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Something Other Than Trancestors: Hirstory Lessons

Insulation

In the summer of 2019, I started a new journaling practice. I was inspired by Lynda Barry, the cartoonist and novelist who, in 2011, began teaching a course called What It Is at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. That course sought to answer the following question: “If the thing we call ‘the arts’ has a biological function, what is it?”

The core of her exploration into what she calls the “unthinkable mind” (2014, 51)—more colloquially known as the unconscious—is a daily writing and drawing exercise meant to activate and access the unthought, to bring out some of its contents and translate them to the page. In this exercise, you divide a page into four uneven quadrants by drawing an upside down cross. In the top-left quadrant, you make a list of the things you did that day. In the top-right, a list of what you saw. On the bottom left, a shred of conversation you overheard. And on the bottom right, you draw—in thirty seconds or less—a sketch of something you saw.

I quickly became a devotee of this practice, but one element of it gave me persistent trouble. This surprised me, given that
the exercise was predicated on instant, ostensibly noneffortful recall, a simple bubbling-up to the surface of consciousness of experiential fragments from one’s day. I wasn’t supposed to have to try. But every day, reliably, when I got to that third quadrant where I had to write down something I overheard, I could not recollect anything.

I pride myself on being a good listener. I prefer one-on-one conversations with friends and lovers. I spend a fair amount of my day-to-day life in relatively intense conversations, given that I’m a professor of gender and sexuality studies with a de-centered, fundamentally dialogic pedagogical practice. I do my best to stay sensitive and attuned to linguistic nuance, in speech and in writing. So why is it that, try as I might, I could not recall a single snippet of overheard conversation? Where was the disconnect happening?

Then a realization struck. This was about gender. And by that, I mean it was about transness, about gender nonconformance, ambiguity, and performative instability. From a very young age, I’d been subject to the speculative hypothesizing of strangers regarding gender. My high school bully, in a brutal iteration of this sort of transphobic speculation, once trailed me through a high school hallway demanding to—in his words—see my pussy. He wanted proof that I was a girl. My body, undergoing its uniquely intersex puberty, was manifesting in pretty masculine ways—facial hair, deepening voice—but I continued to dress tomboy-lite, shrouding my never-really-feminine body in baggy clothing. This wasn’t the first time I’d been exposed to such a demand, but it was the most invasive yet. That would change, though. I lived, throughout my teens and twenties, with an omnipresent worry that when and where I appeared in public, I would be subject to stares and extemporaneous speechifying about my gender. I often—sometimes paranoically, perhaps—was convinced I heard whispering in my wake about whether I was a boy or a girl. I
refused to stop going out, however—that wouldn’t have been possible or tenable for me; I’m constitutionally antiagoraphobic. But what I did do—without ever admitting it to myself, without ever directly or intentionally trying—was develop the ability to completely tune out the conversations of strangers. I had cultivated an intense inability to eavesdrop, and I didn’t even realize I’d done so for . . . maybe decades? Until Lynda Barry prompted me to sit down, shut up, and think about what I’d overheard that day, and I—ever a student that aims to please—completely failed the exercise.

For days, I walked around attempting to tune into the conversations of others, trying desperately to bring my auditory sense-relation to the world into a more robust existence. It was really, really hard work; the strength of the habit I’d built was immense and recalcitrant. I had stonewalled the world’s chatter, and I had to disassemble this wall brick by brick if I was going to cultivate an openness to the words around me. But this opening, like all openings, also intensified my sense of vulnerability, increased the likelihood of becoming wounded by some offhanded scrap of commentary.

When I told friends about this strange ability to turn the volume on the world way, way down, some of them—all cis and relatively gender-normative—responded with envy. How convenient it must be, they said, thinking of all the times they’d become annoyed and exasperated with things they’d overheard: MAGA flunkies in the supermarket checkout line, caretakers desperately trying to cajole a child into silence, tech bros talking investment schemes at the airport. For them, this chatter is noise—a distraction, not at all central to their day, their goals, their well-being. For me, the inability to hear this noise had become an index of exclusion and marginality. I had tuned out in order to protect myself. The degree to which I was able to tune back in was the degree to which I felt at ease in a given social world. They
thought I had cultivated a superpower that enabled me to focus on whatever I deemed the most important task at hand; I knew that it was symptomatic of a larger propensity to recede from spaces I didn’t feel I could trust.

I began to think seriously about the different ways that trans subjects cultivate detachment, distance, and numbness in order to survive in and through inuring ourselves to the hostilities that surround us. How many of us have had to devise strategies for withdrawal and escape? How often do we strategically muffle our sensorium to get through a situation? We’ve seen the statistics on trans subjects and substance abuse (and if you haven’t, the gloss from the 2011 comprehensive survey on trans discrimination in the U.S. reads “26% use or have used alcohol and drugs to cope with the impacts of discrimination” [Grant et al. 2011, 81]). We know anecdotally that depression and anxiety are common, and the 2015 U.S. Trans Survey gave us numbers to back it up, reporting that “thirty-nine percent (39%) of respondents reported currently experiencing serious psychological distress, which is nearly eight times the rate reported in the U.S. population (5%)” (James et al. 2016, 105). Enough of the bleak statistics, though. If you’re trans and of a certain age, you’re already thoroughly schooled in the saturation of negative affect, the cultivation, manipulation, and mutation of our coping mechanisms, and the cumulative toll both of these things—inextricable, indissoluble—exert.

We do what we need to do to keep going.

For me that meant tuning the whole world out. The folks that are closest to me now are the ones that knew how to cut through that silence. This means that caring for us—and our practice of caring for one another—is no simple task; we're sometimes swaddled thick in completely justified defenses. We might not be able to hear you, or each other, very well at all.
“I Am in Training, Don’t Kiss Me”

Around the time I started insulating myself from my everyday surround, I became increasingly interested in trans, intersex, and queer archives. In retrospect, my decision to pursue archivally grounded research during my dissertation (and for years afterward) is intimately linked to the forms of social dissociation I had unintentionally embraced for the purposes of survival. When the milieu you inhabit feels hostile, it’s deeply comforting to turn to text and image from another time. I was desperate for representation, but more than that, I was desperate for some sense that other subjects had encountered and survived some of the transphobic, cissexist bullshit with which I was being repeatedly confronted. I needed resources for resilience. I wanted a roadmap for another way of being.

It’s during this time that I encountered Claude Cahun’s work and, in particular, a photograph that I’ve been obsessed with for years. It’s the one of Cahun with two dark dots over their nipples, in boxing gear, barbell on their lap, wearing a leotard that reads “I AM IN TRAINING DON’T KISS ME.” The standard feminist analysis of the piece circulates around the gender transitivity of the image—is Cahun training to become, or unbecome, a woman? The flurry of postmodern academic criticism addressing Cahun’s work tends to “focus on her identity, attempting to piece together a psychogram of the artist through her writings and photos to determine whether she felt at ease with her biologically assigned gender” (Wampole 2013, 103). All of this speculation about the intent of Cahun’s work and what it might say about their gender identity. Most of it bores me. It seems obvious that Cahun is engaging in what we now understand as a trans aesthetic practice, and I don’t think that claiming this is anachronistic or recuperative. I’m not interested in whether Cahun is “really” a lesbian,
“really” trans, “really” whatever, but what I am very, very interested in are the links that they build between transition, gender instability, and desire.

Their pose is serving deep trans twink. The flattened chest, the coquettish cock of the head, the handlebar mustache displaced and inverted into smoothly pomaded spit curls, the training motif—it is all very “daddy, teach me.” This is, of course, absurdly heightened by the textual declaration on the leotard, warning off all potential suitors, highlighting the fragility of nascent sexuality, and calling attention to the way that countenancing another’s desire runs the risk of despoiling whatever form of gendered sexuality is emerging here. The famed ambiguity of the photo renders Cahun a kind of universally fungible object of desire—maybe a boy, maybe a girl, maybe a man, maybe a woman, but precisely none of these things. Whatever it is that you’re into, maybe they can become it—maybe they’re in training to be the whatever of your dreams.

This space—nascent, indeterminate, delivering an evasive image prone to the projections of others—resonates as a particularly trans look. Inhabiting a gender-liminal or provisionally gendered body—as so many of us do, before, during, or after “transition,” whatever that is—means being subject to continuous erotic interrogation, being tossed squarely onto the shores of cis shame about their own desires, being made an impossible—and impossibly disruptive—object of desire. There’s a bright filament that connects Cahun to Lou Sullivan, a gay trans man who wanted nothing more than to be a hot “youngman” (a turn of phrase he takes from John Rechy) who is voraciously desired by other men, who nevertheless kept ending up with dudes who were deeply uncomfortable with their own queer desires, who relentlessly feminized him and refused to accept his masculinity unmitigated. His lover of the mid-1980s, referred to in the journals as T, gets upset with him about not shaving: “He was complaining as
we were having sex that my whiskers were ‘rubbing’ him and he 

* hates* that. I asked ‘What’s the big deal? Yours rub me too.’ He said ‘I don’t like having sex with men’” (Sullivan 2019, 308). This echoes the laments of his lovers from years prior, like J, of whom Lou writes: “There’s a deal where they say some people want a girl with a penis so they get a girlish boy. Maybe J wants a boy with a vagina so he takes me, a boyish girl. I don’t know. The whole deal’s screwed up” (66).

The whole deal is screwed up. We’re surrounded by faithless witnesses and fetishized by them to boot. Our bodies are interpellated as not enough, too much, but also—as Cahun’s image makes vivid—desired and desirable precisely because of this, in ways that run roughshod over our gender identities, our sense of self. To kiss—to engage viscerally and intimately—might be to trigger, to run headlong into haptic and verbal forms of bodily misrecognition. Desire and dysphoria are tightly bonded to one another, and in the midst of transition, even the most well-intentioned and routine forms of intimacy run the risk of being received as confirmation that an other wants a bodymind that we aren’t (entirely or quite). These misrecognitions imprint us; they leave a psychic trace, one that often manifests as acute anxiety about how we’re being seen, how we’re being interpellated, especially in moments of intense vulnerability.

Morty Diamond, in his short introduction to the edited volume *Trans/Love: Radical Sex, Love, and Relationships beyond the Gender Binary*, speaks directly to this erotic anxiety when he writes of how, “as familial, social, and personal changes abound during transition, a question arises early: *Who is going to date me now?* Or if currently partnered, *Will my relationship survive this transition?”* (2011, 7). Cahun deflects this anxiety by holding a mirror up to the viewer that acknowledges their desire, and Cahun’s desirability, but withholds engagement because of how such desire discomfittingly overcodes trans and genderqueer
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embodiments. Christy Wampole, in a beautiful essay on Cahun’s work, describes their gaze as “impudent” (2013, 101)—that is, without shame. Refusing shame. This is part of the queerness of Cahun’s work, obviously—to reject shame is to reject the main affect that structures hegemonic heterocisnormative and misogynist understandings of queer and femme sexuality. Cahun, instead, forces the viewer to grapple with their own crisis of meaning about attraction to nonbinary bodies. It’s not their problem. They’re busy becoming otherwise.

Cahun’s work—and so many other archival traces of trans, intersex, and gender nonconforming lives—feels like a gift that I’m still figuring out how to use. All I know for sure is that it sparks a sense of connection that resonates even as it remains opaque. It makes me feel some kind of way: less alone. This doesn’t mean I identify with Cahun, and it especially doesn’t mean they grant me some sort of prototrans legacy. Jules Gill-Peterson, in her own meditation on the affective resonance of trans archives, explains this feeling perfectly, writing of an archival encounter that moved her to tears: “it wasn’t a moment of clean identification with the past . . . the proximities of the archive disperse the feeling of otherwise being consumed by the present and its many emergencies—of living overexposed, on the other side of that so-called ‘trans tipping point’” (2019). It’s not your past to claim, but it still somehow slant rhymes with your present, this instance of trans worlding that happened long before we came to speak casually of a gender spectrum.

The Spectrum and the Spectral

Pedagogically, I have become used to periodizing the emergence of the “gender spectrum” as a heuristic for understanding a post-binary proliferation of genders. When I teach it—usually in an intro course—the lesson goes something like this: In the 1950s,
sexologist John Money used gender (distinct from biological sex) as one of several variables for medical professionals to take into account in cases of intersex births, and it appeared as part of a list alongside items like hormonal sex, assigned sex, and chromosomal sex. Gender (or, as he put it in the mid-1950s, “gender identity/role”) encompassed “all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself as having the status of a boy or man, girl or woman respectively. It includes, but is not restricted to, sexuality in the sense of eroticism” (Money, Hampson, and Hampson 1955, 310). This understanding of gender was then deployed within mid-twentieth century university-run gender identity clinics in the United States in order to diagnose and treat both intersex and trans individuals. In the late 1960s and 1970s, it was increasingly taken up by feminist theorists to think through the socially and culturally constructed dimensions of masculinity and femininity. Finally, in the 1990s and early aughts, we have the emergence of the gender spectrum, oriented by two deeply familiar poles, with a proliferation of gender identities and spectrums sandwiched between. Commence a proliferation of increasingly complex infographics: some are overlapping Venn diagrams, others with additional spectra beyond gender—spectra of biological sex and sexual orientation, for instance. Sometimes gender is differentiated into spectra of expression and spectra of identity. Sometimes the infographic takes the form of a chart with two axes, male and female, and an abundance of quadrants arrayed betwixt. Whatever visualization we prefer, we’ve become culturally quite familiar with the proliferative logic of the spectrum, and—as per my intro-level historical narrative—tend to periodize it as emerging within the last twenty or so years.

Predictably, each time I teach a class where this comes up, I leave feeling frustrated and bereft. I will never argue against the importance of articulating gender identity and will always gladly furnish whatever resources I’m aware of for doing so
to my students. But frustration persists, because whenever I articulate the spectrum, I brush up against the ineffable. The account I give tracks an emergent model, a specific and historically circumscribed calculus for diagnosing, identifying, translating, and rendering legible the gorgeous messiness of trans, intersex, nonbinary, and otherwise gender nonconforming lives. The identities we claim, no matter how complex our list of modifiers, always seem to say both much more and much less than I’d like. Years of dwelling in trans archives—both digitally and in brick-and-mortar collections—have brought me headlong into this messiness, into the history of terminological debates (between transvestites and transsexuals, “TVs” and “TSs,” between transsexual and transgender, between intersex and trans, between hermaphroditisms of the body and hermaphroditisms of the soul, I could go on and on) and their inevitable failure to do justice to the lives they purport to label and thus, in a way, bear witness to.

I’ve come into contact with so much ephemera, so many traces of a number of minor lives—not famous or infamous historical personages, but everyday trans folk. Those who sent their self-portrait in to a transvestite newsletter, who were anonymized in medical case studies, who wrote heartbreaking letters to doctors seeking transition-related services. I’ve been consistently confronted with an ethical dilemma, which is also an ethical injunction: How to do justice to these lives? How to write about them—on behalf of them, with them, for them, in memoriam of them? The language I use in an attempt to render them never seems to suffice. The problem might actually be one of language itself—diagnostic language, in particular, but not only. Roland Barthes wrote of what he called “the ‘fascism’ of language” (2002, 42). With this turn of phrase, he named what I find so consistently and profoundly troubling when writing about (of, for, with) those subjects who appear, spectral, in the archives: the fact that the categories operative in language—masculine/
feminine, or the informal, singular you and the formal, plural you, for instance—“are coercive laws” (42) that “permit communication . . . but in exchange (or on the other hand) impose a way of being, a subjecthood, a subjectivity on one: under the weight of syntax, one must be this very subject and not another” (41). Working with fragments, attempting to render them legible, to place them within broader narratives of trans histories, places you squarely in the center of this quandary. In order to communicate about these lives, you engage in forms of speculation, projection, invention, and translation that inevitably fail to render subjecthood faithfully. The piecemeal, the partial, the imperfect is all you have. Each claim you make is overdetermined and only ever possibly resonant with the vicissitudes of their lived experience. The terms you use to describe folks are inevitably, as Barthes attests, coercive, too forceful, assertive, and declarative to do justice to the complexity and nuance of experience. This intensifies with trans subjects, because we experience ourselves so often, and so acutely, as trapped and constrained by language.

I’m haunted by these archival specters, and by my sense of duty to them. Because, in some small way, by existing—however minimally or maximally, however “part-time” or “full-time” they were—they have made our existence possible. Because our lives are, in some opaque and difficult to capture way, entwined. Because I want to do justice to their struggles and joys. Because, in my own way, and with all of my own projections and fantasies intact, I have fallen in love with them. To love the dead is for them to remain with you, introjected, present. Haunting and love are very close, indeed.

Abram Lewis, in his crucial work on the recurrence of “declension, addiction, paranoia, and delusion” (2014, 23) in trans archives, articulates a quandary produced by the recurrence of material that cannot be substantiated with historical proof or evidence in trans archives—for instance, transsexual philanthro-
pist Reed Erickson’s psychotropic meditations on the possibility of human-dolphin communication, or trans activist Angela Douglas’s fascination with and speculation about extraterrestrial life, including “her discovery that a close friend was a nonhuman being, seemingly alien but possibly Satan, with ‘grey reptilian, leathery skin, hairless, with coal black eyes,’ that had come to earth to help transsexuals” (Lewis 2014, 23). The frequency with which such evidence of cognitive divergence, mental illness, substance abuse, and addiction appears is an archival testament to the institutional and interpersonal violence within which trans subjects were and are forced to build lifeworlds. This material, as Lewis writes, is “by no means easily disentangled from accounts of living in a violently transphobic capitalist order” (24). However, the dominant genres of historical narration would have us consign all of this material to the level of the anecdotal—unprovable, irrational, and thus subsidiary to the historical record. Perhaps it might be utilized as proof of mental illness. In its most pernicious form, this would serve to discredit the testimony and traces left by the subject in question; at best, it would be considered epiphenomenal to the historically substantive material in the archive. Historically speaking, trans subjects are already often considered infelicitous, mentally ill, disordered, or “crazy” by virtue of our transness alone; within a transphobic imaginary, these traces only further entrench that perception, rendering the archives we do have marginal, unreliable, and thus easily dismissed. It also presents difficulties for those of us who bear a debt to these lives, who are in a kind of transtemporal solidarity, who feel a deep responsibility to this material. This responsibility entails an ethical obligation to narrate justly, which is indeed challenging, given the aleatory, multigenre inventive speculation so manifest in trans archives. To care for these archives, to care for these lives, means, minimally, “cultivating openness to irreducible alterity” (Lewis 2014, 29), admitting that there are
unknowable dimensions to our entanglements. This necessitates a historical witnessing in excess of a logic of succession, clear precedent and antecedent. We are related to these subjects in some way, yes, but it is not an inheritance, not a lineage. These people are not our “transcestors”—that word we sometimes use to position ourselves in relation to the pantheon of repeatedly memorialized trans subjects—but they are nevertheless deeply implicated in our current conditions of possibility.

The spectrum is built of specters that undo and exceed it. So are we.