

TRANSPOETICS

Dialogically writing the queer and trans body in fragments

*In recent years we have seen an explosion of trans memoirs, but relatively few of these have a poetic sensibility or include poetry. In this paper I will extend the concept of 'transpoetics', first coined by trans writer and poet T.C. Tolbert in his edited collection *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (2013), who said in a recent interview that poetry meant 'I could do things in language and create a world for myself that I didn't know how to inhabit with my body'. I will posit that transpoetics carries all the markers of a dialogic form, despite the fact that Bakhtin privileged the novel over poetry and poetics, claiming that poetry could only ever be monologic. I then discuss Butler's notion of performativity alongside Jay Prosser's interventions against using the trans body as metaphor to destabilise gender norms, and finally meditate on drag, the practice of reading, and look at transpoetics as chronotope. By placing this work alongside my own autobiographical prose poetry, this paper also performs a heteroglossic, 'both/and' writing of the queer and trans body.*

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TRANSPOETICS: DIALOGICALLY WRITING THE QUEER AND TRANS BODY IN FRAGMENTS

BOTH/AND

'Touch this skin, darling. Touch all of this skin.'

Venus Xtravaganza, *Paris is Burning*

*These fragments I have shored against
my ruins*

T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land'

Three weeks ago, after binge watching the last three seasons of Ru Paul's Drag Race, I sent a text message to a good friend that said this:

I think I want to be a drag queen

I didn't think. I knew. This was a deep dream. One that was covered over by all of the ways I had never felt like a real girl, and all of the ways I had never connected in with real boys. It was covered over by my sister's deft lipstick hand; my grandmother's 'don't ape men—your steps are too long'; my breasts; the way the girls at school talked about razor blades, diets, and stretch marks. A conversation ensued:

But which genre?

The genre of Fierce

Obvs

Sasha Velour intellectual style?

Quinn style.

Art, poetry, melancholy, hope.

Drag name?

BOTH/AND

Saturday, April 16

erasing women

Tonight was the first night someone really attacked me for being/becoming trans.

It was after a show about heartbreak called *The Divide*. I was the sign language

interpreter. Dressed all in black. Packed.

Latex pushing against my jeans. Steel capped boots. Signing *I Will Survive* and *Piece of My Heart*.

At the end the lead stood on the steps to my right, holding a sheep's heart and

chewing bubble gum, and on the third pop of the gum a bucket of tomato soup tipped

over her head. She wiped the soup/blood from her eyes and sat, and I walked over to

sit with her, and we looked out at the

audience, and she sang and I signed

All these people drinking lover's spit

Swallowing words while giving head

and the smell of tomato soup was thick salty red all around us, and then she left the stage,

I had found myself increasingly saying ‘it’s less a case of either/or, and more a case of both/and’. The more I passed (looked like the gender I felt like—which is perhaps not the one you are imagining), the more I heard myself saying:

both/and.

What does it look like when a female to male trans person—female to male is not at all what this is for me, but I prefer masculinity, so situate myself there—wants to be a drag queen? My favourite movies have always been musicals. I don’t know how to put on foundation, or eye shadow, or lipstick, but I want to. I want to now that I have a flat chest and a deep voice and hair where before there was none (belly, chest, forearms...) I can’t walk in heels, but I want to. And I think:

I can dance. I can laugh. I can let my gender and my body be a carnival. I can be my queer trans self putting on girl drag and I will call this queen:

both/and.

I know this phrase has its home in theory, and that it is a remedy of sorts for binary thinking, but I don’t know where it is from. Typing ‘both/and’ into a search bar doesn’t yield relevant results. Typing ‘both/and + binary thinking’ does.

Clark and Holquist, when describing Bakhtin’s distinction between dialectics and dialogics, write that

[o]ne of the difficulties posed by Bakhtin is to avoid thinking from within an all-pervasive simultaneity

and the band walked away, and I stayed, signing *Heartbreak Hotel* until the lights went down.

And they’ll be so,

they’ll be so lonely, baby.

They’ll be so lonely

They’ll be so lonely, they could die

There was a party afterwards and I was wandering around outside, self-conscious and not knowing where or how to stand. In the laneway outside the theatre I saw a woman I knew and went to say hello. We talked about writing, she asked what I was working on, and I told her I was transitioning and writing from the body-in-transition.

‘The world doesn’t need more men, it needs more women and good lesbians,’ she said.

‘You’re erasing women,’ she said.

‘You’re erasing my voice,’ she said.

There were people all around me. Fairy lights. Tables made of old wooden cable spools holding tea light candles. The night lit up with points of light. People clustered at the corners of buildings. The feeling that everyone had known each other for years. Cigarette smoke and incense and beer. While she talked, I looked for someone, anyone, that would come and stand with me, that would help me to push back.

‘We’ve fought so hard for so long and

without at the same time falling into the habit of reducing everything to a series of binary oppositions: not a dialectical either/or, but a dialogic both/and.

(1984: 7)

Dialogic? I've read the term many times. I've seen it rub up against architechtonic, chronotopic, heteroglossic, double-voiced, centripetal... But what is it?

You probably know. Maybe I'm supposed to ask *where* is it?

Warning—here come the binaries: dialogic/monologic (the many versus the one); nonrepressive/repressive (free versus fixed); centrifugal/centripetal (from physics, moving away from/moving towards, the centre). Shall I continue? Dialogism prefers the multiple. *That's me* is what I thought as I read Bakhtin's fourth essay in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). *That's my writing*. Always in-conversation. That's the poetry in *Troubling the Line* (the fat book on my bedside table that—of course—has a picture of a fire twirler on the cover. Carnival, anyone?). Fifty-five trans and genderqueer poets are inside that cover, with black and white photos of each of them appearing before a number of poems, and what the editors call a 'poetic statement' from each. A book of transpoetics (in this book they say trans poetics, but I have taken away the space, because trans wants to nestle up against poetics, to covet this particular linguistic place), which can

free us from the crippling rigidity of the defensive, before-and-after, and 'I always was the man or woman I have become' tropes that we find in many memoirs and other public explications of transgender (which in these forums almost always means transsexual) identity.

now you have the attention of the world media and we're silenced. We can't speak,' she said.

I didn't know how to be angry about her words. Knew if I became angry she would take that as a sign of misogyny. Told myself this wouldn't be the only time someone would do this. Kept my arms folded across my bound chest. Three times I asked her to stop. 'This is my life you're talking about, this is too painful for me to listen to,' or a variation of that. Each time she nodded.

'Mmhm. Once again we are pushed to the sidelines. We are invisible. We are unheard.' Eventually I left. I went to the toilet and felt ashamed of the black straps around my thighs that held my latex dick in place. Madonna bled through the bathroom walls. People laughed outside the door. I pissed and wiped and adjusted my cock and tucked it inside my jocks and washed my hands and walked back into the theatre. I found people to tell and they said things like 'she's old' and 'she doesn't understand' and I agreed and held in the cry I wanted to have. Swallowing words while giving head.

I called you when I got home and we talked in the dark. I told you what she had said and cried. We fucked. We fucked but her voice kept playing inside me. *Erasing women. We can't speak*. That night her words inserted herself inside my desire and

(Ladin 2016: 641)

That crippling rigidity is Bakhtin's description of unitary language, which seeks to fix and discipline ways of speaking and writing. So where, he asked, was the free and unfixed? The answer was to be found in the form of the novel, which is many-voiced, situated in culture, located in time and space (chronotopic), and written in a de-centralising language that stands in direct opposition to a 'unitary and singular language of poetry' (1981: 288).

Wait. Poetry is repressive, centripetal and authoritarian?

Wait. Poetry is only one voice?

Wait. Poetry isn't embodied, embedded in what-is-happening-now?

Wait...

Bakhtin keeps going. He outlines why poetry is monologic, and formed from a unitary language, which is

a system of linguistic norms. But these norms do not constitute an abstract imperative; they are rather the generative forces of linguistic life, forces that struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language, forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought...

(1981: 270-71)

Wait...

[I think I want to be a drag queen](#)

Why do I want to be a drag queen *now*? After top surgery and hormones and passing most of the time, and my children calling me Mama and he in the same sentence with ease?

stayed there. I stopped packing. *Erase.*

Monday, May 9

the messages you send

You have been reading my book for a few weeks now, and last night you sent me this:

Can I be extra roots while you write, can I taste the text on your skin with my dry wolf tongue, can my desire become the third scent on page 24 of the book you haven't written yet, can I fuck you hard, hold you down, lift you up, celebrate this with you while you write? Can I? Can I? Can I please? Can you smell my desire for all the pieces of your carefully cut puzzle? Can you?

You send me messages every day. But this is the first one that talks about what you want when you read me, when we read each other, when I am read. You throw these words across the sky and they land on a backlit screen in my hand and everything in me says yes. Yes let this desire carry us through each day. Yes hold me down, push yourself into me, stay there, and I will come around you. I will arc and push. I will rise to meet you. Yes while I write. Yes with your dry wolf tongue that pushes up the side of my face when words are not enough. Yes extra roots that stretch and start thick and can hunt nutrients like they have an eye on the end of each fine extension. Yes to the smell of soil that we lay down in on the wet morning, on the setting sun, on the

Aren't I *there*? I'm not there. There isn't a line with female on one end and male on the other. There is no *arriving*. There is only oscillation. And time. And what I find in any given moment to follow, and right now, it's wanting to be a drag queen. I think too, that you might be wondering about this combination of drag, transpoetics, and Bakhtin. Why these three?

We could go back to Judith Butler's 1988 paper 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution' here, that moment where she wrote the words that would be debated (and misread) for the next thirty years:

If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. (1988: 528)

This paper went on to inform *Gender Trouble* (1990), a foundational work for many gender studies scholars, and the beginnings of an unpacking of the 'naturalness' of sex and gender within a feminist framework, whilst activating the transgender body as the ultimate queer icon and the metaphor *par excellence* for destabilising these norms (despite the fact that many trans peoples' desires are hetero-, rather

burnished bright cratered curve of the earth as it turns to find day and breath and love. Yes to a cut puzzle cut me open me open you we will press skin together that opens to the other and draws it in, in, in. Yes.

Tuesday, May 10

from my bones out

I listen to music. I imagine the body-to-come. Nearly six weeks ago I saw the gender psychiatrist for the first time. He asked me questions. I answered them. Honestly, the way I always do. Bi-polar parents and a bi-polar grandparent. My depression. Surgeries. Drugs. Thyroid disease. Asthma. Born premature. I have answered these questions before. I will answer them again. In the second appointment he asked me about mirrors, and childhood, and being naked. I thought maybe I had walked into the pages of Lacan. The mirror question: if you could wake up tomorrow and have the body you wanted, without any surgery or side effects, and you looked into the mirror, what would you see? I would see a body that goes straight up and down (my hands showed a pillar in front of me), I would see facial hair, and wide shoulders, and a flat chest. That's what I would see. What about genitals? I would see both. Both? Both. I love my cunt. I don't want it to go anywhere. But I want a cock too. Both. Yes but if you could get just as much pleasure from a penis then what

than homosexual). Key trans theorist Jay Prosser argues that it was from this point that a common misreading of Butler's concept of performativity—whereby gender is *only* a series of performative acts—came to be synonymous with transgender. That an understanding of '[g]ender [as] the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler 1990: 33) is an understanding of the body as surface, with gender acting upon it, where the lived trans experience in which an understanding of gender lives *in* the body can never get a foothold.

An entire chapter of Prosser's foundational book, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (1998), is devoted to the problems that arise when we use the transgender/transsexual body as a site to theorise the disruption of normative gender expression (as Butler does). Throughout the book, Prosser places trans autobiographies/body narratives front and centre, where a body narrative is 'the story the transsexual weaves around the body in order that this body may be 'read'' (1988: 101). Trans people have been writing and speaking 'body narratives' for hundreds of years, and until our stories are not fodder for psychiatrists and medical professionals to diagnose dysmorphia, we will continue to do so. Transpoetics takes these narratives one step further. By mobilising the poetic form (not in the Bakhtinian unitary sense of poetry—which was of its time—but in the dialogical sense that trans poetry and fragmented/experimental forms of writing exemplifies) to tell body stories, we are able to step outside of the 'born in the wrong body' narrative that we are required to tell in order to get access to surgeries and hormones, and to speak in new and generative ways about

would you see? And then I remembered. Not to be too honest. That this was the man who would decide whether I would be allowed to access testosterone or not. Oh well then I would just see a penis (I would not, I would see both, I would be not even both but some other body that walks between). Satisfied, he wrote more notes. The questions continued. In my head I listened to music. I let myself be not both, not third, but queer from my bones out, and queerest between my legs, where later you will plunge and push and not need words for what this is that I am.

Monday, July 4

being the wind

This Friday I will have my second full dose of T. This week I will have had that oily thick liquid pushed into my muscle for the fourth time. Nothing changes. Everything changes. I listen to my voice. Carefully. At night, on the phone, when we talk and talk and laugh and fuck and talk, I listen. At night it feels, it sounds deeper. There is a scratch in there somewhere. Like the night brings depth, breaks it open, like my throat is ready to catch what comes next. 'Does my voice sound different?' I ask, often. Mostly it's only you I ask. But sometimes the question slips out in other places. At parties. Once in a staff

our lives.

Joy Ladin, in discussing the importance and value of trans poetry for *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, writes this:

But that is precisely why trans poetry is such a crucial site for the articulation of trans identity. Unlike daily life, legislative testimony, Facebook posts, mass-media interviews, and even memoirs, poetry is a safe (because culturally marginal) space in which to explore the vulnerabilities, complexities, and contradictions of trans identities, to explore trans identities not as positions to defend but as modes of becoming and thus ways of being human. (2016: 640)

But where is drag? Drag is the exploration of a gender identity that doesn't sit on a line, unless it's Paul Carter's line, who, when writing about land surveys and mapping, said that '[t]he movement form, or prehistory, of the experience that formed the survey was not a ruled line; it was more like the process of osmosis, a capillary action throughout a zone of possible connections' (2009, 36). The history of trans medicolegal practices is the history of trying to correct what is seen as an incorrect topography of the body. It is the history of trying to re-draw many unique maps. So this body (every body) is not/does not sit on, a ruled line. There is no *there* and *here*. This body is Carter's 'zone of possible connections', and the connection this body finds now is in the possible connection to the *jouissance* it finds in feminine practices and performances; in glitter, heels, outrageous lips—in what Ru Paul calls Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent (read it carefully, you'll see what he/she/I/they mean).

meeting. The people I work with paused, and then said yes, that they had noticed it sounded deeper, and then none of us spoke for a beat or two, and then we returned to our papers and whiteboard markers and laptops. We kept working with me turning chrysalis brown stick the tongue that licks in the university library. Does my voice sound different? Yes. Am I different? What is this hormone that changes everything and nothing?

Monday, August 1

warm and soft and right

Winter lives inside this house.

Weatherboard can't keep the cold out. I have curtains and rugs and blankets and a gas heater that I fought my landlord for, but there is still a breeze and a chill. I laid my head down on the couch, pulled a blanket over me, and fell asleep until the doorbell rang. The delivery guy passed my dinner over the back fence and I went back to the warmest room and ate. I ate the food you had paid for and sent: zucchini, chicken, carrot, eggplant, coconut milk, curry paste, the lightest colour green, filled me with heat and spice. Your love delivered by the spoonful. We talked as I moaned at the goodness of a hot meal and ate. You laughed.

'You havin a food orgasm boy?' you asked. I groaned and chewed and swallowed.

So where is drag? Drag is in a very small part of *Gender Trouble*, and in Butler's reading of the murder of Venus Xtravaganza, a pre-operative male-to-female Latina drag queen (revealed in the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* about queer drag ball culture in Harlem), as the result of her 'failure to pass completely' (Butler 1993: 129). What is a failure to pass completely? It is the second glance in a toilet, the lifting of a skirt, finding out instead of in, finding flesh where it was not imagined. Prosser refutes this reading by stating that '[a]t work in Venus's murder is not the fear of the same or the other but the fear of bodily crossing, of the movement between sameness and difference: not homo- but transphobia, where 'trans' here signifies the multileveled status of her crossing' (Prosser 2006: 273). Venus crossed and re-crossed. She was a not-queer, Latina, trans queen who vogued with the best of them (Madonna learnt everything she knew at the feet of queens like this). A daughter of the House Xtravaganza. Fierce. Stunning. Crazy brave beautiful. Murdered at 23, her body found stuffed under a bed.

So after this Butler/Prosser/Venus place—and there are so many more in here than just these two—you can imagine (perhaps) my hesitation at drag, my *wanting*, my *I think?* Theory rages around this trans queer body that wants to do drag. How do we make room for both/and?

'Now you wanna talk about reading? Let's talk about reading.'
Venus Xtravaganza, *Paris is Burning*

In Drag culture, reading is the term used to describe one queen taking down another through the use of acerbic wit and high-end observation skills. If Prosser was going to *read* Butler he might say something like:

I was sitting at my yellow kitchen table eating last night's left-overs when you called and asked me to read to you and I did. You heard all of my words.

'I wondered why you'd stopped packing. I thought it was me, taking up too much space, because I love being dressed, but it wasn't. I didn't realise how much that night got to you.'

Curry still on my tongue and lips. Rain at the window. A chill on my ankles and calves. The dog hoping for food.

'I couldn't push back,' I said. 'I grew up in the lesbian community. The last thing I want to do is erase women. But when she told me the world needed more women and good lesbians what I thought was, doesn't the world need more good humans? What I thought was, I have two boy children. What are you saying about them? What I thought was, how do I argue against her words? Because instead of arguing I took them in, and now I know (because I didn't before I wrote that entry) that I haven't packed since then.'

Text messages and emails pinging in. Your voice. The kitchen windows which have six panes in each and look out at a bay tree. I've hung a golden papier maché cupid in that tree, three bells from a temple in Chang Mai that play in the wind, and an empty ornamental bird cage that I keep meaning to grow succulents in. We said goodbye. In the

Girrrrrl, you know that haircut hasn't been seen on a lesbian since 1993, but I'm in a charitable mood so you can have my weave. Now that's Gender Trouble right there! And Judith would laugh uproariously (I think she would) because the key to being *read* is to understand that the critiques are delivered with love, and that after you've taken your makeup off you're more likely to swill cocktails together or fuck than fight.

Venus reads in *Paris is Burning*. Everyone reads in Ru Paul's *Drag Race* (the library is *open*). Which brings me back to Bakhtin and his chronotope (which means '[l]iterally *time-space*'), who says that '[t]he chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring' (1981: 425-6). While the chronotope is most often used to understand fictional narratives, it can also be applied to this particular moment in time, where all-of-a-sudden trans stories are centre stage. We are in a *time-space* where you can hear us. And not only can you hear us, but you can read us. And yes, I mean read in both senses. Because visibility is not always what you want it to be. Attention, sometimes, kills.

But Lisa Gasbarrone, in 'The Locus for the Other', writes that 'Bakhtin imagines a relationship between self and other in which silence is truly, reciprocally deadly. The moment the dialogue ends, whether violently or gently, both other and self have ceased to be' (1994: 16). So transpoetics as chronotope, as dialogue between self and other, as Venus reading, as Jay and Judith sitting face to face on a bed eating each others' texts and laughing as they half-choke on ink and paper, as the spooling out, in short lines, of trans lives written here, now, where self and other meet, and read, and if they're lucky, go

bedroom I pulled the suitcase that holds my toys and your dicks from under the bed. I found my packer. His name in the shop was Mr Flimsy, and that's what I still call him. He's soft, and I have a packet of corn flour in the cupboard so that after a wear I can wash and dust him. That feeling, just after a dusting, when he's softwarm from handling, and roughsmooth like skin. I put Mr Flimsy into my briefs. I tell you I'm packing.

'How does it feel boy?' you ask.

'It feels... warm and soft and right.'

Tuesday, August 15

'I think I wanna be a drag queen,' I say.

'How fucking divine,' you say. It's a year later. It's not the August from before. I have a flat chest. I want to learn how to paint red glitter lips. You tell me to find a pen and paper.

'Draw your eyes, boy.'

I do. They are blue silver feathery divine big long bleating open in the night. I send you a picture.

'Perfect. Now your lips.'

The reddest red curled up fuller than a face can hold glitter spotlight open in the night.

'Exquisite. We need to find you a drag mother. I'll help. I can't wait to see the next you.'

And I do. Find a drag mother. She's busy right now but we have a date. She's going to

to a ball.

teach me how to walk in the highest heels I
can find. How to smooth my now stubbly
face. How to read. To throw shade. To be
both/and. To be always open to being
across. To be more.

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