Pronouns Not Of My Own Making:

Language and Gender Misrecognition in the Academy

by

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I intercept your gaze as I clear my lunch debris from the small round table in a little deli I visit almost daily. Your eyes study me, attempting to ascertain my biological sex, confused by my physical presentation. You offer up a mundane question—small talk—coaxing a verbal response from me. As I speak, I am located and fixed within a history and propelled towards a future not of my own making.

Every day I (re)construct myself, put on my binder, pack if I feel safe enough and enter the world. Through the use of gendered pronouns I am continually confronted with an image of myself that I do not claim or own. I restructure myself with each outing, denial, and dismissal. It is particularly confounding to repeatedly experience this within the academic environment. Most recently, a fellow student after studying a series of my paintings; baby yellow splitting the canvas with either baby blue or baby pink, the outline of figure formed by the two colors meeting; said "Well, I know it's about gender, because I *know* eddie. The pink, blue and yellow are all baby colors. *She* is clearly talking about not fitting into the gender binary (my italics)."

I am only visible for a moment. The "I" that I carefully construct gendered language erases. I am an object; fixed and located. Am I to be happy that my work is understood and that part of what I am attempting to express is successfully conveyed? Or am I to be frustrated that even with this knowledge my peers and professors still don't consider the possibility that "she" is not the right pronoun?

In an attempt to highlight the marginalization of trans-identified individuals within academia despite the proliferation of the transgendered and transsexual subject in popular culture and postmodern thought, this paper examines the binary structures of language that situate the body, by locating and fixing identity. Working out from the

writings of Franz Fanon I draw parallels between race and gender, both of which operate first as site-based; in order to establish the corporeal schema that is the trans experience. Through narrative I seek to return the personal and 'body' to postmodern discourse, and there by uproot and disrupt contemporary theories that claim the fractionalized self as uniquely postmodern and hold the transsexual and transgender 'body' up as icons of futurity.[1] I will examine work by Linda Besemer and introduce my own work, in a movement towards new ways of envisioning embodiment and temporality that allows for a namable and visible 'inbetweennes.'

Within the context of this paper, the term "transgender" describes bodies that are *fixed* by gendered language: bodies whose genitalia is labeled as female or male at birth and who are often socialized in contradiction to their personal concept of "self". Additionally transgender describes the temporal and corporeal schema articulation from within the binary produces.[2] When I speak of transgender I am calling to mind complicated bodies: men with vaginas, women with penises, and all the other configurations bodies come in, with or without hormonal or surgical modification. This includes a growing queer community where neologisms continue to evolve and gendered language is re-ascribed: a chest is a chest with or without mammary glands and a "clitoris" is a penis with or without testosterone. Within this community, language is self-determined and self-ascribed. Despite these wonderful evolutions in language,

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[1] Rita Felski, "Fin de Siecle, Fin de Sexe: Transsexuality and the Death of History," in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*, (*NY and London: NY University Press, 2000),* 149-150.

[2] Franz Fanon describes a similar experience in *Black Skins, White Masks,* "A slow composition of my self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world–such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world–definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world."

the terms 'transsexual' and 'transgender' etymologically, designate transition from one end of the binary to the other (transsexual) or the body's failure to become either male or female (transgender); revealing an inability in language to describe a viable subject without it being described in terms of the male/female dyad.

The transgendered individuals and communities I describe contrasts sharply to the postmodern trope of fragmentation with Jean Baudrillard's emblematic *transsexual* or other usurpations of trans-identity as with Donna Haraway's "bodies without gender".[3] While the post-modern epoch can be described as a fragmentation of information, consumerism, and a collapse of temporal difference of local and global, holding the transgender or transsexual body as the embodiment of this is at best problematic. In this context, the "transsexual" functions as an empty signifier, a metaphor—a symbol of the fractionalized self and futurity—never whole or present. Equally, Haraway's iconic transgendered body is the result of the flexibility of gender, of bodies without sex, hybridization—an idealized, utopian body.[4] This usage does not signify the trans-person who occupies a complex and often unjust place in society, or the individual that challenges the binary by constructing new masculinities and femininities. Instead, these abstractions fetishize trans bodies, reducing the struggle for livable lives to an idealized concept extricated from the realness of living in a society that stigmatizes, oppresses, and pathologizes trans-identity.

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[3] See 1 and Jean Baudrillard's essay "Transsexuality" in *The Transparency of Evil* and Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The reinvention of Nature* for further examples of the usage of transgender and transsexuality within postmodern and feminist discourse.

[4] See 1 and 3 in addition to Jay Prosser's *Second Skins* where he problematizes Butler's read of transsexual embodiment in *Paris is Burning*.

The binary structures of language make us believe that bodies can only come in two different ways. It is through this repetition that the gender binary becomes normalized. These social norms replace and produce our understanding of sex as either male or female and as natural rather than socially constructed.[5] According to Judith Butler, these norms of existence—the male/female dyad and congruous gender expression—become sites or nodes where bodies become visible and viable beings.[6] Those whose sex and gender identities do not and cannot easily fit into this binary structure occupy a space linguistically and socially that is unnamable. Making ones intelligibility, in terms of social norms, both a place of freedom where one negotiates identity and a place of loss where one is unable to find identity.

The temporal space that I occupy and embody, as a transperson, similar to what Frantz Fanon describes in "Black Skin, White Masks," is an unoccupiable position. Fanon, grappling with the corporeal schema of "race," is constricted by a racialized identity constructed by and through a white racist society. He writes, "I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other … and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea…."[7]

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[5] "If I am always constituted by norms that are not of my making, then I have to understand the ways that constitution takes place. […] The fact that I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself follows from the fact that the sociality of norms exceeds my inception and my demise, sustaining a temporal and spatial field of operation that exceeds my self-understanding."

[6] In Judith Butler's canonical book *Gender Trouble*, she discusses at length the heterosexual matrix and gender construction and the complicity between these two hegemonies in producing socially constituted beings. In her collection of essays, *Undoing Gender,* she discusses the relationship between socially constructed norms and the livability of trans lives.

[7] Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," in *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans., Charles Lam Markmann, (NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), 112.

Fanon reaches towards an "identity" that is visible only briefly, while possessing the knowledge that the racialization of his skin produces "self" as the enemy. His "self" is rendered unintelligible when he does not align himself with his "racialized identity" or when he asserts his own identity in the face of racial stereotypes. He exists as an object in a white world—stripped of his subjecthood and humanity. Fanon fights against a type of visibility that is not of his own naming, that constricts and tears him from his rightful human experience of dignity and self-determinacy.[8]

While I do not propose to investigate the complexities of "skin" and "race-based" constructs of "whiteness" and "blackness," what links the experiences of Fanon to transgender and transsexual people are that both "race" and "gender" operate first as a visual language. As a transgender person, I fight to maintain a sense of self, a "self" that is rendered invisible each time I am hailed with male or female gendered pronouns.[9] Equally, I am constricted by social norms that dictate our understanding of bodies—my voice, my chest, my Adam's apple, my package or lack of one— determinant of my humanity. Passing and non-passing trans-people face these same types of appearance-based assumptions daily, constantly having to prove ones gender and ones masculinity or femininity. The visual policing of gender maintains a hierarchy that reinforces the requirement for bodies to be realigned within the categories of male and female.

The acrylic works of Linda Besemer, created through a process of pouring layers of acrylic paint onto layers of acrylic paint, produce a finished product whose 'self' provides

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[8] Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks,* 109,110.
[9] "But if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that "undo" the person by conferring recognition, or "undo" the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced."

its own structure. These built up layer of paint insist on their own ability to stand, as it were, without the traditional canvas support or frame. *Large Zip Fold #1* (Figure 2) and *Large Zip Fold #2* (Figure 3) shift easily between abstract painting,

Figure 1

sculpture, and tapestry; creating and becoming new bodies—proposing infinite potentialities.

Figure 2

Halberstam describes Besemer's work as "[…] pliant to a point, flexible within limits, constrained by language, articulation, and gesture," capturing "the precise formal coordinates of the transgender body."[10] Besemer's acrylic forms which seem to directly evolve out of Eva Hesse's investigation and search for the "non-logical self," propose a

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[10] Judith Halberstam, "Technotopias," in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives,* (NY: New York University Press, 2005), 123.

'self' that is formed of itself, without and in opposition to traditional, historical, and social structures.[11] These acrylic forms indicate the possibility for transgender and transsexual bodies to be self-defining and self-structuring bodies, thus freeing the definitions of 'transgender' and 'transsexual' from the male/female gender binary.

Figure 3

Using the outline of my own form, my painted drawings express the psychological and physical temporality of a body that is called into question through the structures of language. My work attempts to visually depict the constriction of binary structures that situate the body, locate, and fix identity, and the corresponding temporal schema that non-normatively gendered body's experience.

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[11] Halberstam, "Technotopias," 124.

In *Shoulder City* (Figure 4)*,* the figure and landscape merge in earthy tones that

recall the desert or a dry summer hilltop. The form floats, ungrounded, and unfixed in

the white of the ground, simultaneously appearing solid and present—a harmonious
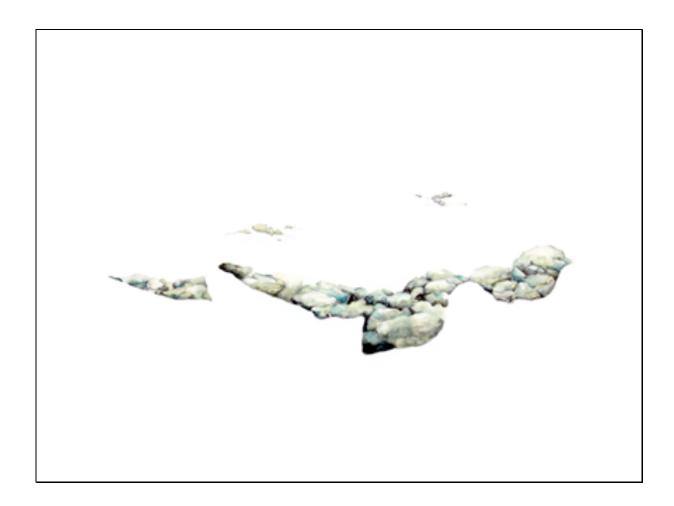
merging of nature and urbanity.

Figure 4

Delicately rendered blue and green shapes line the silhouette of a body, in *Ruins*

(Figure 5). The image indicates possibilities and yet resists becoming: a riverbed, a

rock wall, a clouded sky, or a physical body. *Shoulder City* and *Ruins* amplify the

binaries through which one attempts to locate the image: figure/landscape,

metaphor/image, or male/female. In both painted drawings, the forms fail to come into

full view, insisting on the impossibility of a fixed identity and proposing the 'non-logical self'—bodies that exist outside of the structures of language. Both Besemer's and my own work formally operate in opposition to binaries and illustrate the ability to occupy and articulate the state of inbetweenness – a "transgender" space. Thus, these body/landscapes occupy a temporal space that is unlocatable through the structures of language – verbal or visual.

Both Besemer's and my own work formally operate in opposition to binaries and illustrate the ability to occupy and articulate the state of inbetweenness – a "transgender" space. Working against the reading of utopian or fractionalized depictions of self, Besemer's 'self-structured' bodies and my own 'non-logical' body/landscapes must be met on their own terms. These forms cannot be situated within the binary. Equally compelling is that these works are realized and whole in their incompleteness.

It is through this analysis that I seek to dislodge notions of sex and gender from bodies, freeing bodies from the historicity of being bound or needing to be bound to these ideologies. Yet, it is perhaps here that my argument comes undone; an abstract concept removed from the lived experience and the conflation race and class upon trans bodies. Still it is the hegemonic male/female and the historicity of sex that continues to marginalize bodies. It is only through re-imagining these ideologies that we can begin to return livability to lives that are marginalized because of their 'inbetweenness'.

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