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combine

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
For the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Dillon Chapman

Committee in charge:

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2020

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The Thesis of Dillon Chapman is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Co-Chair

Chair

University of California San Diego

2020

DEDICATION

This collection of writing is dedicated first, and foremost, to my mother and father. Without their steady, unconditional love and support I would not have had the courage to do what I love. Their kindness, generosity, and capacity as guides, both as parents and teachers, will always be an inspiration to me.

To all of my teachers up to this point, who helped me believe that my voice is valuable, and to cultivate that voice. Especially my high school English teacher, Neil Melillo, who boldly told a sixteen-year-old kid that she needed to be an artist and she actually listened.

And lastly, to my late Uncle Jamie, who loved me like his own child, and made my artistic endeavors possible through his unending support.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

combine

by

Dillon Chapman

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Jordan Crandall, Chair
Professor Nicole Miller, Co-Chair

Through juxtaposing prose, poetry, and a screenplay, I aim to investigate familial, romantic, and sexual intimacy through the lens of trans femininity. Personal and critical essays examine contemporary art, image theory, and popular culture examine the ways in which the transsexual self is created through self-fashioning and matrilineal impulses, both familial and chosen. The collection of writing critically analyzes the development and consumption of the “manic tranny dream girl” archetype and reframes trans desire through a transfeminine lens. Theory and autobiography are used interchangeably here as I seek not to produce my own theory, but rather to engage in a critical self-analysis through the process of art making that extends into a broader conversation about trans bodies in contemporary media.

combine

verb

bind by oath

cause to coalesce or form one body; cause to enter into combination

intermix, blend

possess or show (especially disparate qualities or features) at the same time

to act together

to become one

to bring into such close relationship as to obscure individual characters: merge

to cause to unite in a chemical compound

to possess in combination

to unite into a single number or expression

unite; merge

unite, join together; associate in a joint action, feeling, etc.

unite together for a common purpose, form an association, especially for some economic, social, or political objective

noun

an agricultural machine that cuts, threshes, and cleans a grain crop in one operation

an alliance of people or organizations to further their commercial, political, etc., ends, frequently by underhand means

a combination especially of business or political interests

a conspiracy, a plot

an event at which scouts from the teams in a professional sports league gather to evaluate players in preparation for choosing which players to draft

a harvesting machine that heads, threshes, and cleans grain while moving over a field¹

also

a small town twenty miles southeast of Dallas, Texas, with a population of just over two thousand people

¹ The above list is comprised of definitions pulled from dictionary sources that can be found on the references page.

Part One:

I've known I was a barren woman since I was born

FADE IN:

EXT. FM 1389 - DAY

A TRANS WOMAN is walking down the side of a beat up country road.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

The trans woman walks toward a farm house with a red door. She knocks, and a short, older WOMAN opens the door.

TRANS WOMAN

Hi, Momma.

INT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

A photograph of a much younger Momma holding a baby and an umbrella.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

The trans woman and Momma sit on separate couches perpendicular to one another. The light from the television illuminates the room.

MOMMA

The way you're sitting isn't very ladylike,

Sister.

Sister crosses her legs.

INT. BATHROOM - EVENING

Sister is sitting in the bathtub in the dark. The only light comes from the tiny window above the toilet. She gets out of the tub and stands in front of the mirrored medicine cabinet.

INT. BEDROOM - EVENING

Momma stands in front of the mirrored vanity in her bedroom. She primps her hair and touches up her makeup. Momma then walks to the armchair next to the window and sits down, looking out into the backyard. Sister walks into the room and crawls into Momma's lap. She strokes Sister's hair, still gazing out of the window, orange light streams in on her face through the blinds.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Sister is flipping through family photo albums. She stops on a photograph of a plump, older woman.

INT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Sister holds a hand mirror in front of her face. Her hair frames the side of the mirror. Momma's face is visible in the reflection.

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

Sister brushes her hair while looking into the mirror of the medicine cabinets. Harsh daylight illuminates the bathroom.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Momma sits on her bed staring out of the window. She walks over to her armoire, lifting the top up and taking her earrings out while looking into the mirror.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Sister lies in her bed propped up by several pillows. The light coming in from the window to her right creates a harsh shadow on the opposite side of her face. A knock on the bedroom door is heard and Momma enters. Sister scoots over and Momma climbs into bed with her. Sister gets out of bed and closes the blinds, extinguishing the lights, and climbs back into bed with Momma.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

There is a mound of oranges in the middle of the table between Momma and Sister.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DUSK

Momma and Sister stand side-by-side in front of a large red building in the backyard. Momma is facing the building, while Sister faces the opposite direction. Sister unbuttons her dress and lets it fall to the ground. She turns around so that she now faces the red building too.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Momma sits on the couch with Sister on the floor in front of her. Momma gently brushes Sister's hair.

INT. BATHROOM

Momma observes herself in front of the mirrored medicine cabinet.

INT. KITCHEN

Momma and Sister are sitting at the kitchen table. Momma is cutting the orange peels into squares, while Sister is stitching them into a larger rectilinear form.

SISTER

What are we making?

MOMMA

A baby blanket.

SISTER

You know, I really hate the color orange.

INT. BATHROOM

Sister sits in the bathtub, the surface of the water is filmy from the soap. She slides beneath the surface of the soapy water.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DUSK

Sister walks towards the pool. She takes her shoes off, tossing them aside, and slowly descends the steps into the pool, sinking below the surface.

INT. BEDROOM

Sister lies on the bed with her arms wrapped around her torso and her knees up in the air. A pair of pink tights are rolled down to her knees.

INT. KITCHEN

Momma continues to peel the oranges for the baby blanket.

Sister eats an orange.

EXT. FARMHOUSE

Sister is seated in a chair under a group of trees in the backyard. Momma stands behind her, hands on the back of the chair. Sister holds a worn, stuffed rabbit in her arms.

EXT. FARMHOUSE

Sister stands in the backyard next to a silvery mannequin. She removes its head and observes herself in the reflection before putting it back on the mannequin's shoulders.

SISTER

Didn't I tell you? You're the only one that
can see me like this.

INT. FARMHOUSE

Sister slowly descends the staircase. She makes it three quarters of the way down before she reverses and walks backwards back up the stairs.

INT. KITCHEN

Momma and Sister sit at the kitchen table. Sister is doing a reading via tarot cards. Sister draws two cards and lays them out face down on the table. She flips the card over to reveal "The Queen of Swords" and "The High Priestess."

MOMMA

Do a reading for me.

Sister draws two more cards and lays them out face down on the table. Momma flips them over to reveal the labels “Empress” and “Hanged Man.”

MOMMA

What does that mean?

EXT. FARMHOUSE

Sister stands outside in the backyard, cradling the stuffed rabbit like a child and holding an umbrella. She’s wearing a floral print dress. It’s raining. No, Momma is pointing the water hose toward the sky over the umbrella to simulate rain.

INT. KITCHEN

Sister peels an orange.

Momma eats an orange.

INT. BEDROOM

Sister looks out into the backyard through the bedroom window.

INT. KITCHEN

Sister stands topless in front of the island. On the island is a grapefruit, salt, and a knife. Sister proceeds to slice the grapefruit in half. She heavily salts each half of the grapefruit, then places one half in each of the sides of her bra.

MOMMA (V.O.)

Modest is hottest.

The juice from the fruit leaks out of the bra and down Sister's bare abdomen.

INT. KITCHEN

Sister continues sewing the blanket together. Momma peels another orange.

INT. BEDROOM - EVENING

Momma and Sister sit in Sister's bed.

SISTER

Isn't there anything else on?

Momma picks up the remote and clicks the button a few times. The TV continues to play Miss D's performance.

EXT. FARMHOUSE

The mannequin is in the pool. Sister descends the steps into the pool.

INT. POOL

The mannequin holds Sister in its arms, helping her float.

INT. KITCHEN

Sister serves a grapefruit half for each of them and salts the tops of it before she and Momma eat.

MOMMA

It would be so nice if something made sense
for a change.

EXT. FARMHOUSE

Momma and Sister walk through the backyard.

INT. KITCHEN

A pile of orange peels with a needle and thread on the kitchen table.

INT. BEDROOM

The unmade bed.

INT. LIVING ROOM

The mirror.

INT. BATHROOM

The mirrored medicine cabinet.

INT. BEDROOM

Momma's mirrored vanity.

INT. POOL

The mannequin face down at the bottom of the pool.

EXT. FARMHOUSE

The baby blanket is complete, hanging on a clothesline. It sways awkwardly in the breeze.

INT. FARMHOUSE

Momma stands in front of the faux stained glass window.

MOMMA

That's all I'm sayin'.

BLACK

Part Two:

I am the end of a history and the beginning of an archive

Recently, I moved from La Jolla to the San Diego neighborhood of Hillcrest: the iconic “gay-borhood.” While undertaking a purge of his room, one of my new housemates uncovered a collection of vintage pornographic postcards and offered the stack to me, inviting me to take what I liked. Out of the bunch I selected six images, the other five not really worth noting, they were more aesthetic decisions than emotive. The sixth image, however, really struck me. It was the most explicitly erotic, the others are solitary nudes, but this image is of a couple.

Pictured on the three and a half by five-inch postcard is a woman straddling a man who is mostly unseen, his penis partway disappearing into her vagina, her skin white in the way that amateurish black and white images taken with flash are. Washed out. A braided ponytail falls forward across her face, obscuring her. The man’s fingertips are placed gently on the intersections between the tops of her thighs and hips, perhaps his palms are resting on her ass. A frame taken in the midst of sex. So open and vulnerable, but also so blank, the figures are indeterminable. The curtains form bars of various grayscale shades in the background, perhaps this is in their home or maybe some sort of photographic set. Her fingertips brushing his thighs.

The silvery tones make it impossible to determine the time period. The flattening out of this woman makes her a perfect screen to project my own fantasies of embodiment onto. Her body is framed in the photograph as the point of desire, presumably for cishet men, and it is what draws me into the image. A funhouse mirror of sorts. A speculative future embodiment. I am not the intended viewer but the meaning I make from this photograph is my own: a space between reality and desire.

My mother has had four surgeries over the course of two months. Today she unbuttoned her nightgown to show me her scars, saying that her chest looks like a roadmap. Her scars bring me to tears which causes her to cry as well. This is the first time since she was diagnosed with cancer that I have cried. She apologizes for making me cry, which is her nature. We hold each other and cry, but only briefly.

I help my mother style the wig that she has in preparation for when her hair falls out from the chemotherapy treatments. The wig matches her hair color, yet it is in a style that she has never worn. She has had bangs my whole life, and part of the reason why I wanted bangs for so long. Recently she purchased a camisole with pockets inside to put pads to make it appear as if she still has breasts. We're both trying to pass as regular women.

Women's bodies rarely have the luxury of being seamless. My mother's torso looks like a sewing pattern for breasts. Strange that in order to survive we must enact terrible violence on our own bodies. A generative form of cutting.

I wonder where my mother imagines her scars are a road map to. Will my body also read as a roadmap? If so, where does it lead?

While sifting through my parents' archive of family photographs I happened upon an image of my father. The photograph was strikingly different than the rest of the images in other albums. My father was depicted shirtless, leaning over the person taking the photograph. A moment of intimacy.

You see, my father was the photographer of the family: vacations, holidays, random photo-ops in front of signs, or documentation of significant milestones. My father would whip out whatever camera he had, from a disposable film camera to his iPhone, to capture these familial milestones. To this day my father sets up the camcorder on a tripod for Christmas morning so that he can document mine and my brother's reactions to the gifts that he and my mother had gotten for us. Christmas tapes that none of us have ever seen, nor will we probably see until after my father dies.

The image of my father was discernibly the only photograph in that grouping of images that my mother had taken. Aside from the images of cats and self-conscious photographs of her outfits in front of the full length mirror in her bedroom that she sends me via iMessage, I had never seen a photograph that my mother had taken before. Her gaze is unfamiliar to me.

My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a double mastectomy. As I am driving back from the train station, she calls to tell me that the type of chemotherapy that she will have to have as part of her treatment will cause her baby fine hair to fall out. I know that she feels shame at the loss of her breasts and hair, but I love her even more for it. My poor mother has become a cyborg, bags of saline filled plastic as placeholders for her breasts, and I am on the verge of transmutation myself. There is a membrane between us, and I realize now that it is the

thinnest sheet of silver imaginable: a mirror, improperly rendered. Looking at her is like seeing a double exposure.

[redacted] visited my studio and asked if I dream. I told her that I don't. I waste all of my dreaming during the day. I keep imagining my mother and I in white dresses holding hands in front of the red barn in my parents' backyard. It's clear to me, like a photograph. I feel compelled, like my father on Christmas morning, to document her. She is only survived by still images and I long to archive her voice and movement.

What is Zoe Leonard's transsexual agenda? In one of the exhibition spaces of her survey show at the Museum of Contemporary Art stands a full-grown tree that has been dismembered, and reassembled, with metal bolts and braces holding its limbs together. The limbs are obviously its own, not an aggregate of different trees. Various steel cables hold the tree upright, as well as a metal armature from the floor and one from the wall. The armatures remind me of the braces that photographers would use to hold people still for longer exposures for daguerreotypes. Perhaps the tree is a photograph. The idea of an image while simultaneously an image in its own right. As a transsexual, I cannot help but read the tree as an arboreal representation of transsexuality. Dissected and reassembled, brought from outside the space into the interior: a neovagina. A classic phallic symbol inverted, the neovagina is anti-phallic, *not* yonic. This is one of a few works of Leonard's that I feel have been made just for me.

An installation of Leonard's in which she has stitched back together the peels of fruits like avocados, bananas, and (of course) oranges has been a foundational reference point for me, yet I have never seen it in person, only images. The images of that installation inspired one of my earliest video works, wherein I kneel naked, visible from the mid-torso down, with a pile of orange peels in my lap obscuring my genitalia, the naked oranges set to the side. Slowly I pick up each of these oranges and, through the magic of video, reunite the skin with the flesh. A certain read of my video against Leonard's installation might suggest that it succeeds in restoring the oranges where hers fails to, but that would presume that our intentions were the same. The video visualizes an ideal, while the installation reminds me of reality, though both, in my opinion, embody an idea of transsexuality.

There is an image that Leonard made in the late nineties of a beaver's guts. The image is cropped in such a way that only the core of the beaver is visible, no limbs, head or tail. A yonic

slit, intestines exposed, framed by flesh that has been skinned and the slightest bit of fur that suggests to the viewer what they are seeing. Again, the separation between vagina and neovagina is distinguished. The neovagina is in fact a wound. An opening, a cul-de-sac of sorts, that the body is continually trying to close, to heal. Postoperative trans women use dilators, phallic shaped stints that resemble dildos, to keep the wound from closing, preserving the neovagina. A path to nowhere. The beaver's flesh is rent to expose its insides, the slit cartoonishly yonic. Talk about a beaver shot.

Zoe Leonard's work isn't intentionally about transsexuality, those feelings and associations are totally my own, but it doesn't make them any less real for me as a viewer. Her work is fundamentally about image, and the awareness of the viewer that what they are looking at is an image. I cannot speak for other trans women, but I feel that being a transsexual is like being an image. Or to be a transsexual is to aspire to be an image. To insist on a feeling. To insist on being unreadable. To insist on being read in many ways. To embody an image of oneself from one's own mind. Cutting, removing, reshaping, and stitching oneself back together.

I am at a point in my gender transition where I have been on hormones (testosterone blockers and estrogen) long enough that my body has begun to change. As a result of this, how others read my gender is increasingly contextual. When I am in the company of women, I am one of them. When I am with men, I am one of them. When I am alone in public, it is a coin toss. Your feelings about me, or how you read me, are your fault. My feelings are my fault. Or at least that is what A.L. Steiner would assert: "Anyone who has feelings of not being able to deal with this [work], it's their baggage... as an artist that is not the baggage, I bring in..." That idea could also be used to describe people's feelings toward transsexuals. Someone else's inability to read me is their fault, not mine. Okay, it's really the fault of cis-heteropatriarchal global imperialism

and protestant values that were spread during colonization, but you're the one making assumptions. My gender isn't my own. Like an image it is dependent on a viewer. I am how I am read. Perhaps in the future this won't be the case, but for now, my feelings are Zoe Leonard's fault.

Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl.... Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl. Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl.... And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be....²

Amy Dunne was undoubtedly a cold-blooded psychopath, but she makes some good points. Or at least some of what she says resonates with me. Isn't that what every (trans) woman wants? To be a Cool Girl? But what does it even mean to be a Cool Girl? More than anything, I think what Amy Dunne is saying is that being a Cool Girl means being an image. Or aspiring to be an image. Isn't that, in a sense, what transsexuality is? Or at least an idea of it. That's how I've slowly been developing my womanhood. Looking to my mother, the women in my family, my friends, women I see on the street. Picking pieces that I think look like me, or could look like me, and fashioning myself after them.

To be a transsexual is to be a collage. Maybe that's what it means to be a woman, or just a human. No matter how clever, you can always see the seams, the points where the images overlap or meet. Even the gaps. My formal art education was in photography, and, like many photographers, much of my time was spent in the darkroom watching the images develop in the chemicals. Transsexuality is not so smooth. Part of that desire to be an image, to be a Cool Girl, is to be

² Gillian Flynn. *Gone Girl: A Novel*. New York: Broadway Books, 2018.

desired. To be a surface for people to project their desires onto. It is not enough for trans women to conform to conventional standards of womanhood, in terms of the performance of gender, they must also be passable and beautiful according to cisnormative standards.

The longing for beauty or glamour here isn't so much a practice of narcissism as it is a longing for human connection. There is a surprising number of men who are attracted to trans women, but that shouldn't necessarily suggest that these men are progressive and beyond cisnormative beauty standards. These men primarily come to trans women through pornography, sex work, or a combination, and those form a foundational image of what trans women are that few trans women have the time, resources, and even desire to live up to. I recently went on a coffee date with a man I met on a dating app. We had been snapchatting for close to three weeks, sending pictures of ourselves and texting almost nonstop during the day. He had seen me without makeup or filters from about every conceivable angle, sometimes even with stubble or acne. When we met in person at a crowded mall in Dallas, he couldn't even maintain eye contact with me. While my features that were perhaps more noticeably trans were perfectly acceptable to him while in a private space, being in public with someone like me, who is quite frequently looked at, was uncomfortable, because the scrutinizing gaze that I have become accustomed to, was destabilizing to him. The date lasted less than half an hour and he messaged me later to apologize.

We are told (and I am reminded constantly by cis men) that men are visual creatures. What does that mean? Ultimately, if I was more beautiful, or even at least more passable, then men would be more comfortable loving me. Notice I did not say that they *would* love me, as there are several former/almost partners that have expressed that if I were more this or that then they would be able to envision a life with me. Men are so devastatingly immobilized by their fear of being

“othered” that even cis het men who are comfortable enough with their sexuality to fuck me cannot imagine moving into the public sphere with (non-passing) trans women like me.

Perhaps counterintuitively, my desire to be an image, particularly as a transsexual, is not about being taken at face value, but it is an invitation for others to connect. (The irony of men who love trans women not being able to comprehend the desire for people to look past our bodies does not escape me). This isn't to say that all men who love trans women are bad or are passively upholding our oppression. Once back in San Diego, I went on another date with a different man in which we met in public at a bar near my home after texting for almost a month. After a few drinks I asked if I could kiss him and he said yes without hesitation. He held my hand as he walked me home. While this man was openly attracted to me, he still took a passive position, allowing me to be the instigator, too shy or ashamed to act on his attraction to me.

Most recently I went on a date with a third man, who not only verbalized his interest, but confidently kissed me in the middle of the crowded bar, more than once. We walked around my neighborhood, his hand alternately on the small of my back or firmly holding my own. And while the two previous dates were very much dates in my mind, the language surrounding these “hangouts” by the first two men was rather nebulous, noncommittal. This third man, however, was very clear in that it was a date, and that he was excited by the prospect of having another date the following week. I've been a transsexual long enough to be able to distinguish sexual desire from real interest in trans women.

What are the key differences, aside from the fact that these three men are completely different people? Well for one, they all have different sexualities; the first man is heterosexual, the second is bisexual, and the third is pansexual. Aspects of my body or mannerisms that might be read as male/masculine might not have been as off-putting to the non-heterosexual men. Being

part of the LGBTQ community also might have made them more sensitive to my sensitivities. I mean the other guy was open minded sexually (he showed me several images of his dildo collection), but many of the men like him that I've encountered insist on the distinction between public and private when it comes to desire. Their insistence on the privacy of desire (particularly when it comes to sexual practices outside of the cis heterosexual norm).

According to writer and critic Andrea Long Chu, a self-described "sad trans girl":

....femaleness is a universal sex defined by self-negation....
Everyone is female, and everyone hates it.... I'll define as *female*
any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room
for the desires of another.... the self is hollowed out.... To be female
is to let someone else do your desiring for you, at your own
expense.³

This takes some of the logic from *Gone Girl*'s Amy Dunne and pushes it to the extreme. Or perhaps it confirms Dunne's fears. My aim is not to validate or discredit Dunne or Chu, but to suggest that the emptying out of oneself can at times facilitate desire. Perhaps for trans women like myself, the scraping out of one's interior is meant to beat the violence of a cis-heteropatriarchal gaze to the punch: a controlled burn of sorts.

An archive might more effectively embody notions of transsexuality than a collage. In forming myself, I look to the matrilineage of my own family, histories of transfeminine people, traditions of womanhood and feminism, and of course women in art, both makers and muses. This desire to be an image is ultimately futile, for it would suggest that some form of stasis was possible.

³ Andrea Long Chu. *Females*. London: Verso, 2019.

Dunne looks down at performativity, seeking an essential personhood behind the facades that each of the women that she is critiquing wears, but she ignores the mutable nature of personhood. This emptying out could be understood as performing a kind of “realness”: an embodied desire. Amy Dunne fails to account for the desires of the women that she so deeply despises, yet ironically her raced, classed, and gendered performance of self-engages the same framework of the women she is critiquing. She aims to be a perfect woman, though not solely for herself, for she is attached to her husband Nick, and part of her performance is being the perfect couple. Though she may be influencing his performance of manhood, her womanhood, the performance of herself, is still completely dependent on his performance of himself, as they are a single unit: they reflect one another (his failure to meet her expectations, to hold up his side of the bargain, is ultimately why she fakes her death in an attempt to ruin his life).

Gender, like many other things such as race and class, is dependent on referentiality. The desire to be an image, for me, is really a longing for mutability, not to be an archetypal woman but to be as many women as possible. In a TED Talk from 2016, the actress Hari Nef asserts that the performance of upwardly mobile feminist respectability and femme aesthetics, particularly trans femme aesthetics, are at odds:

...I wanted a body that allowed me to do the things I wanted to do in the way I wanted to do them. Things men in this country aren't really allowed to do. I tried to do them in the body I was born with, but people told me 'no, you can't, you've got to soften up your face, get rid of all your body hair, get breasts, shrink your waist, get a vagina.' Of course, I looked them right in the eyes, said 'fuck you', turned

around and did pretty much all of what they told me to. It hurt, and it worked.⁴

Passing is not just about being read as a cisgender woman. For some trans people the idea of passing may have more to do with looking like themselves than an archetype. For Nef this idea of passing or an outward expression of more conventional or traditional femininity is about access to things and certain kinds of treatment. She champions Lana del Rey who, at the start of her career, performed an archetypal womanhood. del Rey was particularly mocked for this, and essentially told to be more “natural.” After several albums and a more solidified success she has done just that, stripping back the makeup and the glamour. Nef has done something similar as she has progressed in her own transition through womanhood.

I find this to be a trend amongst trans women that I follow on social media. Hyper-femininity asserts their womanhood in the start or towards the beginning of their medical transition, and eventually a lot of them stop performing femininity in this way because their bodies pass or pass enough for them to usually be read as women. Their bodies do the work “naturally” without augmentation. I feel I also should clarify that these are heterosexual trans women or trans women who date and sleep with cis-hetero men, so their performance of femininity exists, at least at times, within a heterosexual framework and therefore sexual dynamic.

A point of note here is that trans women’s performance of hyper-femininity is not just an affirmation of their own gender, but also of the sexuality of many of the men who love and fuck us. In a similar manner to Amy and Nick Dunne’s relationship, the masculinity of these men is contingent on the ability of trans women to pass. If we are not women, then they are not straight, and they refuse to relinquish the privileges that come with that. This presents a somewhat volatile

⁴ TEDxTalks. “#FreeTheFemme: The aesthetics of survival.” *Youtube* video, 12:27. May 11, 2016.

power dynamic between cis men and trans women. The refusal to perform this femininity removes the potential for trans women to exist within a cis-heterosexual framework of desire. As it stands, the cis men who love trans women have the power to change our circumstances. Only they can eliminate the stigma as well as the rigid gender performance expectations surrounding trans women. Even some of the most beautiful, passable trans women have difficulty finding and maintaining relationships due to this stigma. Are we not then justified in trying to leverage our chances of happiness, even if it means we must perform a level of femininity that is not quite authentic? The desire is sincere, and above all, the desire to be an image is a desire to be seen.

The DIEP (deep inferior epigastric perforator artery) flap procedure surgically relocates abdominal blood vessels along with the surrounding tissues to reconstruct breasts for cancer patients who have undergone a mastectomy as part of their treatment. A grueling six-hour surgery with a six-week recovery time, it allows patients to refashion themselves from their own bodily material.⁵ In November, my mother underwent this surgery as the final stage of her cancer treatment, effectively transitioning from a “sick” person to a “healthy” person. Thin tissue from radiation treatment on the left side of her upper abdomen made traditional implants a nonviable option for her in terms of reconstruction. Even if implants were a viable option, I believe my mother would have still elected to engage in this alternative procedure because having her body be only comprised of her own material was of the utmost importance to her in feeling a sense of wholeness, and finality. To no longer be a cyborg, or at least not the kind of cyborg that she was for over a year. Expanders in her chest to allow for various reconstruction surgery options. My mother seeks to be a facsimile of herself: as close a copy as her surgeon can manage.

As a daughter it is my prerogative to project my own experiences or perceptions onto my mother, and I cannot help but draw a direct line from her DIEP flap procedure to my intended Sexual Reassignment Surgery. Taking my own material and reconfiguring it into a form that is more true to my metaphysical self. The issue for myself, and my mother (I think), is not one of gender or the confirmation of our gender(s), but the fulfillment of a desired embodiment. A longing for wholeness. We are moving in different temporal directions though. My mother seeks to reverse the effects of time on her body, while I seek a lateral shift to a version of myself that speculatively exists in another timeline. Our femaleness is indisputable. Self-defined. I am a transsexual (or an aspirational one at present, though perhaps not at your reading), and she is a

⁵ “DIEP Breast Reconstruction - New Orleans - Center For Restorative Breast Surgery.” The Center for Restorative Breast Surgery.

cyborg (which is to say that we're both cyborgs of a sort). The scars that serve/will serve as identifiers of our cyborg nature are/will be hidden under our clothes. For our eyes (and the eyes of our lovers) only. A reminder of precarity and potential.

In Patrick Staff's film *Weedkiller*, excerpts from Catherine Lord's memoir *The Summer of Her Baldness* are performed as a monologue by a transfeminine actor. These scenes are interspersed with thermal images that oscillate between representative and abstract and a lip-synch performance by another transfeminine performer. Through the combination of Lord's words and the images that Staff has produced, they effectively draw a line that connects trans persons and cancer patients through the shared bodily trauma and the ways in which embodiment is facilitated by the medical industrial complex. The connection is re-enforced by the fact that for transfeminine people, taking hormones in order to medically transition increases the risk of cancer, especially breast cancer. My mother must take hormones for the next several years that are supposed to help prevent the return of her cancer. I must take hormones for the rest of my life in order to secure the body that I want. Hormones that may or may not cause the development of cancer in my breasts. All of the women in my matrilineage have had breast cancer, which begs the question: is breast cancer a rite of passage for the women in my family?

A bizarre side-effect of my mother's surgery was the loss of her belly button (a new one was fashioned for her by her surgeon). While talking with her, she lamented the loss of what she viewed as the last physical connection that she had to her mother. A profound statement. A profound loss. I'm not sure if it is my age or the estrogen that holds me at the edge of tears at all times now. Or perhaps it is merely the fact that she is my mother and that her pain (physical or psychic) is also my pain and will live on with me after she is gone. My mother is trapped

between two dead-ends. The loss of her own mother and the inability/refusal of me as her daughter to be a mother. She is the last mother in our family, which I imagine is agony.

I connect our bodily traumas at the risk of lessening the importance of my mother's struggle, and also conflating transness with illness. Neither of these things are my aim. Though not explicitly stated, and perhaps it is quite heinous of me to suggest this, but my mother's struggles with her own embodiment have brought us closer and facilitated an unspoken understanding and practice of empathy between us. I wish that my mother had not sustained this trauma, but I am also grateful that, first and foremost, she survived and that through that survival we have a relationship where I am no longer the curve to her asymptote, instead we intersect at key points physically and psychically.

Part Three:

I'm trying hard to be a photograph for you but I don't know how long I can sustain it

Walking before dawn I stepped on a mushroom.

I mistook its cap for a wildflower.

It oozed death under my sole.

Purple.

[redacted] brought me a bouquet of the most beautiful flowers on my birthday.

They will sit in my windowsill until they are rotting and their sweet floral fragrance has shifted to the saccharine aroma of death.

do not pass

I've known I was a barren woman since I was born, so I plucked my testes from the fleshy nest that they reside in.

I planted one of them in my parents' backyard next to their apple trees.

The other I planted at my grandmother's grave in the same earth where she lies.

I imagine that they will grow into orange trees and bear fruit where I could not.

The earth must be the womb for my seeds: my abdomen is like calcified sediment.

I placed them in Texas in order to ensure future sojourns to water them with my tears.

When my parents harvest the oranges they will be nourished by my flesh: recompense for bearing and nourishing me.

Should someone stumble upon the orange tree in the cemetery I hope that they would find a combination of fruit that is ripened on the branch and rotting on the ground covering the graves.

Perhaps the seeds of the rotten fruit will seep into the ground and bloom into an orchard to provide a canopy for my mother when she comes to visit her mother, and for my family when they've all been laid to rest.

I am the end of a history and the beginning of an archive.

Headlights are swallowed by the pitch

The darkness here is rich like velvet

Everything merges after dusk

Skin shimmering in the moonlight, I can see the whites of your eyes

The cicadas have stopped screaming

Your lips on the inside of my wrist, veins like spiderwebs in the dark

Thinner air, softer gravel

Southern heat long gone

Snakes congregate in the middle of the road at midnight

The mud on your feet is cool and wet like my kisses on your brow

Desperate for water.

My tongue soft yet dry like the pages of this book.

Pressed flower organs.

Between the walls of my bedroom and a heavy sheet of glass.

No.

A mirror.

You're gazing into it.

I can see myself looking at you, looking at yourself.

A silver membrane.

Cold.

I press my lips against the metal.

The gentle sounds of rain through the open window.

My thirst is satiated.

Stagnant pond

There is more water in the air

The smell of your unwashed scalp

Abandoned wasp nests

Dead frogs in the pool

Ant bites on your sweet ankles

Tread softly across me

Grass so thick the rainwater cannot reach the soil

The blades are yellow

Surreptitious kisses from the sun hiding behind the hot breath of July

Hydrangeas that are neither pink nor blue

Muddled

Indecisive faeries - dragonflies

The rose bushes wear the chain link fence like armor

Sun-bleached petals underfoot everywhere

Oranges hanging from the peach tree

wipe the sweat from your brow with mine

My father told me that he dreamt that I was a child made of gold before I was born.

The dead bees in my windowsill keep multiplying.

I place one on my budding breast.

Thick, rich honey oozes from my teat.

The bee is still dead.

It dissolves into pollen.

Naked oranges rotting in the backyard

His music in the air

A romantic notion

I'm a little lost

Raindrops on your windshield

No, butterflies hurling themselves at the glass with graceless desperation

Yellow wings, tulip petals, strewn up and down the highway

bruises on my spine from pressing matters

There was a spider in my bed when I woke up in Texas.

It was dead on my desk when I returned to California.

The flowers [redacted] gave me are curling in on themselves like the legs of the spider.

Empty houses

Paint peeling, desiccations

Even the wasp nests are vacant here

The cicadas are rehearsing their keening for a funeral

Perhaps yours

Salt overtop the flesh of fibrous fruit

Your lips peel, dried lime rind

A balm of pollen and my saliva

The sea of grass pushes you to the surface

Beholden to the sun

Tree-lines move backwards at your pace

I kiss your knees, down on my own

Coyotes watch from the brush, desperate to taste your flesh as well

Honey oozes from my eyes to soothe your bleeding feet

Little white church, faux stained-glass

Gravel roads lined with black-eyed susans

Rusty footprints down the aisle

Streets without signs

Your lips on my cheek, I am merely the ash from a pile of burned limbs

All the mirrors are fogged up from your desperate breath

Chain link fences, porous membranes

Hands circle my left thigh

Your touch, stickers from my backyard that would embed themselves in my heel

A lone cardinal spies from atop telephone wires

My hair the color of dried pine needles

Silky nests in the trees, caterpillars awaiting metamorphosis

Estrogen gave me back my dreams.

Divine transsexuality

Virgin by way of suicide

Grapefruit juice dripping from my core

The origin of my own world

He called me wholesome and I wonder if it's because he noticed that I'm wearing my grandmother's earrings

The afternoon sun snuck into my room and burnt me

while I slept

A scorch mark between my breasts

I walk to the flower shop next door and purchase an aloe plant

to soothe the residue of his kiss

Honey, lemon, whiskey

I only half watched the film, silently begging you to touch me

Brush your fingers between my thighs

This dull ache in my abdomen

My barriers were built too hastily and too thorough

The cold air in the theatre

I want to sit here with you

Silence

A black screen

I cannot bear to watch you looking at me

Dreams of you in my bed, disarming me

Lying together in the darkness

Silence

No more pretending

Words between us are insufficient

fucking and intimacy aren't the same thing

but I want some fucking intimacy

sucking the marrow from his bones a starved animal

watermelon gum torrid kisses

feet, wet pasture smell

his finger ravenous mouth fur and an oily substance

Two beasts biting him damp cage his insufficiency

more dead than alive

lightning attack a religious experience

rupture

the voracity of those hundred mouths his juice

an enviable love it was all anticlimactic

intestines yanked with such delectable force wetted by another's saliva

her mythic mutability his early manhood

the act of love

silence flayed him alive.⁶

⁶ Jeffrey Eugenides. *The Virgin Suicides: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition*. Picador, 2018. The phrases in this poem were selected from a section in Eugenides book, redacting his words to develop my own, disjointed sentences.

Headlights dance around my room

Ghosts of embers from the fireplace

He runs an ice cube across my lower lip

Fingers in my mouth searching for secrets that aren't there

Bites my thighs, juices trickling out

A delicious pool, sink into me

A body of water for you

Wet

I can be anything you want me to be while remaining totally myself

I'm so in love with sincerity

You're such a tranny magnet.

My lover wants to plant his seed in my belly,

but I would rather that he let his semen seep into the earth.

Kiss the bottom of the pool, my love

The water is still

I can feel your movements ripple out through space

Your embrace crushes the air from my lungs

Fill me with your moist breath, tongue rubbing against my teeth

I am watching from outside the psychic space of the water

Keep me present so my mind cannot wander

Entangled limbs

You cut my thigh and I drip like milkweed, clouding the pool and your eyes

You don't need those to see me

Appendage(s) inside orifice(s)

There are no more boundaries between us

Curtains blowing in the summer breeze

Your breath between my thighs

Yearning in the sticky heat

Sweat coated sheets, translucent

Your hands are cold, a relief

A bathtub filled with ice cubes

My limbs ache

kisses on the soles of feet

Bees in my house, swarming in through the pipes

Clusters nestled on my breasts

Honey leaks from his pores and I kiss his cheek

He tastes like a fantasy, warm sunlight

Bees buzzing inside my rib cage

His head pressed against my stomach

listening to the choir echo in my interior

A nurturing impulse

Kissing his thighs in return

A gentle breeze, his touch

I wish I were an orange that you could bisect and eat the flesh out of.

Isn't that romantic?

Your teeth tearing into me, my juices running down your chin while they scrape the walls of my interior in your attempt to extract every bit of sweet meat that I contain.

Isn't that romantic?

I hope you pull out my seeds first so that my flesh isn't pristine when you run your tongue across my exposed surfaces.

Sink your teeth into my breast and then eat my pancreas.

I love tasting my flesh on your tongue when you kiss me.

Will you eat my tongue next because you like the taste of metal, silver?

Isn't this romantic?

Really? You don't think so?

Will you whisper secrets into my mouth that you know I cannot hear?

Isn't that romantic?

There are oranges that have been fermenting in my belly.

You can drink the mulled wine from my stomach.

Don't you think I'm romantic?

Can you see the blood running down my thighs?

It's not my menstrual cycle; I dilated too forcefully trying to make room for you.

I'm in love with everyone,

don't take it so personally

The flowers that [redacted] gave me are dead.

Embalmed: they refuse to rot, so I leave them sitting there in the windowsill.

A lock of your hair on the edge of the photograph that I was taking

pass with care

Your feelings are my fault.

Part Four:

The camera doesn't care about your desire

To be an image is to be abstracted from intimacy: an irreconcilable relationship between image and viewer. Intimacy and desire are diametrically opposed. Through my experience as a trans woman, particularly as an object of desire, I am merely an image to the men that primarily want to live out a fantasy through me. My body is an experience for them. My personhood is secondary. The moment we near intimacy, they disappear, unable to actually look at and see me, rather than a reflection of their own desire. Our desires are diametrically opposed.

Desire is the absence of intimacy, likewise, intimacy the absence of desire. To desire someone is to project your own idea of that person onto them, a violent abstraction. Fixing them into an image that ignores the mutability of their personhood. To be desired is to be hollowed out, an impression of oneself.

In *Blade Runner 2049*, the replicant K has a servant/lover who is a hologram, named Joi. Joi longs to be intimate with K. At one point in the film, she hires a human sex worker and projects her visage over the sex worker's own body so that she may have sex with K. To be desired is to be a hologram. K fucks an image of Joi, not Joi herself. Simultaneously he fucks the sex worker, without acknowledging her personhood. There is no intimacy in this act, even if there is the perception that Joi's desire is fulfilled, it is merely a farce. The distance between them is insurmountable.⁷

To be a transsexual is to be an image, more specifically a hologram: I am Joi. For the men who desire me, I am the sex worker, and they project their fantasies of tranny porn onto me. The illusion is what maintains desire. Intimacy would require them to see me, to acknowledge

⁷ Andrew A Kosove, et all 2018. *Blade Runner 2049*.

my womanhood. I am woman-adjacent, not really a woman. My womanhood is both conditional and contextual. Only within the confines of desire, and specifically the fulfillment of the desires of cis men, am I a woman. I am a woman because otherwise they would be fucking a man (which would make them queer) and that is truly the worst thing that they could possibly imagine. I am not a woman because I am not their sister, their mother, their daughter, their girlfriend, their wife. An image is not afforded this kind of intimacy.

What then do we make of a desire to be desired? A longing to be seen as an image? There is perhaps a mutability in living in another person's perception of you, but there is still the gap between their perception of you and your own perception of their perception. Living in someone else's head is not a sustainable practice. Still, there is something fundamentally romantic about being desired, though romance does not promise fulfillment. To desire desire, to long to be an image is to relinquish intimacy, refuse it, even.

Hervé Guibert writes about the irreconcilability of intimacy when one desires an image in "The Cancerous Image" from his book of essays titled *Ghost Image*:

For a while, I kept the image in my bed, beneath the sheet that welcomed my body; I crushed it and heard him whimper. He lived in my dreams. I sewed him into my pillow. Then, after a while, I decided to wear him, directly against my skin, directly against my torso, attaching him with bandages and tape... when I finally undid the bandages and tape, I saw that the limp cardboard was empty, the image blank.... It had stuck to my skin, like a tattoo or decal.⁸

⁸ Hervé Guibert and Robert Bononno. *Ghost Image*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014.

In this instance the object of Guibert's desire is obliterated through this gesture of intimacy. An extremely romantic gesture, but a violence, nonetheless. Desire is dissolved as object becomes subject. Intimacy is about proximity, closeness: desire requires distance. Where then do intimacy and desire meet and overlap? Can they? Just as an image is not immutable, intimacy and desire do not exist in separate vacuums. They flow in and out of each other, like waters of different temperatures creating currents, churning the ocean.

To treat intimacy and desire as antithetical is to ignore the desire of the desired. That complexity is recognized in the sexual exchange between K, Joi, and the sex worker. K desires Joi, and the sex worker functions as a bridge between the two of them, facilitating the desire which becomes a moment of intimacy that is otherwise impossible. Joi desires K, and therefore utilizes this other person, this host body, as a means to fulfilling not only her own desire, but his. Joi wants to be a "real" woman. Or rather, longs to be more than an image. This however is complicated by K's desire for Joi's visage. Joi does not merely hire the sex worker as a stand-in body, she imposes her likeness on top of the sex worker's body in order to facilitate a "real" sexual experience between the two of them. Concessions must be made in order to fulfill desires.

Perhaps then it is not desire that need be sacrificed in the pursuit of intimacy, but rather the image that must be eliminated in order to facilitate a symbiotic framework that incorporates both intimacy and desire for both parties. Guibert is able to simultaneously destroy image and desire, but his object of desire is in fact an object, not a subject. Presumably the image has no agency, no desire, so the intimacy facilitated by imprinting the photograph onto his own flesh, while romantic, is dependent on the passivity of the image. He loves the image of the man, not the man himself, having never actually encountered the person whose impression he desires. It is

when the object is also a subject that desire is complicated and through which intimacy becomes a possibility.

To be a transsexual, one must first establish oneself as an image, an idea of oneself, and then allow that image to be shattered. Being an image facilitates desire, but that is not the long-term goal. To be desired not solely because you are a transsexual and not in spite of being a transsexual. This work cannot be done by trans women themselves; it is the responsibility of transamorous cis men. Desire is empty without the promise of intimacy, though desire is not the central issue.

Cisnormative womanhood needs to be dismantled. It is the burden of image that is placed on trans women that creates a barrier between intimacy and desire. In a recent series of interviews with transamorous men (men who are attracted to trans women), journalist Diana Tourjée, a trans woman herself, allows them to talk about their desire for trans women and how that desire was sparked, cultivated, and sustained. In his story, one of the men admits:

...I've hooked up with trans women regularly. I've even gone on dates with trans women, but only when they pass well enough that I'm not anxious someone will know. I'm not proud of that. It's hard to admit, because I know it isn't right. I know that trans women are women no matter what they look like. If someone is visibly trans, and whether there's parts of themselves they'd like to change but can't, or they're perfectly comfortable the way they are, who am I to judge that? There's certainly things about my body that I'm not in

control of, so how does it feel for trans women to hear this? I feel
guilt.⁹

As a transsexual, this isn't news to me, rather something I've heard or inferred from several romantic/sexual partners. "Passing" is an obstacle for trans women, but "passing" as a cis woman does not guarantee intimacy with cis men. We are tasked with erasing our transness in the name of desirability without the benefits that cis women enjoy through their adherence to cisnormative femininity. Even cis women who are gender nonconforming or that do not practice hyper-femininity are still considered women, while more androgynous or masculine presenting trans women are not. Positioning cis people as the paragons of manhood and womanhood leaves trans people with no option other than to "pass" as a cis person, but when we are "passable" we are called traps and tricksters. The subtext is that we have manipulated cis men into finding us attractive, of making them think that we are "real" women.

Even amongst transamorous men there is a divide that I have encountered. The first kind of transamorous man likes trans women primarily because we have penises (at least those of us who are pre or non-op). We are, in their minds, "not like other girls" and that is what makes us attractive to these cis men. The second kind of transamorous man only likes post-op trans girls. Dicks are not allowed. We must erase every trace of our transness in order for these men to bestow womanhood upon us. The third and last kind of transamorous man likes trans women for who we are as people, as women. They don't have preferences for what kind of genitals we have, but even still, many of these men expect us to perform womanhood within a cisnormative framework. In each instance, being "passable" is what gets you in the door. It is a prerequisite for desire and intimacy.

⁹ Diana Tourjée. "How I Realized I Was Attracted to Trans Women: The Bartender." Vice, February 10, 2020.

The question of “passing” is unavoidable for transsexuals. As a “non-passing” trans woman, it is something that frames every social interaction and the way that I move through public spaces. I am often asked if that is a goal of mine, especially by the men that I sleep with. Rather than reject the idea of “passing” altogether, which I think would be dishonest and not allow for nuance, I suggest the re-framing of the idea of “passing” through a transsexual lens. I *do* want to “pass”, desperately, but perhaps not in the way that many cis people, and even some trans people, think.

For me, “passing” doesn’t mean looking like a cis woman or looking like a “woman” (which I feel like is often a misguided cis feminist attempt to bring trans women into the fold that ultimately erases our intersectional differences). I don’t want to look cis, and I don’t want to be cis. I want to “pass” as a trans woman. What I mean by this is that I want to be recognized as a woman *and* to not have to erase my transness to be worthy of womanhood, desire, or intimacy (read: love). Unfortunately, this is not my work to do, cis men and women must take up the task of dismantling cisnormativity. Until then, I am not Guibert, I am the photograph of the beautiful man, and I long for someone to press me against their skin until I leave an impression in their flesh.

A cis-heterosexist framework is what creates dissonance between intimacy and desire for trans women and the men that love us. Assumptions and expectations separate us out, situating desire as a one-way street, when, like intimacy, it is dependent on dialogue. Is intimacy, at least situationally, not the fulfillment of desire? These things are not, as I suggested earlier, diametrically opposed, rather, cis-heterosexism facilitates the alienation of trans women from cis men. The men that desire trans women desire more than sexual fulfillment, I know that they too long for intimacy, but they cannot visualize it.

Desire comes easy, but it is skewed by overly sexualized and reductive representations of trans women in media, especially pornography. These men want the same kind of intimacy that trans women do, but they cannot visualize what that looks like. Affirming representations of love between trans women and cis men are few and far in-between, and truthfully, unless you're an expert on transsexual cinema (the non-pornographic kind), how are these men supposed to know that this is even a possibility? They cannot imagine a future with us because they have never seen it.

How can a relationship that facilitates respect, trust, and intimacy be built upon a shared foundation of shame? Natalie Wynn, a trans lesbian who runs a Youtube channel called "ContraPoints", talks about shame in one of her videos:

There's two problems that kind of multiply together. One, I'm ashamed of being trans, two, I'm ashamed of being a lesbian, and whatever one times two is, I'm really ashamed of being a trans lesbian. Ugh. It's difficult and risky for me to admit these feelings because visible queer people are supposed to perform pride. Why is no one talking about the shame? Because we're ashamed of the shame. But we shouldn't be. The shame is a natural result of shaming.¹⁰

Shame is not reserved for queer/trans/nonbinary people. Cisgender heterosexual people feel shame about their gender/sexuality as well. In fact, it is their shame that reinforces the gender/sexual binary. These people didn't create the cis-heterosexist framework that we all operate within, but

¹⁰ ContraPoints. "Shame." *Youtube* video, 42:02. February 15, 2020.

they are just as beholden to it and reinforce it on themselves and those around them, regardless of gender or sexuality. This is especially true for cis-heterosexual men.

Men are not the patriarchy. While most men may benefit from patriarchy in various ways, more so if you are white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, protestant, wealthy, etc., they are also incredibly damaged by it. I started dating this man recently, and the first time I brought him back to my place I found out that he wears polish on his toenails. He was a bit embarrassed when I mentioned it, and also hastily let me know that he doesn't normally shave his chest, and that he's telling me these things because he saw on my dating profile that I prefer "masculine" people (to clarify my profile states that "I'm attracted to people of all genders who are masc of center"). It honestly made me really sad to think that I was making him feel inadequate in some way. I clarified that one, I liked the color polish he was wearing, two, that he should groom his body in any way he saw fit, and three, that I didn't have a monolithic idea of what masculinity was or what it should be. More often than not I am so worried about how my gender is perceived that I never stopped to think that this man could be worried about how I would perceive his gender.

Toxic masculinity and cis-heterosexism puts men in a cage where their desires are evaluated as a way of assessing the "realness" of their manhood. Intimacy is constrained and only acceptable within certain parameters and only with certain kinds of people. Any expression of desire or development of intimacy with a person who is not a cisgender woman has the potential to undercut a man's masculinity. To be a transsexual is to be an image, but perhaps to be a man, to be any kind of person, is also to be an image.

So how do two images love each other? Desire doesn't have to be a barrier to intimacy, it should be a bridge. When [redacted] looks at me, I can tell that he sees me, not an image. My personhood is central, not the modifiers that people filter their perceptions of me through. I do

not mean that he does not see my transness or my womanhood, rather they are parts of my whole self in his eyes: interlocuting and inseparable from my soul. With [redacted] I am not the man in Guibert's photograph, the sex worker, or Joi. Trans women are not simulacra, but girls *do* have oranges.

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