

1 Trans Desire's Retroactive Birth

It is 1993, or thereabouts. I'm at the municipal pool of Westmount, arguably one of the most conservative neighborhoods on the island of Montréal, and I see them: an apparently white, flat-chested person, wearing an athletic bathing suit marketed to women, a bathing suit that covers their chest. They have long hair pulled back into a ponytail and narrow hips. "I think we are alike," sings the character who plays the young Alison Bechdel in the musical remaking of Bechdel's graphic memoir, *Fun Home* (2006). Bechdel recounts the moment when she first sees a person who, she claims, is unlike anyone she's ever seen before, someone with short hair, dungarees, and lace-up boots, someone who is strong, and, ultimately, the young Alison sings, handsome. The song is about growing up in a world where children are not granted images or narratives about gender-nonconforming people. As a result, Alison is perplexed. "I feel . . . I feel . . .," she sings, naming no clear feeling. These unfinished sentences lead to the next lines, which also highlight the character's lack of knowledge: "I don't know where you came from / I wish I did / I feel so dumb. / I feel . . ." Notwithstanding this confusion, the song ends in some apparent clarity and knowledge, "I know you. I know you. I know you."

In this narrative, contracted and confused affect becomes reframed as self-recognition, which is a misrecognition too. Alison does not know the person, even if she says she does. She is projecting herself onto them. But the song, crucially, is not only about identity and identification. It is also about a feeling that blurs identification and desire, and a feeling that José Esteban Muñoz can help us to understand as a utopian "insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (2009, 1). Alison sings in amazement about the person's ring of keys, made extraordinary in Alison's vision. The song expresses astonishment in the person and their keys, a form of astonishment that helps Alison to "surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness" and that allows her to imagine "a different time and place," which is why she wonders where the person comes from (Muñoz, 2009, 5). In the song, the ring of keys comes to signify, much as Muñoz writes of a Coke bottle in a Frank O'Hara poem, "a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality" (6). The ring of keys is utopian. It promises "a futurity, something that is not quite here" (7).

When I saw them at the pool, I felt relief – even joy, possibility. I could become them. *Please, let me become them.* I want to watch them as they swiftly move through the water, completing lap after lap. I do not know them, but onto them I project a possible future and different forms of relationality. Misrecognition entangled with desire, a confused and contracted affect

experienced in the form of intensity. I see their beauty. Their valor. They are a sight to behold – not in the characteristic distancing and objectifying of scopophilia, but in the wonder of connection. Euphoria, not only dysphoria.¹ Another social world is possible.

Sometime around the age of fourteen, I began binding my breasts. At the time, I didn't have the language of binding, and I developed the practice on my own. I liked to use masking tape. Standing in the family bathroom, in front of the large, wall-to-wall mirror, I'd wrap the tape around my chest, directly on my skin, over and again, each morning. The work felt like a ritual of self-assertion, neither self-hatred nor exactly self-care. I was making of myself as I wanted to be. I trained myself into a signature posture, as well: chest concave, rounded shoulders, head forward. I always wore sweaters.

Had anyone asked why I worked to hide my breasts (and no one did), I probably would have yelled at them to leave me alone (and this might explain why no one asked). My breasts were not something I was capable of talking about. I could think about them, though, lying awake in bed, at night. And it was simple: I did not want my breasts to be seen. But it was also more complicated: I did not want to be seen wearing a bra, especially by my parents, because it would give them the satisfaction that I had accepted my fate. Yet at the same time, I did not want to be seen not wearing a bra, either, because then, too, I would feel exposed. I did not want anyone to think that I was “blossoming,” whatever that meant, into a “young lady.” I was not a flower. I was not something to be looked at. I was not a vehicle for reproduction or for someone else's pleasure. I did not want to become a “woman.” And finally, here it is: I did not want my breasts to be there. When I'd take the tape off every night, it would hurt a little, especially around the nipples, and that seemed right. My body, in developing breasts, had betrayed me. The pain was part of its punishment. When I was in my twenties, after suffering upper back pain and neck immobility from my poor posture, a physiotherapist diagnosed me with kyphosis, an excessively rounded thoracic curve most common among elderly adults. It still hurts, right now.

Throughout these years, the unspoken assumption, treated as reality itself, was that nothing could be done for me as I slowly shrunk into myself. It is cisnormativity that made it such that I thought that my body had to take on a certain form, that I had no choice but to accommodate that body and to tolerate it. It is the limited “transsexual” narrative that gave me no language to articulate myself either: I did not identify with “the opposite sex,” so I thought I couldn't

¹ As Beischel et al. (2021, 3) explain, “gender euphoria” has received little attention in academic literature, but it has been a term prominent in trans and nonbinary communities, especially online, since at least 2001.

be trans, but I did not see myself in this “female sex” either. Other people’s refusal to recognize my feelings and the challenge I had in finding a public language that could help me to articulate myself and find a social place was the result of hetero and cisnormativity, patriarchy, abandonment, and disregard.

All of this sounds like a story (my story) of a trans or nonbinary child, of a child living in a world they wish were different but that they can’t quite describe. But here’s the thing: that child as trans or nonbinary has only appeared recently, retroactively, in my encounter with trans and nonbinary people, publics, literature, and theory.² Previously, this (somewhat) same child was a proto-lesbian feminist, born through my reading, during my late teens, of Adrienne Rich (1994) and the subsequent reorganization of my life, future, and communities. These two narratives, these two children, build two different subject positions and, with it, two different political visions: on the one hand, a woman, on the other, a nonbinary position; on the one hand, the project of resignifying “woman,” and on the other, the refusal of compulsory “womanhood.” *So which one is Stephanie?*

But do I have to choose? Can we not do both, together?

2 Care on the Borderland between Feminist and Trans Thought

I write in and about the tense space between feminist and trans thought. I am not, however, interested in the question of whether trans women ought to have access to women’s spaces or to services for women – the answer seems clear: yes. Unless we want to ground the category “woman” in an embodied essence (for instance the possession of XX chromosomes or of a vagina) – and we don’t – it is only in displacing differences between women that trans women’s presence appears as a threat. In fact, the exclusion of trans women produces phantasmatic sameness, including a perceived sameness of embodied form, which has never been a promising basis for the category “woman” in the first place.³ Existence precedes essence, and “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir, 2011, 283).

Equally, I am not interested in developing a trans feminism, which is to say a feminism that serves all women, and especially trans women. This is not because I am against this project but rather because there already exist important versions of such praxis, including Emi Koyama’s “The Transfeminist Manifesto” (2003) and Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007). Emma Heaney (2017)

² I am borrowing the framework of “retroactive birth” from Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009).

³ For an elaboration of this argument, one that places anti-transgender feminism within the context of the investment in purity amongst first-wave white, middle-class feminists, see Hines (2019).

reads the work of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson in this vein, too, and to Heaney’s detailed tracing of trans feminist thought (253–97), I would add Viviane Namaste’s and Mirha-Soleil Ross’s work, especially their focus on sex workers’ rights (Namaste, 2009, 16–18).

Instead of these points of encounter, I want to address a different meeting of feminist and trans thought, a meeting similar to what in the 1990s was referred to as the Butch/FTM Border wars, or, framed less antagonistically, as the borderland between butch and trans masculine identification (Halberstam, 1998; Hale, 1998). This 1990s borderland has not disappeared, but to it, today, we might add another layer, which is the focus of this text: a feminist inhabitation of the category woman, on the one hand, and a nonbinary position on the other. This borderland, on which I currently live, is not new, though its prominence and visibility, as evidenced in the growing use and acceptance of they/them pronouns, is.⁴ And from this borderland, here is what I want to argue: movement between “woman” and “nonbinary” is possible, not just strategically but also emotionally or affectively.

In making this argument, I suggest that we understand nonbinary both as an identity, which is to say a recognized, social position (or set of social positions) in the world with which one identifies, and as a structure of feeling, which is to say a set of repeated patterns of emotion that emerge in response to the social world. In fact, all genders might be understood as both identities and structures of feeling. While both “identity” and “structure of feeling” reference something that the history of Western thought might characterize as internality or selfhood, a structure of feeling, unlike an identity, need not be explicitly recognized (by the self or others) in order to exist. That is to say, a structure of feeling might be present when a corresponding identity is not. Insisting on the difference between a structure of feeling and an identity helps to navigate the borderland between “woman” and “nonbinary”: the distinction clarifies how, for those assigned female at birth, the assertion of a nonbinary identity is certainly not or not only a political evacuation of the category “woman” but also the recognition of a mode of feeling, belonging, and pleasure, to use Cameron Awkward-Rich’s framework (2017). Likewise, insisting on the distinction between structures of feeling and identity clarifies how a feminist inhabitation of “woman” is not simply political but also, potentially, the assertion of a feeling, a sense of belonging, or a mode of finding pleasure. In other words,

⁴ For instance, to give two high-profile examples, in 2017, *The Associated Press Stylebook* was revised to allow for the use of the singular “they,” including to reference people who identify as neither male nor female. That same year, *The Chicago Manual of Style* followed suit, adopting the singular “they” both as a substitute for the generic “he” and to refer to a person who does not identify with gender-specific pronouns.

the existence of a nonbinary structure of feeling for those assigned female at birth is not a refusal of the social position of woman because feelings in themselves are not forms of refusal. But feelings might lead to refusal: the assertion of a nonbinary identity for those assigned female at birth is both a refusal of the social position of woman and the recognition of a structure of feeling.

I owe the phrase “structure of feeling” to Raymond Williams’s 1977 *Marxism and Literature*. Williams argues that too often the social is understood in the past tense: the social is that which is always already formed. To this approach to the social, Williams seeks to add a dimension of experience that remains social but is lived in the present tense. Such present-tense consciousness, “what is actually being lived, and not only what is thought is being lived,” is not “fully articulate” and yet exerts “palpable pressures and set[s] effective limits on experience and action” (132). “Structures of feeling” are complex and can be contradictory. They are expressed in the “affective text of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (132). We find structures of feeling in patterns of “impulse, restraint, and tone” (132). They have the property of the emergent and embryotic: that which is present and exerts force, but that which is not completely articulated and not quite taking the form of something fixed and fully present. The feelings are “structures” in that they often emerge “as a set, with specific internal relations” (132). Though structures of feeling are often “taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating,” Williams argues that they are in fact shared ways of feeling in a particular historical moment, ways of feeling that emerge in relation to that historical moment, as a response to that moment, and also as part of that moment, as well (132).

I enter the borderland between woman and nonbinary as someone steeped in feminist and queer thinking, structures of feeling and points of identification, but also as someone invested in the project of trans liberation, who has only more recently spent time with trans thought. This is a dangerous place to be writing for at least three central reasons. First, there is a long history of feminist and queer scholarship turning to trans topics to extract theories of gender and sexuality that do not serve trans people. This scholarship often figures trans people as dupes to medicine or to gender itself (unlike the supposedly enlightened feminist/queer scholar), and the scholarship does not center trans people, trans thought, and trans cultural production.⁵

⁵ For important examples of this critique of feminist and queer (and feminist queer) thought, see Prosser (1998, 21–60), Rubin (1998), Namaste (2000), Stryker (2004, 212–215), Namaste (2009), Heaney (2017), Benavente and Gill-Peterson (2019, 111); Chu and Drager (2019, 103–116); Chen (2019, 34–38).

Second and relatedly, in acknowledging that I have only more recently turned to trans studies, I am framing transness as new or recently “discovered.” Such framing has the twin dangers of, on the one hand, treating trans people as exotic others to be gazed at and scrutinized (often with the goal of extracting “knowledge” about gender) and, on the other hand, placing a question mark over trans existence itself.⁶ As Jules Gill-Peterson argues, when transness is presented as new and therefore without the ontological weight of history, it becomes, at worst, a possible and passible fad and at best, a figure of futurity with no being in the present (2018a, 2).

The final reason why the position from which I write is thorny is that I think it is fair to say that I am writing as someone who has experienced and still experiences gender dysphoria but, also, as someone who has found some level of resolution to this experience through feminism, especially lesbian and queer feminism.⁷ I just framed my experience in the psycho-biomedical language of gender dysphoria in an honest attempt at describing it. But turning to this language is also symptomatic of the continued ways in which authenticity and realness have been called upon to limit and control transness. On the one hand, I seek authenticity by turning to this discourse to provide an authoritative term that describes my experience and that places me in a “true” relationship to transness. And yet, this psychological, biomedical discourse, as well as the requirement to “prove” “realness,” needs to be called into question for both have been used to regulate transness (i.e., see Spade, 2006). In any case, to say that I have found some resolution to gender dysphoria in feminism can easily be misconstrued as an argument against transition. One central refrain of “gender-critical feminism” (also known as “trans-exclusionary feminism”) is the argument that what trans people need is, simply, a good dose of feminism.⁸ In this view, trans medicine and identity accommodate rather than challenge gender norms. Instead of resignifying the meaning of a female body and therefore transforming how the category “woman” is understood (as has been a key feminist project), trans people and politics reassert the importance of gender, “mutilating” bodies to fit and reproduce, as best as possible, patriarchal norms. To insist then that I have found some resolution to gender dysphoria in feminism appears to be promoting this logic even if this is not my intention.

While I acknowledge the dangers of writing from my position, there is something worthwhile in writing from this vantage point, something that

⁶ For a foundational argument about such exoticism, see Stone (1992, 163).

⁷ As Patrick Califia put it in 1997, “There are many levels of gender dysphoria, many aberrant accommodations other than a sex change. Feminism, for example” (6).

⁸ For examples of this argument, see Jeffreys (2014) and Shrier (2020). For an overview to gender critical feminism, see Hines (2019).

would be missed were I just to stop. I have been transformed by reading trans scholarship and by engaging with trans cultural production, affected precisely in the way that Susan Stryker predicted in 1994 when she wrote that “to apprehend a transgendered consciousness articulating itself . . . will remake you in the process” (250).⁹ This change is personal, theoretical, and political, and it clarifies to me how feminist and queer discourse is not enough. Quite simply: writing from my position allows for the continued investigation of how feminism, including queer feminism, changes (and ought to change) in its encounter with trans thought.

From this standpoint, this text addresses an ongoing point of tension between trans and feminist politics, a tension that remains unresolved but that is especially apparent on the borderlands between “woman” and “nonbinary”: is the “better” position to resignify womanhood (or, in my case, white womanhood in particular) or to refuse this social position? From what position is such a choice possible? Can this even be a “choice”? These questions return to key debates in the history of feminist theory. Played out in scholarly texts and on Instagram, they are at once new and old. They point to the ongoingness of problems never resolved, and, perhaps, never resolvable, but nonetheless still meaningful to many people both within and outside of the academy. Addressing them requires taking up Jane Elliott’s call to challenge the common belief that “theory that is no longer novel is no longer useful” (2006, 1701). My central argument, that movement between “woman” and “nonbinary” is possible, insists that the oppositions that my central question depends upon needs not be synthesized. I can seek to recognize a nonbinary structure of feeling without giving up on the feminist project of resignification. Along the way, I can both inhabit and resignify “white woman” and also refuse the social position of “woman” though not necessarily the whiteness that is attached to it – here, only resignification is possible.

2.1 Nonbinary Genders and the Modern/Colonial Gender System

This thesis indexes how the analysis of nonbinary genders and the category “woman” needs to be developed within a historical context that understands how “gender,” as María Lugones argues, is a “colonial concept” (2007, 186). What I mean by this is that gender is imbricated in the production of race and the nation, and the projects of colonialism and settler colonialism. For example, scholars in Indigenous studies, such as Joanne Baker and Mark Rifkin, have argued that binary gender (and its reliance on anatomical sex) is

⁹ Attending to this transformation is also to follow Hale’s rules for writing about trans-related material for people who are not trans (2009).

a colonial imposition, entangled with the imperial appropriation of land, bodies, and epistemologies. In this framework, the elaboration of Two-Spirit and other Indigenous genders and sexualities becomes a critical part of decolonization (Rifkin, 2010; McMullin, 2011; Barker, 2017, 13–15). In Black feminist studies, many scholars, such as Evelyn Hammonds (1997) and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, have traced how Black women have been “forever outside the ideology of womanhood” (Guy-Sheftall, 1990, 96). This is because the concept of “womanhood” as it emerged in the United States and Europe during the mid-nineteenth century was explicitly and implicitly white. My point here is an obvious one, though one that still remains difficult in some (mostly white) feminist scholarship: I cannot analyze the category “woman” without thinking of how that category has been imbricated in the production of race and racism, the projects of (settler) colonialism, and the nation.

From my positionality, I am especially interested in asking how white nonbinary positions relate to racialization. I ask this question not because I want to take attention away from Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC people) – although it is true that this attention can sometimes become another mode of surveilling control, a practice of othering, or a method to extract value (Gossett et al., 2017). Instead, I work in the tradition of whiteness studies that seeks to de-universalize whiteness by making whiteness visible as a historically constituted particularity entangled with dominance (Dyer, 1997; Alcoff, 2015; Rankine, 2020). Here, I ask, is the possible refusal of white womanhood also a refusal of whiteness? Or does even posing this question represent a white desire for continued, willfully blind, violent innocence?

Part of the challenge in addressing this question is that the privilege of whiteness often functions through hiding its existence as a particularity or as a category at all. For this reason, any claim to “escape” or “refuse” whiteness in fact seems to perform whiteness rather than to disrupt it. Such claims also seem to miss both the historical and present-day structures and daily interactions that constitute and reproduce whiteness. One cannot simply “escape” these through any act of volition, affiliation, or political solidarity. A second problem is that the category “white woman” signifies many different things both all at once and across time and space. For instance, it is (and has been) a demographic category; a structure of feeling and mode of affiliation; a category of self-identification; a violent ideal that lends itself to discipline, self-discipline, and exclusion; and, finally, a figure in public discourse, representative of those who hold a particular political stance, be that stance the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement and/or colonial, nationalist enthusiasm for the mission of “civilization.”

All of these modes of understanding “white woman” obviously overlap, and yet at the same time one can imagine the existence or presence of one without the other.

The collapse of these various positions was clear to me at the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) conference I attended in November 2016, immediately after the election of Donald Trump. Conference attendees were reeling. Some people were surprised that many white women had voted for Trump, and during my panel’s Q&A, white women in the room, myself included, were called upon to reach out to other white women to get them to change their allegiance. “But I am not a white woman,” a white, senior colleague whose work is greatly admired in the field (including by me), insisted. Her argument went something like this: “My masculine gender performance means that even if I am white and a woman, I am not part of this category ‘white woman.’ That category has been defined against me. I’m not included.” I wasn’t so sure. While many white queer people understand their queerness as potentially or effectively deracializing, does not this understanding reproduce and depend upon racial privilege? “You are a white woman,” I insisted to my senior colleague. “Your queerness is not relevant.” But we were confusing things. Yes, demographically, she is a white woman, and yes, she might (or might not) practice modes of being, acting, and feeling that reproduce the habits of white womanhood, as a result of her socialization and structural position in this world. And yet at the same time, her sense and practice of affiliation as well as her politics need not align with the category.

The heated debate at the NWSA haunted me a few months later, as I attended an anti-racist workshop at my university. After several presentations, the organizers had us join discussion groups. These groups were mostly based in ethnic, national, and racial categories: Black, Asian American, American Indian and Indigenous, South Asian. There was also “white ally” and “white anti-racist.” The final category, though, puzzled me: “queer and gender-nonconforming people.” Presumably, the existence of this category suggested that queer and gender-nonconforming people have an orthogonal relationship to racial categories – that somehow gender and sexuality cut through racial, ethnic, and national belonging. It is of course true that homophobia, transphobia, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity exist, and that some of us lose (and then remake) our sense of kin as we come out, which might have the result of breaking our feeling of racial affiliation. It is also true that we live with the remains of late nineteenth-century white discourse, which used iconography associated with Black female sexuality to represent white lesbians (Gilman, 1985, 218). In this vision, sexual “deviance” was understood in the context of racial hierarchies and vice versa such that a white lesbian might be understood

as not-quite-white.¹⁰ And yet, certainly, at the same time, the space of queerness is and has itself been racialized – there are countless examples of how racism exists in these spaces even as some people contest it in these spaces too (see, for instance, Riggs, 1989; Puar, 2007; Hanhardt, 2013; Haritaworn and Riley Snorton, 2013; Marhoefer, 2022). Quite simply, white gender and sexual non-conformity can and do coexist easily alongside the maintenance of racial inequality and racial identity even if there is nothing inherent about this nonconformity that is itself racist.

In the sections that follow, the movement between “woman” and “nonbinary” that I focus on is a movement between the racialized position of white woman and another position that, I will explain, is also tied to whiteness, yet at the same time offers a potential for the transformation of whiteness too. In other words, there is nothing inherent to “nonbinary” that is anti-racist, although it could be anti-racist too. As Bobby Noble writes of white trans men: “That we transition into a masculine identity is not enough; we must also self-consciously and willfully embody an anti-racist, anti-White supremacist politic at the same time” (2006, 15). I will argue that a white nonbinary position does not offer a space of escape from race, but it does offer a potential or possibility for change. This is because the performance of “white womanhood” has often been reproduced for racist purposes, for the purpose of colonization. My point is not to conclude that the category “white woman” is unsalvageable or necessarily inherently racist. But I do risk asserting that it might be easier to develop a white nonbinary anti-racist position than one grounded in the category woman. “Nonbinary” potential disrupts the habits of whiteness, though not necessarily.

2.2 Toward a Politics of Care

Finally, my refusal of synthesis (between nonbinary and woman, between feminism and trans politics, between whiteness and its possible transformation) is based on an approach to politics that centers the practice of care over the purity of thought. I allow for contradictions that are apparent in the world. Instead of making an argument based on principle, I consider what it makes possible, who it might harm, and what it might allow.

Early feminist work in care ethics, notwithstanding its many limitations, is helpful in this regard. Without idealizing or naturalizing the mother–child relation and without falsely universalizing “woman’s” experience, what I take as important from the legacy of feminist care ethics is its approach to moral questions. In the words of Nel Noddings, moral problems ought to be considered “not as intellectual problems to be solved by abstract reasoning but as

¹⁰ Thank you to Laurie Marhoefer for helping me to articulate this point.