

... Trans ... Forming ... M/othering ...

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ABSTRACT

Finding inspiration in embodied life writing methodologies, the essay explores the fraught slow intimacies of mothering a trans child, now a young adult. The essay engages an experiential familial, in the sense of 'family' relations, but in seeking to process the uneasy forms of m/othering through trans allyship, the paper turns to a range of intellectual repertoires, both old familiars and newer strangers, hoping to shape ways of responding that re-home family gender troubles within wider communities of scholarly and creative thought, and reading. Wanting comfort in ideas, the author grapples and drifts, trying deliberately to open her heartmind to unbecoming methods and messy, queering adjacencies that elude polarities, even push me aside, and admit to never completely representing the subject. Alongside conflicted negations/negotiations of mastery, then, the essay tries muted moves into intimate geographies of mutter, martyr, mater, matter, meta, all in a lived struggle 'to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations' (Halberstam, 2011: 2) in search of deliberately fugitive, blurred intimations that place m/othering in difficult, witnessing relation with a transmasculine life lived at assertive gender variance.

Keywords: mothering, trans, queer, critical autoethnography

I have many questions about what this essay is doing, what it has the right to do. Yet also: what is there *more* than right | wrong. self | other. girl | boy? Through what unusual, deliberated disordering can thoughts, feelings, *lives* be called into more liveable being beyond the binaries? I enter a necessary wilderness of uncertain wrongs and potential writes where much runs rings around me. As a scholar whose academic reputation is closely tied to autoethnographic modes of critical inquiry, I have mulled over the dangers of othering, when writing about mothering in the context of a trans life. Misgendering. Dead-naming. Appropriating. In exploring relations of mother subject and other subjects – among them the person whose life slips in and out of view as the object of my love and attention, the essay risks proximities that verge on the transgressive.

Yet here I am, here we are, our subjects bonded from birth.

...

For the record: years ago, after an uncomplicated pregnancy, I was delivered of a baby girl. Vagina = F, that being the established equation. Yet even that making had taken months; the gradual transformation from embryo to foetus to neonate, reminding me that 'trans', as a prefix, tends to be associated with moving on or to the other side of something; across, beyond or through. That 'trans' might mean transcutaneous, or so as to change or transfer.

Our daughter arrived easily, almost as if without me, surfacing in under an hour with the heft of a thick, prime steak. I remember a compact, chunky body steeped in bloodied afterbirth, hauled upside down from between my mess and placed red upon my chest, a pungent mix of blood, iron, meconium. The angry wail. How avidly she latched, ready to thrive.

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I'd long been a queer sort of woman, although not queer identifying. Call it quirky, sometimes querulous. Down-to-earth, an amateur of the quotidian. An outspoken female too straight-talking to be nicely feminine, marked by a slant of mind and tilt tangential to chafing norms. Unmarried, though partnered. Children outside of paperwork. Happy to raise a family without the cloying obeisance of blue and pink. And as for a potentially queer orientation, nothing was ever at stake in how our children grew into themselves. Then along came the second child, a fiercely gender-variant question-making, italicised in bold.

...

For the purposes of this paper, let the young adult child be X. Let the old motherbag be Y. (Why not?) Alphabetically, X and Y are sequential, but lived experience disrupts the conventional niceties of ordinal order. If X precedes Y in the alphabet, in life's skewings Y must predate X but X does not necessarily follow Y. X both marks the spot and remains elusive. There *and* their. And why is Y always the parent in question? The mother, on call, arms open to hold, yet also anxious and angry and ready to strike out. If life is trying, she tries. If The Mother typically represents normative time (Halberstam, 2011: 76), Y does not assert entrenched, hetero temporalities and phobic routes. However much she is perceived to lack, by X, forced to stand in for the rhetorical and structural violence of normative systems, Y derives herself in close relation to X, her life a mutually queer strand of un/becoming through the gender questioning child she raises, and sometimes erases. So: never 'Let x = y', or vice versa. Life can make simple equations difficult.

...

At 18 months, our 'daughter' is diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). PDD-NOS is the initial, open-ended term used when medical experts agree that development in a very young child is sufficiently delayed to constitute a probable problem. No crawling (only 'turtle tracking'). Head banging. Hyperacuity. Emotional explosiveness. Skin picking. Hair tugging. Obsessive attachment to routine. Difficulty in transitioning between activities. Imitative speech. Echolalia. Passive inertness. Manic hyperactivity. Indifference to danger. Disordered reactions to pain, time, temperature. Acute sensory sensitivities. Persistent, injurious expressions of gender dysphoria.

Despite the list of assumed co-morbidities, PDD-NOS is a curious diagnosis, a hiatus or lacuna, a paradoxical concession to *lack* of medical certainty around the infant's likely progress, and the extent to which the child will develop into what is socially recognised as a normal, functioning self. The language of labels is a powerful burden on a life, a cryptic, acronymic alphabet that variously clarifies, and calcifies. Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Bipolar Disorder (BP). Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD). GID (Gender Identity Disorder). Gender Dysphoria (GD). Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD). Etcetera. A tome of terms we now know well, all depending on the medical specialist and the definition at work in the most current version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).

What can a mother do when intersecting specialist 'ologies' (biology, neurology, psychology, sociology) name multiple, disabling incongruencies in her child, likely to prevent flourishing in the cruel grist of the given world? When the experts have no solution, the mother (life maker undertaker hard taskmaster mother of determination) knuckles down to make what sense she can. Because if she knows anything, from literary-critical scholarship, it's reading for depth and surface, reading against the grain, reading creatively, reading beyond the instrumental. She knows that labels matter and that far from being self-evident, they are made, making them subject to revision. Luckily, it also happens, sometimes, that happier interpretations arrive, as in the association of autistic and artist, for example. Or, when she is researching autism and queerness, and she discovers that: i. neurology increasingly posits a correlation between ASD in those identified at birth as female and the likelihood of subsequent gender variant expressions of identity and orientation. And that ii. in some current scholarship on neurodivergence, beyond the well-known descriptors 'autistic', or 'aspie', or 'atypical', or even 'neurodivergent', the word 'neuroqueer' is gaining traction, a portmanteau descriptor that takes validating inspiration from queer people's assertive reclaiming of queerness from stigma.

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If autism is stigmatised as a developmental delay, it is inspiring to discover that delay is more productively theorised in queer theory. In a 'study of children's queerness in its broadest sense' (2009: 3), Kathryn Bond Stockton critiques the linear trajectory of growing up, the normative model of life development from childhood to adulthood 'relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (...) toward full stature, marriage, work,

reproduction, and the loss of childishness'. As Stockton affirms, delay 'is tremendously tricky' as an idea and a pattern (2009: 4), and against the rigid normative linear model, which society presents as progressive, she makes a persuasive case for 'sideways' relations that skew developmental models of maturing (2009). J. Jack Halberstam is another voice in this conversation, suggesting that what might be perceived as 'immaturity and a refusal of adulthood' in young queer lives is a rejection that occurs *because* 'adulthood rhymes with heterosexual' (2011: 73), and thus excludes. An ostensible failure to mature can be an emphatic denial of norms, an assertion 'away from the construction of and narrativization of family' towards the queer, questioning, questing 'creation of a long, gerund-laden story of dying, reuniting, growing, learning, unlearning, losing, searching, forgetting, rising, uniting, singing, swimming, threatening, doing, being, finding, and becoming' (2011: 78).

...

This brings to mind Lauren Berlant's discussion of cruel optimism. Cruel optimism

... names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility (...) What's cruel about these attachments...is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of the object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being; because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on (...) Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss. (2010: 94)

Through such ravelled relations, says Berlant, one 'makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments (...) most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire or attrition' (94). This means that the 'poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off of the *story* I can tell' (94) about 'wanting to be near x ' (95). It's clearly complex. Even Berlant's repeated use of 'one' in this context abstracts and discomforts me, in truthfully embodying an uneasy relation at once far, and a thwarted longing to be near. Not surprisingly, then, as my essay illustrates, in order to understand cruel optimism, I 'must embark on an analysis of rhetorical indirection as a way of thinking about the strange temporalities of projection into an enabling object that is also disabling' (95). In this 'poetics of indirection', Berlant explains, 'each of these rhetorical modes is shaped by the ways a writing subjectivity conjures other ones so that, in a performance of phantasmatic intersubjectivity, the writer' enables 'a performance of being made possible by the proximity of the object' (95). Transmogrify. Mother. Trans. Child. Transfer. As in Berlant's discussion, the relations of x and y are overloaded with volatile motilities of agency and passivity, subjecthood and objecthood; the motherwriter's care, hubris, witness, despair, determined single-minded doubleness, her detouring through various modes and registers, keep hope, keep hurting, keep coming up against the chafe of 'something as banal as scouring love' (95).

...

I recall. The genderqueer expression of a child classified female at birth. A toddler's enraged assertions. 'Not *broeks!*¹ NO! *Boxers!*' Getting dressed with panties worn carnivale on the head, body bared rudely, in defiance. The shrieking trauma of dresses. A pointless battle soon quit for the ecstatic relief of boys' shorts, worn shirtless, or with baggy Ts. Happiness. Never again an item from the girls' section, because *obviously*. And the agony against long hair. The lush abundance of Pre-Raphaelite curls worn as insufferable hair shirt. The hair had to go; the discomfort too extreme to bear. But the cutting was also a trauma, in fear of the skinself being cut to the quick.

...

'Being transgender is not a choice. No one chooses to be transgender. It is not cool It is not easy. It has no allure. Children and teens alike do not try it on for size like a pair of shoes. Being transgender is one of the most difficult things to be because it is not understood and the binary gender system is so pervasive' (Brill and Pepper, 2008: 22). Constantly, I must weigh this up.

...

¹ Colloquialism from the Afrikaans (usually the diminutive 'broekies'), meaning panties; the bottom part of a young female's underwear; girls' knickers

Two years old, crying in the bath. The water wells a tap of tears.

'Howww howw how will I knowww what to be?'

'Don't worry, lovey, you *will*. You will find something you like, something you can do! We will help you! Soothing. Smoothing. Thinking: job, career.'

But the child's stare unblinks me. 'No, mommy! How will I really know what *to be*? Cos I know what I am for the world and he doesn't like me. So how can I *be* who I am?'

The tenses. My tension. I have no words.

So it's time for actions, which speak louder, and I lean in close, making my Scary Face at the child who squirms in the bare slip of bath.

'Oooh ooh do the Mommy Monster, mommy. Do it!'

The little body shivers, thrills aquiver. Is lifted from the tub naked as the day, towelled in a writhing, snarling bearhug that is never a motherhold tight enough. Tight, tighter until magically I fling off the towel and gather my strength and my wits and the child's small self is dramatically inverted, grasped by the ankles, dangled over the abyss with nothing to keep a body alive except a mother's desperate, hardfast hand. How the child laughs, then, a raw guffaw, brought right to the brink of hysterical fear and then hauled back again, just in time. This is how the precarious wide world is overturned, life re-turned for a little while to happy, intimate rights.

...

Mothering is never 'just'. Mothering is unfair. Never truly just. And a mother is never just 'mother'. She is And. She is Also. She is Always-Already something other. Butcher baker candlestick maker. Uber cleaner cook accountant tutor health worker advocate. Often, I don't know where the men are, and why The System assumes it's mothers who must multitask. No wonder The Mother can materialise as monstrous, a being of so many disaggregated parts that she fractures ugly, hit and myth. The mother, in mothering, often becomes a shadow of herself, though this (they say) is said only by bad mothers, those who fail to mother properly. Never mind the mother of an autistic child. Of a trans child. The mother frantically trying to translate refusals and denials and incommensurables into liveable sense. She is a spectre of herself, making a spectacle of mothering, chasing the elusive, erratic forms of a child's intensely different becoming, hunting down the possibilities against society's No. Mother/child. Bonded. For better and for worse. Always the two of them: X and Y/Y and X, a complex tight as a desperate handhold against whose choke they both thrash. 'I spose you have to write about me, Mom. I mean, we're like this.' Makes tight fist.

...

In a review of Tey Meadows' *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century*, Best emphasises that 'the parents of trans and gender nonconforming children' are key allies. 'Impelled by the deep ache of parental love as they witness their child's cumulative distress', these parents 'square off against an unknown future, press for greater institutional support and protections at school, and seek the appropriate medical care to support their children' (2020: 220).

Why do I feel so alone?

...

Three years old. Pre-school. The Principal calls me to a meeting. 'We're very worried. Something is really wrong. Your daughter is in despair. She keeps saying it's better if she dies. Says no one can love her. And so matter-of-fact! It's terrible; *terrible*. Her teacher doesn't know what to do. We tell her we love her. That she *is* loved. But. Here's the name of an excellent child psychologist.'

(Uncanny fingers: I typed the phrase 'mater-of-fact'. True story.)

...

Some m/other related subjects, trying tying vying, their modes and materials, making up disquieting incongruities:

mother. madder. mutter. mudder. murder. mummer. maimer. martyr. mater. meddler. muddler.

the minotaur destroys. the medusa laughs.

the mother s/cares, carries, is precarious.

Is she any good, this woman? You tell me.

As ever, you will tell me. (And you. And you.)

Of that a mother can be sure.

But how many times has X warned Y not to make this about herself. *This is not about you!*

But also: it is, isn't it? Constantly it is.

...

WHETHER LONG

OR SHORT

[Family Christmas] *Why's it she's built like a boy when she's supposed to be a girl?*

[Family Easter] *But you're going to grow up into a lovely little girl. Yes you are, don't shake your head! So you mustn't be silly and say this about being a boy.*

[Everywhere] *Are you a girl or a boy? Are you a boy or a girl?*

[Shopping mall] A belligerent man calls the security guard, who threatens to throw me out of the men's bathroom because I am a woman, but this is the only bathroom my toddler will agree to use, and we're already battling with recurrent bladder infections and mental distress from all the *knyping*.² The kid just wants to pee.

[School: girls] *What are you doing in the girls' toilets?*

[School: boys] *What you doing in the boys' toilets?*

[Teacher] *I said boys this side, girls that side! You line up with the girls right now!*

[The Wimpy] *And him?* (Gestures with the pen.) What does your son want? We just say, *A cream soda please.*

[Anywhere] *But his face is too beautiful for a boy!* But she's so big, for a girl!

[Principal's Office] *You signed the rules when your child entered this school. All the girls must wear the regulation full black Speedo.*

[Teacher] *It's hate speech. She cannot call a black child that just because he calls her a butch dyke. I'm sure he doesn't even know what that means! And as you know, two wrongs don't make a right. Unless you stop this defiant streak now, establish respect for boundaries, she will grow up a criminal. We are a remedial school; we can't handle these other things.*

[Head of School Board] [Different school] *Look, Mom, can I give you some advice? Don't encourage her behaviour. Draw the line and don't let her cross it. Just nurture her femininity; then she will become the beautiful little girl she naturally is.*

[Parents' Representative] *The code of conduct is very clear. It does not permit such short hair. Not for girls.*

DAMNED IF YOU DO

DAMNED IF YOU DON'T

DAMNED DAMNED DAMNED

DAMN PEOPLE

(Murray, 2019)

...

² Colloquialism from the Afrikaans 'knyp', meaning 'to pinch'. In this context: to tighten the bladder muscles to withhold urination

I have no issue with ‘those who manage to negotiate sex/gender congruity more or less easily’, but I want to ‘foster an awareness of how that negotiation is neither natural nor universal’ (Elliot, 2010: 4). Contemporary paediatric endocrinology ‘is resolute that gender has a stable biological element’ but, at the same time, ‘emerging scientific consensus is that the felt sense of gender subjectivity’ – puzzling, dispersed – ‘inheres somewhere deep within’ (Best, 2020: 222). Kathryn Bond Stockton mulls over the ‘words through which I made myself out’ in *Avidly Kissing: Making Out* (2019), her memoirish account of reading as/and gender-nonconforming: “‘girl’ turning ‘gay’ feeling ‘trans’ under ‘white’ facing ‘God’ soaked in ‘shame’, having a ‘blast’” (2019: xv). As she remarks, ‘We’re made of “words” as much as made of cells’ (2021: 8). ‘Words enter us and words live inside us, birthing whole realms of meaning *in* us. Words are even draped on us. We wear “girl” or “boy”, for instance, in the form of clothes and hair and so much more. It can be hard, to put it mildly, to get words off of us – especially words put onto us before we were born’ (Stockton, 2021: 14).

...

In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson pays homage to ‘the many-gendered mothers of my heart’ (2015: 57), a phrase she borrows from the poet Dana Ward to signal the powerful revolutionary work of many feminist, queer, and antiracist thinkers, writers, activists, and artists of different genders who have nurtured her ideas or provided her with intellectual precedents. ‘I was cruising for intellectual mothers’, she says of her college-age self (2015: 58). My own mind creates ‘collage self’, a bricolage of imaginative-academic connections, imaginary companions who keep me, allow me to gather together, to keep myself going, in the ongoingness of trans-allied mothering. While alliances are never direct, I am drawn to varieties of queer theory, since ‘queer theory’s antinormative methods have a key role to play, allowing us to imagine ourselves and the world otherwise’ (Owen, 2020: 13). In my otherwise searches, the many possibilities form a sustaining mixed company, across many media. Printed volumes. Websites. TikTok. Google Scholar. Instagram.

Jack Halberstam Kathryn Bond Stockton Ocean Vuong Leslie Feinberg Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick Djuna Barnes Hil Malatino Maggie Nelson Zanele Muholi B. Camminga Maia Kobabe Bhanu Kapil Chris Mosier bell hooks Sara Ahmed Dennis Francis Anne Carson Gender DynamiX Alok Vaid-Menon Susan Stryker Chella Man Audre Lorde Chase Strangio Alison Bechdel Ernst van der Wal Aydian Dowling Kopano Ratele.

Somehow, they hold together.

Ocean Vuong says, ‘I wandered into a bookstore’ and ‘Anne Carson was somehow under queer literature’ with the queer texts, but ‘*Autobiography of Red*, right? And I think that’s right, right? (...) and then queerness in a way helps us hold all of them simultaneously true. We don’t have to decide, we don’t have to have a binary polemic’ because categories and genres are ‘much more nebulous than the commercialization of genre tells us’. And then as a writer, ‘I think I looked at my bookshelf and I said, okay, how do I create a matrix out of these weirdos who’ve been lifegiving to me’ drawing on ‘the plurality of what’s possible[?]’ (Vuong and Elkins, 2023).

...

‘As a not-girl’, writes Stockton of her genderqueer childhood (2019: 130), and also a ‘Not-girl notboy all my life’ (138), ‘I always had the feeling of ‘being ‘beside myself’ (138). Elsewhere she says: ‘I’ve been a fiction to myself, as it happens, as I sought from youngest days to kiss girlbodies but kiss the boy-word upon my own self’ (2021: 108):

Those of us said to be ‘girl’ or ‘boy’, without any way to ditch our one word and get the other word, were impaled upon both while falling between them. Not-girl-not-boy (wasn’t the one, couldn’t be the other), not ‘trans’ either (no such word I knew), we were prequel-people, linguistically stranded at that point in history. With no surgery or drugs known to us, weird word-kissing – kissing a word we could not ‘have’ – was all we knew to do. (Stockton and Josiowicz, 2021: 112)

I am attracted to Stockton’s queer world-making in words, her tussles with creating a response to gendering as presence out of absence, self through re-doublings. Stockton reflects on a queer child’s knowing while not knowing that is a way of being both with *and* beyond, a certain uncertainty (an uncertain certainty?) made through aloneness, projection, longing, desire, constraint. In conjuring this strange agency, she also reminds us that since “‘children’ do not obey’ adult orders of ‘the Child’ (Stockton and Josiowicz, 2021: 109), in some sense ‘the queer child (...) is every child, since every child is strange from the standpoint of adults (...) full of crafty swerves’ (109) that entice and threaten the norms that would prefer to deny the ‘intense varieties of racialized gender and sexual yearnings and cultural flavors and strange reflections (...) encased in our own (weird) bodies’ (108).

Stockton reminds us that we have good reason to trouble the troubling category of gender, sharing her discovery of the ‘unexpected history’ (2021: xii) of ‘gender’ she encountered in Jules Gill Peterson’s *Histories of the Transgender*

Child (2018). Stockton, like many people, had found inspiration in ‘feminists’ separation of the concept “gender” from “sex” in the 1970s’, making ‘gender our hero’ against the conventional givens of biology, and ‘crafting gender as the happily changeable cultural behaviors that mute the force of sex’ (Stockton and Josiowicz, 2021: 110). Yet as Stockton discovers via Peterson’s research, in 1950 the sex researcher John Money and his team had got to gender first, laying the rigidly influential foundation that would shape ‘all of our lives’ (Stockton and Josiowicz, 2021: 110):

From his contact with intersex and transgender children, Money knew that bodies were ‘naturally’ ‘indeterminate’ in terms of sex. He and his colleagues knew that numerous ‘predictors’ for male or female status were (...) unpredictable. Chromosomes were not a sure grounding force; a body’s having testes or ovaries didn’t anchor it; hormones, with all their complexities, Money knew, didn’t predict with any finality; and genitals or secondary sex characteristics could present askew. Enter gender. To *shore up* sex. To unqueer what is queer about biology. In the face of children’s ‘plastic’ bodies, Money said that children needed to grow in ‘developmental’ channels – male *or* female channels he called *gender* – if they were going to escape social stigma. (110)

In other (tautological) words, society’s enforced gender ‘binary corrects a problem of its own making. And medicine complies, against its own research. Quite unlike later feminist notions – that gender is dynamic, changing, changeable, and capable of undermining social norms and their stigmatizing ways – Money’s ‘gender’ (...) argued for something much more fixed and stigmatising, all while purporting to sidestep stigma’ (110).

...

As a child, ‘I was seduced by my unseen face’, recalls Stockton, ‘I was at the mirror, straining to kiss the face I felt, trying for the life of me to make myself out. I felt myself a boy, saw myself a girl. Somewhere deep inside me I was discerning a face I couldn’t see, except that I could sense it (...) By stark contrast, my observable face was a quandary’ (2019: 31).

A quandary. In that quotation from Stockton, the word prompts in me an unruly queue of Qs, never quiescent: quiddity, quirk, quizzical, questioning, quisling, querying, all words in queer company among more naturalised, everyday (*quotidian*) lexicons. Even relative to supposedly more typical reference points that designate positions X and Y, Q seems pointedly questionable, necessarily out-of-order, even disorderly. Q is never either this or that, no obedient glyph standing for male ♂, or female ♀. Q cues me towards an orientation that is other; some body not quite. To put this another way, the very q-ness of ‘Q’ has come to conjure queerness for my imagination, making space and place for the questioning to which I am called. Q is a crucial figure of my intransigent queering as the mother of a trans child.

This should not engender surprise.

And lest you forget: this involves you, too, however cis, straight, hetero. For in the questioning that Stockton shapes in *Gender(s)* (2021), you, the reader, must be prepared ‘to enter a story that is yours, however strange it could end up seeming’ (xi), for the book is ‘a plunge into gender’s strangeness, no matter how ‘normal’ the concept seems’ (xii). For as Stockton cautions, in her reading ‘biology turns strange for everyone – *especially* for people who assume gender is given and “natural”’ (2).

...

‘Whereas trans belonged to an overly pathologized category in the not-so-distant past, today trans childhood represents one iteration by which gender is done’ (Best, 2020: 222). I wish it were that simple. The world over, that ‘past’ reappears, spectrally or more bluntly. In the United States. In Uganda. Even here in South Africa, for X, it is so difficult to find a path. Make a path. To path a life that is authentically ‘selving’. And even when I resist pathologising, trying emphatically and empathetically to parse a trans life sentence without conventional assumptions of passing and passing privilege, the fugitive lack of clarity can be disorientating. I scarcely know where I am.

...

Having relocated with the family as a child from Durban to a new town, X often recalled a bridge in the old mother city of childhood, a vast, curved arch spanning a major multi-lane route into the city centre, connecting one side of the city to another. ‘Their’ side, where they lived, to ‘the other’ side, where they did not live. Umbilo/Glenwood/Manor Gardens ↔ Berea/Musgrave/Morningside. This bridge had to be crossed several times a day, to and from remedial school. The bridge was both coming and going, a familiar but also an unsettled

habitus of leaving and arrival. The bridge was not the marker of 'from' and 'to, but some less binary form of connection, at once mode and material. Being. In process. Ongoing.

In the family's new home town, the once-repeatedly seen and experienced object of the bridge became a missing landmark, an empty site of memory that young X actively missed. X would mull over the bridge, pondering aloud.

There came a point where X explicitly understood that she had fixed on this bridge as an imaginative mnemonic of self. X wanted to fly back to the old city, to re-experience the bridge. Since that was not possible, the bridge of talking had to answer to the unfulfilled need.

'What was that bridge thing again?' X asked every few days in the still unsettled new home town. Never mind how often X had been told, X would forget. Or appear to forget, in order to be able to ask, again, about the bridge to which X was so attached and which formed part of X's attachment to an old (*younger*) self. Also, the given, proper name of the landmark constantly slipped X's mind. So again X would ask, and again X would be told: Tollgate Bridge.

But this very idea flummoxed. How could there be a bridge that was also a gate? It wasn't possible. And if it was possible, *somehow*, then where *was* the missing gate? How come, X said, no one could see the gate? And what was a toll? Where was the bell, if there was a toll? And when X was told about the toll being money, X asked what it was for, and who said it must be paid, and who'd put those people in charge? And how come we never paid?

Again and again and again. So many questions asked and answered about The Bridge but still never answering to the child's questions about The Bridge. Time and again the time they spent, X and Y. crossing over and over.

...

Barely a teen (after a long childhood period answering to a self-chosen boy's name), X declared herself done with pretence and came out. As a lesbian. Some were a little surprised, but also not really surprised. Relieved, even. A family could do lesbian, no problem. Even if the psychosocial intricacies of the identity were unknown, it was a familiar style of queerness, especially in the androgyny that often marks early female adolescence. The back of a denim jacket stencilled 'Baby Butch'. ('You mean, like, dyke?' a relative grimaced. 'But isn't it obvious?') Hair cropped. Doc Martens. Carabiners. Dad's leather jacket. A kerchief tucked into a pocket. Head shaved. Stick and poke tattoos. Bedroom artworked in photographs of female nudes, and gender-ambiguous male-presenting bodies. Drawings of human beings morphing into monsters (and/or the other way around?). Chest binding. Secrecy. Dodgy relationships with food. Trauma every bloody month. Self-harm. Hours of solitary (social) media, and reading. (A lesbian friend chats to X. Tells Y she needs to be more careful about X going online.) The books are a better-known quantity: Ann Cvetkovich. Sarah Waters. bell hooks. Garth Greenwell. Ocean Vuong. Maggie Nelson. Leslie Feinberg. Girlfriends are found and loved and lost, sometimes with dangerous intensity.

In style, self, thought, in this period, X lives a violent angularity, wildly at odds with everyone and everything. There is rage. Many things get broken. And yet through it all, we sense the undeniable authority of someone struggling to be themselves.

Several difficult years later: 'I'm trans'.

() Lacuna. But after the gamut, the pieces, the mother knew nothing else to do except accept, and go figure. Trans. If a person, like X, experienced a severely disabling discrepancy with the gender assigned at birth, trans presented as a narrative of transformation. A person who identified as trans wanted to cross from one gender to the opposite gender. F2M, in X's case. The mother's weirdly-wired mind tossed up Todorov's narrative schema: 'situation – transformation – situation'. In a transman's transition, multiple obstacles would need to be overcome, in stages:

social transitioning: living as the desired gender, passing, pronouns, re-naming...

biomedical transitioning: testosterone, top surgery, bottom surgery, other masculinising/gender confirming surgeries...?

official transitioning (doctors again, plus Home Affairs): formal change of name and gender on birth, ID, bank cards, school transcripts...

All extreme, and extremely daunting. But this had to be done, since life had shown that the dire alternative, for X, was living in deathly extremis.

And yet, after a time – a long time – the mother slowly understood the stupid facility of her clear, linear, longing for the certainty of a transformation from → to. She saw that subtending such a resolute narrative arc are the old, predictable binaries, the pressure for trans individuals to present *appealingly* through society's preferred codes of 'transnormative respectability politics' (Miller, 2019: 304). She meant well, but Y's thinking had been unwittingly caught in the cis assumption that trans people would/should render themselves legible through the prevailing

norms: male /female. Either/or. (Never mind the added complexity of straight/queer.) The best way to prove yourself a ‘good’, ‘worthy’ trans person, was to transition *properly* from M2F, or F2M. And, ideally, to do so quietly, without any disruptive genderfuck trouble. Then, what followed: while of course you could never really be a real man, or a real woman, when you had fully transitioned you could settle into your authentic trans self, leaving the old, wrongbody you behind, and society (generously) would more-or-less bypass your strangeness if you could pass as the real deal without making waves.

In comparison, Hil Malatino motivates for trans lives lived through a processual ‘trans-ing’, an ongoing, life-long range of transitioning practices and trans becomings; a shifting agglomeration of adjustments, re-revisions and re-versionings of trans that has no obvious ‘delimited outcome’ or fixed endpoint or comprehensive legibility (2019a: 644). For Malatino, trans-ing occurs in the ‘interregnum’ of structural and personal violences and pleasures, of wounds, wishes and fugitive joys, of uneasy intersections of social, individual and medical expressions of self beyond clear cut, old-style categories of coherent gender identity. Or, as Susan Stryker writes, ‘it is the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place, rather than any particular destination or mode of transition that characterizes the concept of transgender’ (2017: 1).

...

Still, ideas, like people, can be tough cookies. Even when we’re eager for their company, they can leave us wanting. Ideas call my supposed open mindedness into question when I happen on Halberstam again, again a goad. Halberstam asserts: the texts ‘I examine (...) refuse to think back through the mother; they actively and passively lose the mother, abuse the mother, love, hate, and destroy the mother, and in the process they produce a theoretical and imaginative space that is ‘not woman’ or that can be occupied only by unbecoming women’ (2011: 125). This is difficult; learning to be ‘capable of recognizing the political project articulated in the form of refusal’ (126). As Halberstam observes, ‘radical forms of passivity and masochism step out of the easy model of a transfer of femininity from mother to daughter and actually seek to destroy the mother-daughter bond altogether’ (131).

Is this what trans masculinity is teaching me?

Is this one of the lessons I must learn?

...

Over the years (a slow shadow of intimacy) schooling is a bridge almost too far. The rigours. The challenges. Extreme demand avoidance. The difficulties of being alive. The stress permeates everything. Y and X must leave at 6.15am to arrive on time at the small independent learning hub in a town about 40 kms away. Breakfast is a sleepy bowl in the car. Often, X sleeps, or tunes out. Hardly sun up, but emotions are already explosive.

Then one early morning, on the drive, X suddenly asked to read to Y. Long extracts from Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*. X reads hesitantly, at first, unused to the soundfeel of reading aloud. A traumatic episode in the narrative is mumbled in a stilted monotone that gains confidence and fluency in the reading of passages through passages of time, the reading aloud delivered from the back seat, directed at the back of the mother’s head. Because: the relief, for X, of no eyes to see, and no mouth to urge.

Is this what it means to find your voice? To have your voice heard? To be heard by another, for exactly the duration you wish, without interruption? To ventriloquise your voice through the published voice of a writer who is also queer? For this suspended duration, Y feels how X feels themselves ‘seen’ via a synesthetic effect, without being constantly surveilled by forms of concern or judgement, whether benign or malign.

This unexpected *togetherness* in the car, through reading and listening, offers a shared affect, materialising an elusive, uneven connection. The possibility for X and Y to be differently. It is as close as touch. As intimate as kissing. It is as if the car has transformed into another kind of vehicle, a tentatively shared space, and Y remembers that metaphor, too, is a kind of transformation, as metaphors combine by carrying meaning from one thing to another, in the process trying to change one thing into another with an uncanny sense of in/completeness. In metaphor, things are rendered similar, and yet nothing is ever quite as it seems.

...

Y remembers when X eventually learnt to read. A long process. Late. The child's desperate relief: 'Now I can breathe!' Not metaphor, but fully-embodied feeling, so different from the characteristic autistic masking.

Y remembers another early morning. Dark winter. Again the drive to the distant school. Provoked beyond her limit she'd veered onto the verge, jamming the brakes, screaming. She'd yanked open the back passenger door and punched and pummelled X, in a deadly frenzy. The early morning traffic continued, in both directions.

Violence. Vital life. Both appear in the same trans-ing story, which offers no sudden transformations for the better.

...

Halberstam assertively queers Cvetkovich's take on the relatively narrow archive of feelings associated with canonical gay male writers in their 'responses to the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heteronormativity' (2011: 109). Beyond the camp formulae of ennui, ironic distancing, and arch dismissal as expressions of antisocial affect, Halberstam claims varied modes of negativity, among them 'rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, brutal honesty, and disappointment' (109). These, in queer lives, comprise a powerful politics that releases – *unlooses* – 'the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire' (109). Here, in wider political company we find:

[d]yke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, punk pugilism – these are the bleak and angry territories of the antisocial turn; these are the jagged zones within which not only self-shattering ...but other-shattering occurs. If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate. (110)

I understand this, in conceptual terms. And yet Halberstam's antisocial turn is terrifying, for me, in its (necessary) intent to destroy forms of collective socialisation that refuse to meet queerness as it is, spilling over, perhaps, to refuse forms of fragile allyship that exert overconcern. Mothering. Care. Harm. Othering.

Hobbled by my own repressed maternal rage, I find myself processing my fear of female rage by working through Hil Malatino's version of trans rage as 'tough breaks' and 'trans resilience'. Malatino turns 'away from (...) culturally dominant articulations of rage' that position rage as necessarily *negative affect*, as a 'deleterious emotion' (2019b: 122) to be worked through at the individual level, and overcome, discarded. Instead, for Malatino, 'rage is key to the survival of minoritized subjects', offering a 'critical resource' (2019b: 122). Malatino extends into trans discourse Sara Ahmed's assertion that rage is a necessary feminist affect (2006), a force that moves us and others variously away from, and towards. Rage,

... is a repellent affect, meaning it scares away certain others and, in doing so, propels us as well. It is our vest of porcupine quills, that which makes us prickly, that which prevents proximity, deters the closeness of threatening forces. It is a kind of armor, shielding us from that which seeks to harm. It can form a force-field; it is a radiating affect that distances. This distancing can produce a small modicum of space for being that is less subject to trespass, less likely to be violated. Rage can make us seem unfriendly, unapproachable – it can deter less-than-welcome approaches. Being perceived as unfriendly can be an important mode of self-preservation, a way to inure ourselves in/relation to hostile publics, a way to inoculate ourselves against the emotional toxicity that is directed our way. (2019b: 122–123)

In the context of trans lives, Malatino mobilises rage as a complex affective force with multiple inflections and overlays: 'Rage breaks things. Rage signals a break. Breaking leads us beyond rage. Rage enables a break' (2019b: 124) without 'necessarily imposing hard separations of sense among them' (124).

This rage can *enable*:

We tell our uncle his joke is racist. We leave the family table when we're consistently gendered incorrectly. We ask our loved ones to stop deadnaming us. We tell a transphobic street harasser to fuck off. We refuse eye contact with the stranger aggressively ogling us. We make eye contact with the stranger

aggressively ogling us and sneer. We trouble others. We make trouble for others. Rage helps us come unstuck, helps us find an exit from these troubling relations. (2019b: 123)

...

During a chef school industry placement, the middle-aged male Head Butcher, a man of colour, jibes:

‘Looks like you never have a boyfriend?’

X: ‘I’m trans masc. And I wanna *girlfriend*.’

‘What the fuck you even saying, trans-what? You don’t *smaak*³ the sausage?’

X: ‘Fuck you man. Just leave me and my life alone. Go back to your *meat*.’

Unfortunately, this behaviour could get X fired.

Fortunately, it is the penultimate day of the internship.

Is it always going to be like this?

...

Queerness has been cast ‘as the dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness’ (Halberstam, 2011: 97). As Halberstam points out:

While liberal histories build triumphant political narratives with progressive stories of improvement and success, radical histories must contend with a less tidy past, one that passes on legacies of failure and loneliness as the consequences of homophobia and racism and xenophobia. (98–99)

There is undeniable truth in this, *trauma*. As the mother of a trans child who over his young lifetime has grown, is growing, will further grow, into his transmasculine identity, experience has shown me a slow, fear-filled violence of fragile deferred hope. But I also remind myself that ‘nothing essentially connects gay and lesbian and trans people to these forms of unbeing and unbecoming’ (Halberstam, 97). And yet, again, I know – counterintuitively – that ‘the social and symbolic systems that tether queerness to loss and failure (...) cannot be wished away’ and ‘nor should they be’. For to ‘simply repudiate the connections between queerness and negativity is to commit to an unbearably positivist and progressive understanding of the queer’ as subject to the cruel optimism of redemption, progress, inclusion (97–98). So I grapple with the thought, following arguments that reposition failure as a necessary repertoire of Halberstam’s ‘queer art’, that being trans deliberately disfigures, disrupts, the blindsiding, exclusionary nature of optimistic narratives of hope that privilege individual responsibility, hard work, and dedicated agency as the primary markers of success. Trans-ing calls bullshit on such myths, exposing the systemic injustices and structural disparities that pretend equality while keeping injustice in place.

...

I feel my way into reading my child’s transness where I am. Here. South Africa. A country with an enviable Constitution and accompanying Laws and Acts, that ‘have theoretically created radical opportunities for the imagining of different gender embodiments’ (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 15–16). Hard as things are, for those who are trans in South Africa, lately I am relieved X is not transitioning in Florida, or Texas, or any number of American states where trans rights have been rolled back in terrifyingly phobic legislative sweeps. We are here. X is on T. ‘Here’ has made possible some things that maybe once I thought impossible.

Local scholarship helps me to figure out the relational pressures and possibilities X is likely to face, in living in this country as a transmasculine person. A recent article by Monakali and Francis helps me to place X’s experiences in tentative relation to the lives of other local transmasculine people, in communities across the Western Cape. I learn to acknowledge masculinities, plural, as ‘not the exclusive embodiment of bodies assigned to the male sex but a collection of roles, behaviors, and imaginaries that are continually being challenged’ and transformed (2022: 6). I start to see, in X, how for a transman the ‘relationality of gender is highlighted as power shifts become more pronounced as a result of the status of being men and occupying masculine subject positions’ (15).

³ Slang from the Afrikaans word for ‘taste’, meaning ‘to like, to fancy, to be keen on’

Like the transmale participants in Monakali and Francis's study, since X lives in a cisnormative, raced patriarchal context with the ubiquitous 'threat of gender-based violence and sexual violence' (14) against 'women and femme-presenting people' (15), he is bound to grapple with his 'preferred expression of masculine identity' (14). As a transman he is consciously challenged to devise, revise, negotiate masculine subjectivity in relation to privileged 'available violent masculine ideals' (14). In a society where transness is subject to violence, erasure, debasement, *death*, how will X learn to assert himself, his rights, without drawing on the dominant discourse of violent masculinity that prevails?

...

He goes to clubs. Says guys look at him *skeef*.⁴ Mocking. He wants to fuck them up. He does not. (Is he weak? Is this strength?)

He does his weekly shopping. Says people give him the side-eye. He feels rage. Shame. Flagrant fuck you willfulness.

He sees men treating a homeless woman badly. Says he wants to fuck them up. He does not. (Is he weak? Is he strong?)

His blind date gets blind drunk. He says she ditches him, preferring to be railed in the bathroom by some random bro. He feels a complicated girlboy rageshame. Rants about No Respect for *Me*. No Self Respect Either. Has to be restrained.

He walks home late at night, in the early hours. Says no one will mess with him. Not when he looks like this. (Gestures. Gym is starting to pay off.)

He's got a mouth on him. Swears. (Says: 'So what? Everyone does. You're just old.' Swaggers. Shadow boxes. Presents himself through common male codes.)

He goes to buy cigarettes from a hole-in-the wall café. Says when he pays, the man in a kurta behind the counter clutches his wrist and reaches over the chips and lighters trying to stroke X's stubbled cheek. Smiles. 'Hello, Lady Boy'. (X recoils. '*Don't you fucking touch me!*')

He's with female friends, outside a club. Says five guys pin him to the ground and jack his cellphone. Says he cannot even think about resisting. As if this is just something that happens. To him. As if he is not really present, in himself.

...

Dicks, whether literal or discursive, X can do without them, mostly. (Of course, it's complicated.) But: a beard, a buff build, a square jaw, a deep voice, a body 'that communicate[s] normative interpellations of masculinity' (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 6) – these X wants, along with the commanding ability to occupy public space without fear. Is this complicity in the gender binary?

I find myself thinking that if some transmen prefer to embrace 'a gender nonconforming masculinity which speaks to the porous qualities of gender' (15), it is also not surprising that passing unremarked as a man is a desirable goal for many transmen. If it's about happiness, it's also about safety; liveability. Plenty of scholarship indicates 'that transgender subjectivity is navigated through the often slippery dichotomy of visible and invisible, where recognition, acceptance, and sometimes survival frequently hinge on transgender people's embodiment and performance of normative gender subjectivities' (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 8). Our Constitution aside, the 'binary imaginary of gender' is 'deeply embedded within the legal, sociopolitical, and cultural fabric' of South Africa, and a significant South African survey estimates that about 500 000 people 'have physically harmed women who dressed and behaved like men in public' (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 4). In other words, given genderism's 'hostile readings of gender-ambiguous and gender nonconforming bodies', a transman is in danger of being a target if 'publicly occupying a trans masculine gender expression that calls the gender binary into question' (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 15).

...

⁴ Slang from the Afrikaans word for 'crooked', 'skew'. In this context, meaning 'to side eye', to look with the likelihood of giving offence

Once again, I am teaching Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Some of the contemporary scholarship (building on Susan Stryker's early insights) interprets 'the monster' as a narrative figure for trans-lating transness. In the novel, the nameless being created and then abandoned by Victor Frankenstein mulls over the pained isolation caused by his physical form. He begs to know whether he is, then, a monster, a blemish upon the earth, destined to be shunned and disowned.

As Anson Koch-Rein observes, the 'monster is a ubiquitous figure in transgender rhetorics', used both against and for trans life-storying. '[T]ransphobic uses of Frankenstein's monster as a trope generally draw on ideas of monstrous bodies and physical monstrosity' so as 'to cast transgender people as 'monstrous, crazy, or less than human' (2019: 44). Against such denouncing, however, are trans-affirming imaginaries that assert the so-called monster's 'ragefueled agency to carve out a transgender speaking position in the face of the silencing gestures of transphobia' (Koch-Rein, 2019: 44). Additionally, he reminds us, 'Rage is not the only means of understanding trans affect through *Frankenstein*'. As 'a figure laden with negative affect, the monster offers transgender readers a way of addressing feelings of shame, gender dysphoria, and alienation from heteronormative gender and sexuality' (44). Again, this is tricky to read. In part, stories of 'queer shame' are 'read as relatable, sympathy-generating, and therefore acceptable queer narratives, while proud, fluid, perverse and politically angry narratives are deemed 'too hard' for most listeners to see, hear, or bear', meaning that 'these narratives remain persistently unintelligible, characterised as 'monstrous accounts of queer selves and lives' (Jones and Harris, 2016: 521). Further still, we might begin to appreciate that the illegible 'monster' is a construct that surfaces the social, beyond the individual trans life:

[t]racing how affect creates the monster lets us see gender dysphoric shame as a response to perceptions of non-normative embodiment in the social world and reveals the role of disgust in the naturalization of transphobic violence. (Koch-Rein, 2019: 45-46)

My thoughts shift and swerve. They move over and across familiar lines, protocols, practices, then turn slant, all in making my understanding of trans necessarily otherwise. With difficulty, I break the comforting balance of either/or, gathering purpose and chance and their numerous relations into an erratic, noisy colloquy, a swooping, looping murmuration: stigmata martyr mater master m/other, a melee motherfesto. I beg and steal and borrow from what-have-you, notably from queer arts of failure that stumble and stammer, halting even as they move towards coming to know trans more intimately. I like that this ongoing movement of allyship aligns with trans-ing, a verb in the present continuous tense. I also like the incongruity of the fact that this tense is sometimes called the present progressive, or the present imperfect.

I am looking. Witnessing. Searching for alternatives 'to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other' (Halberstam, 2011: 1). I am reading 'across feminist, queer, and trans terrains' (Elliot, 2010: 9), making 'a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations' hoping, for X and for Y, 'to locate (...) the in-between spaces' (Halberstam, 2011: 2) and gather together amid the 'fugitive strivings' (Elliot, 2010: 13) that promise the flourishing of trans as diverse emergence. This process unsettles comfort, even while consolation is sought. It is a method that tries to create a workable piecework of feelings and ideas by 'making its peace with the possibility' that mothering a trans life entails even less mastery than motherhood more usually, the mother learning to become other, leaning in to embrace 'alternatives' that 'dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive (...) realm of critique and refusal', rather than expressing some idealised 'mother love'. I am working to accept 'a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing' than familiar ways of being in the world, as a mother mothering trans (Halberstam, 2011: 2). This too is living in the m/other's hope of a potentially queer, trans futurity coming sometime into being.

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