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# “What Gender is Your Hair Color”

by Irina Nekrasov/a

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*Translated by* Nat Modlin

## Translator’s Introduction

It is my pleasure to introduce readers to the work of the non-binary author and activist Irina Nekrasov/a. Born in Chelyabinsk, Russia, Nekrasov/a currently lives and writes in Leipzig, where they are a founding member of the literary collective PMS (Postmigrantische Störung). Characterized by a highly personal and self-questioning narrative voice, their texts raise questions about the intersections of migration, gender identity, bodies, and memory culture. “What Gender is Your Hair Color” first appeared in *Realitäten: 30 queere Stimmen (Realities: 30 queer voices)*, a recent anthology of poetry, essays, and stories focusing on queer, intersectional experiences in a German-language context.<sup>1</sup>

While much contemporary German writing about gender has been influenced by American queer theory and discourse (as we see in Nekrasov/a’s essay in the form of familiar English words and phrases), I want to note certain social and linguistic differences that have influenced my translation. In a passage toward the end of the text, for instance, Nekrasov/a refers to “[e]in\*e Freund\*in.” The use of *Gendersternchen* (literally “gender stars”), is, as Jon Cho-Polizzi and Michael Sandberg put it in 2020, “an inclusive linguistic device which seeks to overcome the highly gendered nature of German grammar.” For example, the plural noun *Student\*innen* signals the writer’s acknowledgment that they (1) *know* that there are non-binary students in the group, or (2) that they *don’t know* the genders of all the students, and thus don’t want to make assumptions, or (3) that they are deliberately rejecting both the generically masculine form of nouns (*Studenten*) and the binary term *StudentInnen*. Cho-Polizzi and Sandberg thus suggested replacing *Gendersternchen* with “non-gendered English-language equivalents.”<sup>2</sup>

But *Freund\*in* is not an inclusive, “non-gendered” term. In fact, it is a highly gendered term, one that precisely marks the friend’s gender as a *genderqueer* identity. In the philosopher Robin Dembroff’s definition, genderqueer identity is performed through the “existential destabilizing” of the dominant gender ideology, that is, of the conception of gender as an exhaustive and exclusive binary of *man* and *woman*.<sup>3</sup> As a rejection of both

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<sup>1</sup> Irina Nekrasov/a, “Welche Haarfarbe hat Geschlecht,” in *Realitäten: 30 queere Stimmen* (Berlin: etec buch, 2022), 66–71.

<sup>2</sup> See Jon Cho-Polizzi and Michael Sandberg, “Translators’ Introduction,” *TRANSIT* 11, no. 2 (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Dembroff contrasts this “existential” destabilization with a “principled” destabilization, which would include those who destabilize gender norms due to a sense of political or social commitment, but who do not feel that their gender falls outside of the gender binary. “Principled” destabilizers would typically be called “allies.” See Robin Dembroff, “Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Kind,” *Philosopher’s Imprint* 20, no. 9 (Apr., 2020): 1–23, here 13.

masculine and feminine, the word *Freund\*in* thus signals an individual’s existential rejection of the gender binary.

My fear, then, is that translating *Freund\*in* as *friend* removes a specific kind of destabilizing marker, thus erasing a deliberate signaling of genderqueer identity. Not all non-binary and genderqueer individuals want to hide their gender. Non-binary is not the absence of gender, nor is it synonymous with androgyny: in fact, many non-binary people specifically reject androgyny, arguing that it issues demands for the body that not everyone can meet. Ultimately, I opted for an imperfect solution, “enby friend,” attempting to retain the mark of destabilization and intimacy at the same time.

Destabilization is central to Nekrasov/a’s work and existence more broadly. Their stated literary themes include “how to smash the conditions of normality”; their very name signals a destabilization of gendered conventions.<sup>4</sup> In “What Gender is Your Hair Color,” you can hear a longing for alternatives. If the body “becomes its gender,” as Judith Butler wrote in 1988,<sup>5</sup> then how do I become mine? The search for a non-binary haircut, a non-binary jacket, a non-binary body remains fruitless. “I’m convinced,” Nekrasov/a wrote to me, “that gender has no corporeality, but that corporeality is gendered.”<sup>6</sup> Nekrasov/a thus lambasts social media posts stating that *Non-binary folx don’t owe you androgyny*. “People share these posts every day,” they write. “And every day, I don’t believe them.” For many, non-binary still means androgynous; androgynous means white, thin, hairless.<sup>7</sup>

In Germany, the use of *Gendersternchen* has been perceived as a threat not only to the gender binary, but also to dominant ideology altogether. The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party has included “gegendert” or “genderised” language alongside Muslims, English-speakers, and immigrants as central threats to German national identity, and debates around gender have entered mainstream conservative discourse more broadly.<sup>8</sup> As Nekrasov/a’s essay reveals, the non-binary body is held in tension between invisibility and surveillance. “[I] would rather be unseen than looked at like that” they quote.<sup>9</sup> “I will never know what it means to be invisible” begins a text by another non-binary German author.<sup>10</sup> “Being trans means that you have the burden of proof. Being trans *and* non-binary means you have to prove something for which there are no words, no images, and no defining features,” writes Nekrasov/a.

I first encountered “What Gender is Your Hair Color” at the peak of my own frustration with Germany’s gender binary, at a moment when the lack of gender-neutral bathrooms and accepted non-binary pronouns in Germany had begun to weigh on me, when

<sup>4</sup> See [here](#). My translation. “Nekrasov/a” merges masculine (-ov) and feminine (-ova) East Slavic naming conventions.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (Dec., 1988): 519–31, here 523.

<sup>6</sup> Personal correspondence by email. My translation.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Treavian Simmons, “Gender Isn’t a Haircut: How Representation of Nonbinary People of Color Requires More Than White Androgyny,” *Color Blog* (Oct., 2018). See also Nekrasov/a, “Liebeslied für mein Körperfett,” *PMS: Postmigrantische Störung* 2 (July, 2022): 113–14.

<sup>8</sup> Alternative für Deutschland, “Programm für Deutschland: Das Grundsatzprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland,” (2016), 47; “Manifesto for Germany: The Political Programme of the Alternative for Germany” (2017), 47–48. See also Peter Eisenberg, “Debatte um den Gender-Stern: Finger weg vom generischen Maskulinum!” *Tagesspiegel*, Aug. 8, 2018. I thank Sophie Salvo for calling my attention to the strangeness of the AfD’s manifesto and to the debates around gender and language more generally.

<sup>9</sup> See Sâre Zer, “Vertrauen,” *Transcodiert: Queeres Literaturmagazin* 1 (Nov., 2021): 18–22, here 21.

<sup>10</sup> Sasha Marianna Salzmann, “Visible,” trans. Lou Silhol-Macher, *TRANSIT* 12, no. 2 (2020).

I felt invisible and surveilled at the same time, when I couldn’t wait to get back to the comfort and safety of my community at home.<sup>11</sup>

## What Gender is Your Hair Color

*the gazes that fall on me are different. i would rather be unseen than looked at like that (...) i manage to survive, even though i was not meant to exist in the world the way that i am. unseen, i make it to places where i’m not even supposed to be. other voices join in, deciding what i am and whether i’m even allowed to exist. no matter where i go, the gazes hardly change. i still owe them proof.*

– Sâre Zer, “Trust”

A body wearing a blazer can be the body of a lesbian. Or a businessman. Or a social worker on testosterone. Or a woman in boyfriend jeans pushing a shopping cart. Or a law student picking up her degree. Or a non-binary person who looks exactly like the businessman, the social worker, the lesbian, the law student, or the woman with the shopping cart.

What is a non-binary body? What is a non-binary jacket or a non-binary haircut? What are your nails supposed to look like, or the calluses on your feet? What shoe size should you wear? When you sit, do you lean forward or off to one side? Which hair colors are non-binary? Which eye colors, which skin colors? How much body fat is nonbinary? Do your toes point forward, or do they stick off to one side? What does your cough sound like?

On Sundays, my mother used to send me into the bathroom to fetch a small purse. The bag smelled sweet and pungent at the same time. In it was hand cream, nail polish, scissors for her nails, an emery board, a cuticle trimmer, and nail polish remover. She’d sit in an armchair in the living room and carefully unpack each object, one at a time. She wiped off her unchipped nail polish, trimmed her cuticles, filed her nails, and when she blew away the nail filings, it would smell like a workshop filled with sawdust. My mother’s fingers are long and slender. Whenever she starts to get nostalgic for her youth, she likes to talk about how she had the most beautiful hands in her entire neighborhood when she was a young woman, about how people would always compliment her legs and hands. How her ring size was never bigger than a 16. She was proud of that because it was something nobody could ever take away from her. When she migrated to Germany, she started to work as a maid for old rich Germans. Even though her hands were sacred to her, she never wore gloves. Her hands began to grow wrinkled and cracked. She would paint her nails with a

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<sup>11</sup> My thanks to that community, especially to A. Oranday, R. Zein, E. Wilhelm, F. Curtis, and others who have discussed (gender)queerness with me. Thanks are also due to Elizabeth Sun and Sophie Salvo for reading drafts. Finally, my sincere thanks to Irina Nekrasov/a for their correspondence and consent to translate this text, and to etece buch for their official permission.

shimmery pink nail polish, wait until the polish dried, and then apply cream that smelled like chamomile.

My father's hands are small. His fingers are soft in the sense that they aren't slender, and rough in the sense that they bear the traces of years of manual labor. My older brother inherited my mother's long, slender fingers. I've often imagined how beautiful that shimmery pink polish would look on his nails. I have my father's hands: neither long nor rough. My nails are short and unpainted.

Are my brother's hands non-binary? Are my hands non-binary? We might say that mine are gender non-conforming. But gender non-conforming is also an identity. Others might say that they're "just not really like a typical woman's" or "not quite a typical man's." But those are the people who would say that the shape of your hands isn't gendered.

I'm talking to a friend. She starts telling me about a book reading she and another author gave, and about how a handful of groupies came up after the reading and started to idolize him in front of her. I raise my eyebrows and ask her: "What did you see them as? Women?" She replies: "Nah, they all looked more non-binary." Since that remark, I've been trying to imagine what those groupies looked like. Short hair? Long hair? Makeup, no makeup? Baseball hats? Dresses? Blazers?

Every day the same posts pop up on my Instagram:

*Trans mascs don't owe you masculinity.*

*Trans femmes don't owe you femininity.*

*Non-binary folx don't owe you androgyny.*

People share these posts every day. And every day, I don't believe them.

If you pick up a jacket, you can tell whether it's a men's or a women's by looking at whether the buttons are on the left or right. This is something you'd only know if you're trans, or if your grandparents are really anal about these things. Men's feet are supposed to be a size 42 or bigger. My feet keep getting flatter, which means I keep buying bigger shoes. Now, I wear a 41/42. Still a woman, almost a man . . . non-binary feet? I'm secretly so excited about how my feet are growing that I don't go to the orthopedist, even though they're not even growing, just getting wider and flatter. Some people wear shoes that are a size too large, others squish their feet into shoes that are too small. On the first day of a job building sets for a theater, the stage manager starts handing out work shoes. When a guy next to me says, "I need a size 39/40," the manager snickers. I tell a cis friend about this later. He says: "Huh? Since when do shoes come with a gender?"

Ruby Rose puts on gold pumps. Runs concealer under her eyes. She has long, blonde hair. Ruby grabs scissors and cuts her hair short. She steps into a bathtub wearing a dress and pours a bucket of water over her head, scrubs herself with a rag and soap until her skin starts to peel off, revealing tattoo-covered arms. Ruby begins to move about differently. She takes off her nail polish, binds her chest, inserts a packer in her underwear. She puts on suit pants, pulls on leather boots. She starts to make aggressive facial expressions. Shouts at the camera. Hunches and broadens her shoulders. Puts a blazer on. Sticks a cig between her lips.

“A short film about gender roles, Trans, and what it is like to have an identity that deviates from the status quo.” That’s the description under the YouTube video. It’s got 53 million clicks. “It Pulls Me Under” by Butterfly Boucher plays in the background.

Two dykes showed me Ruby’s video in a messy kitchen. I remember saying something like “woah . . . so cool!” I watch the same video today and realize that when we’re looking for a non-binary body, for non-binary clothes, for non-binary body movements, Ruby’s always in the back of our mind. White, thin, short hair, chiseled face: androgynous.

An enby friend writes to me: “I love and hate Ruby Rose, sometimes at the same time, that poster child for a non-binary look we can never get right.”

I list bodies and clothes, I list movements and bodily sounds, I say: “I am non-binary.” And I force myself not to say: “I feel non-binary.” But at the end of the day, my body can’t prove that it’s nonbinary. Sâre Zer writes: “other voices join in, deciding what i am and whether i’m even allowed to exist.”

The same body moves through rooms, through streets, through houses, appears in front of people, moves here and there. Sâre Zer writes “what i am. When strangers can’t clock my body, my face, or my movements, they never say: *who* are you.”

Other voices join in, deciding what I am and whether I’m even allowed to exist.

What is a non-binary body? We try to define it. But if a word is supposed to name something that we can find out there in the world, then what does it mean when the word slips out of my hands like a bar of soap?

We try to define that body and say: “Your body doesn’t owe anyone androgyny.” Your body is allowed to be Black, fat, femme, masc. It’s allowed to be assigned male at birth. You’re allowed to be trans and binary. Disabled. Chronically sick. To look cis. We’ve come up with magic formulas: You can’t tell a person’s gender by looking at them. Assume nothing.

My mother’s hands are the hands of a mother, because that’s what she says she is: a mother. But we all know that the statements we make about ourselves would never hold up in a conversation, let alone in front of a jury. Being trans means that you have the burden of proof. Being trans *and* non-binary means you have to prove something for which there are no words, no images, and no defining features.

Our gender is never tied to our bodies. No gender is ever bound to a body. But this connection is still constantly enforced.

A body wearing a blazer can be the body of a lesbian. Or of a businessman. Or a social worker on testosterone. Or a woman pushing a shopping cart wearing boyfriend jeans. Or a law student picking up her degree. Or a non-binary person who looks exactly like the businessman, the social worker, the lesbian, the law student, or that woman with the shopping cart.