a woman older than them I was an auntie  I shared with you stories from our childhood you would forget and I would forget too  I could see you  I saw the pain  but I didn't know what to do  the best thing was to fall away

Now we wait and hope slipping through forests slipping through gender afraid of bathrooms afraid of loss afraid of history wanting a different world wanting to give a life that we were not given forgetting and wanting to forget  how it was  but it is not yet was it still is  and the pain stays even when the world falls away

It's true I had thought you before  and now the you of you walks with me  hand in hand on the docks of Belfast Maine  are we two men  are we two lovers a quick look then a look away we are re-queered called faggots at the top of A Mountain in Tucson
two men holding hands kissing walking down the street two lovers photographing themselves in a bathroom at Beacon two men walking into a doctor’s office where we learn to say I’m his or he’s my partner before the nurse welcomes us as father and son you look more boy than man not unlike I once did my stature still small before my aging skin before my balding head

We once were two women and now we are two men holding hands like women but are we men but were we women but who are we really to us to you to me we are two warm beings we have many long legs we have some hair we have some horns we have several lifetimes between us we are more than just us we are bacteria we are hosts we are ecosystems we are universes we are hearts we are breathing we are imagining we are remembering

Is it odd our cells walking down to the edge of the sea odd I will say goodbye odd that spring comes then the summer then something else the trick of gardens odd that time the desire to see odd to wonder about the ends of things odd to feel jealous of more time the window looks out over the street

We chase the sunset over the Pacific over the Connecticut River over Gate’s Pass perching on saguaro mountains

Driving west for heat to a house like language a home like gender an age like you

But I can barely face the sun the grief I began to feel in the little house on windy green cliffs over the Gulf of St. Lawrence the grasses blowing when I understood the inevitable

How I already feel loss surprised it would be you in illness not me but like Emerson’s journey our desire not a destination more than loss a gift renewed

Can we love impermanence when the sunrise still paints the sky can we love loss can I carry you with me can I keep you can I curl my limbs around you my darling my creature my love our precious life the constancy of change our hands our home

Our queerest life
Notes on contributors

Sonny Nordmarken is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His dissertation research examines how gender minorities emotionally manage marginalizing social interactions.

Samuel Ace’s books include Normal Sex, Home in Three Days. Don’t Wash., Stealth, and Our Weather Our Sea (forthcoming). His work is widely published and he has received many awards, including the Astraea Lesbian Writers Fund Award in Poetry. He currently teaches writing at Mount Holyoke College.