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Trans*versing the DMZ: a non-binary autoethnographic exploration of gender and masculinity

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ABSTRACT
Using an abductive, critical-poststructuralist autoethnographic approach, I consider the ways in which masculine of centre, non-binary/genderqueer trans* identities transverse the poles of socializing binary gender systems, structures, and norms which inform higher education. In this paper, I assert that non-binary genderqueer identities are products of a particular sense-ing about gender that is reproduced and enforced in US higher education. Non-binary genderqueer identities defiantly take up space within a demilitarized zone that vacates the continuum of gender and instantiates binary genders. In particular, this autoethnography employs promiscuous and high-density theoretical analysis to determine the possibilities of resolving the breakdown presented by non-binary/genderqueer masculinities through a transmasculine critical epistemology.

In July 1992, I was part of a U.S. delegation of eight college students and our guide, participating in a youth exchange program between the U.S. Congress and the Korean National Assembly. During our three weeks in South Korea, we took a trip to the 38th Parallel, the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea and, in particular, the compound where the peace accords were signed to end hostilities in 1953. The compound was sparsely occupied by military personnel, U.S., South Korean, and North Korean, on their respective sides of the border, carefully guarding the maintenance of inactivity within the unoccupied buffer zone along the 38th parallel. The intense surveillance created an occupied emptiness, in which there was no true sense of being alone. There had been a one-room building erected in the center of the compound with windows and doors on opposite sides of the room from each other and a six-foot rectangular table carefully centered in the middle of the floor with chairs on both sides of its length. There was a U.S. soldier, maybe two, who had escorted us into the DMZ from the South Korean side, standing guard inside the small square building. This table was where the peace accords were negotiated and then signed. It was a space that belonged to neither North nor South Korea. No speaking was allowed inside the room though cameras and picture-taking were permitted. At one point as I stood near the table in the center of the room, I looked across to the window on the North Korean side of the building and saw a North Korean soldier staring, expressionless, in the window. As I looked at him, I could not tell if he was actually seeing me though he appeared to be looking directly at me. I had never felt so invisible, but so obviously visible. I had numerous questions in that moment: Does he see me standing here? What does he think of me? Has he ever seen a Black person before? Is he considering how it is even possible for me to be standing here? The image of that soldier’s stare seared itself into my memory. I do not need the picture I took of him to remind me of the cold terror I felt. (17 June 2015)

The purpose of this inquiry is to offer a sense-ible (Gilroy, 2000; Titchkosky, 2011) paradigm for transmasculine criticality in higher education. Specifically, I seek to answer the following questions from a non-binary perspective: What is (a) man, not embodied but philosophically? If not embodied, what is the possibility and function of men? (2015, July 18). Moreover, what does it mean to desire/embrace/claim masculinity beyond gender embodiment? Such a project is necessary to re-educate the human sensatorium (Gilroy, 2000; Titchkosky, 2011) to make masculine of centre (Cole, 2016) non-binary/genderqueer trans* (MoC-NB/GQT*) identities perceptible – and therefore, possible (Butler, 2004).
How to read this paper

Consistent with the post-coding (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014), abductive (Brinkmann, 2014) approach used in this paper, I deliberately violate a few scholarly practices expected in educational research. As Thompson (2003) acknowledged, consistent with the style guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA), ‘educational journals generally look for a seamless text in which each paragraph either builds on a previous paragraph or follows a predictable path’ (p. 8). In this structure, papers are expectedly organized in an ‘introduction – method – results – discussion’ (Thompson, 2003, p. 8) format. Yet, this practice, as Brinkmann (2014) discussed, presumes the discrete separation of extant literature (as not data) from data (considered to be given) from analysis (done to data) from discussion (meant to be representational of truth/knowledge). Further, it reflects the epistemological whiteness and racial bias that dominates research conducted in the Western European/US tradition (Scheurich & Young, 1997; Thompson, 2003).

An abductive approach ‘is concerned with the relationship between a situation and inquiry’ (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 722; emphasis in original) and is neither data-driven nor theory-driven, but rather eschews the underlying modernist, Cartesian ontological realism of most qualitative research (Brinkmann, 2014; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). Analysis happens in the course of living through/with moments of breakdown (Brinkmann, 2014), and journaling as product/ive data are not presumed to be ‘supposedly uncontaminated by theoretical interpretation’ (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). Consequently, in this paper, I present ‘research as part of the life process’ where I am ‘do[ing] research, inquiry, and analysis, for the purposes of living’ (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 722) and subject to analysis and as analysis both the extant literature and my journaled reflections (formatted as italicized right-justified text). The resulting format irrupts both forms throughout the piece for three purposes: (1) signal key ideas, (2) offer analysis (conscious awareness), and (3) crystallize the breakdowns (situations, mysteries, bewilderments; Brinkmann, 2014) that drive this research.

Like Thompson (2003), I also disrupt the narrative’s seamlessness by using discursive endnotes, contravening American Psychological Association (APA, 2010). The endnotes serve as a shadow text meant to recognize the fluid and dynamic character of discourse. Conversations are not tidy and do not progress linearly, but rather feature asides, rejoinders, and background information that do not move the conversation forward but work to ensure that all listeners feel included and understand central ideas that may be taken for granted. In this way, the endnotes given here allow readers/listeners to ‘put a pin’ in the conversation and either continue with the main thread or pause to follow an interesting point.

My efforts to disrupt and problematize whiteness and its enforcement of modernist scholarly writing practices are at best partial as Thompson (2003) also acknowledged. This is still written as a research report and engages in the politics of defensive and archival citation (Thompson, 2003). It has been subject to the practice of anonymous peer review required for publication in this journal. Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate, even if partially, a different way to approach ‘research’ with non-binary/gender-queer trans* identities. I offer some implications for this at the end of the paper.

Promiscuous analysis and high-density theorizing

As a Black MoC-NB/GQT* person, the material effects of interlocking systems of marginalization are pervasive and inescapable. This intersectional reality is messy, complex, and cannot be competently approached through a process that first seeks to follow formulas more than to do justice. Consequently, like Childers (2014), I have ‘embraced an unruly approach to thinking about and engaging with empirical materials’ (p. 819). The life process is agentic, affective, and defies simplistic analysis offered by only one set of perspectives or concepts. As Childers also encountered, I had to be ‘accountable methodologically’ to the multiple layers of race and gender presented by living as a Black MoC-NB/GQT* person in the academy. Therefore, neither critical race theory (CRT), nor intersectionality, nor poststructuralism alone was sufficient to handle the material realities of a Black life inscribed by (non-binary) (trans*) gender. I was consistently engaging all three frameworks simultaneously when thinking about my life/data,
a form of analysis that Childers called ‘promiscuous’ and which I refer to in this article as high-density theorizing. Such a promiscuous, high-density theorizing uses multiple conceptual frameworks, as well as multiple analytical metaphors to create mind maps as nuanced and complex as the ontological realities they are meant to symbolize. Using multiple theoretical constructs and metaphors to do sense-making refracts the central idea of a non-binary/genderqueer transmasculine criticality into multiple strands that are in complex, interdependent relationship. This high-density theorizing applies the logic inherent in the interlocking of material effects (due to intersectional systems of structural oppression) to the inner world of conceptual sense-making. In other words, ways of making meaning (theorizing) are always already densely imbricated and function as inseparable wholes (see Figure 1).

**Critical race theory**

CRT as enunciated by Delgado and Stefancic (2012) and Ladson-Billings (1998) forms the foundation of my research paradigm and positionality. Foregrounding racism and White supremacy as pervasive, inherent characteristics of sociocultural reality deeply intertwined and interconnected with other oppressive systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998) supports an intersectional view of gender’s antecedents and effects. Moreover, through a CRT perspective, whiteness is not merely about phenotype, but rather the multiple ways that rights to status, enjoyment, and material benefits accrue based on being designated as White (Harris, 1993). Whiteness may be classified based on phenotype, but its force and effects are polyfocal, such that what it means to be a part of any other social group is defined, understood, and normed through what it means to be a White member of that group (Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Johnson, 2001; Noble, 2013).

*This is clearly evident in the numerous laws and social practices that served to de-gender – to refuse gender as relevant for – enslaved Africans. Enslaved African women could be raped because they were not women. Enslaved African men could be forced to comply with the selling of their partners and children because they were not men. Enslaved Africans could be denied marriage as either a legal or religious status because they were not men and women. They were not White and therefore could not possess gender or make claims to certain treatment and rights on the basis of one or the other gender. (18 July 2015)*
Yet, CRT tends to ‘solidify and fix race/class identity as a rigid reality’ (Childers, 2014) and this does not mesh with a poststructuralist approach. However, CRT’s privileging of race and racism as pervasive social features with historical material effects was necessary to read the ways that race, Blackness, and anti-Blackness kept coming up and through my life/data. CRT helped to recognize higher education as a racialized space that reproduces White supremacy with racially differentiated effects on different bodies (Patton, 2016).

**Poststructuralism**

Through poststructuralism, I was able to recognize the role of individuals, particularly as collectives, in co-creating, co-challenging, and co-resisting existing power structures (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). In proliferating possibilities, the resultant polyvocality leads to a more radical democratization of systems and institutions leading to liberatory futures (Burbules & Rice, 1991). There are multiple forms of poststructuralism or postmodernism. Some of those variants, including some queer theories, have a nihilistic view of identity that eschews any discussion of identity politics and therefore is incompatible with identity-based activism and social change (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015). Such a deconstructionist perspective would conflict with CRT. However, Burbules and Rice (1991) offer another alternative for educational researchers. In this form of reconstructive (as opposed to deconstructive) postmodernism/poststructuralism, proponents seek to redefine and extend modernist principles concerning difference instead of deconstructing or destroying them (Burbules & Rice, 1991). Therefore, redefining identity as fluid, dynamic, and co-constructed within and across communities operating with social systems mired in modernist encampments allows for recognition of the material effects of social group subjection without presuming that identities are solid, fixed, or stable.

**Intersectionality**

Intersectionality can be understood through such a critical-poststructuralist frame. Its focus on the interlocking nature of multiple systems of oppression on the lives of individuals and groups is wholly compatible with CRT’S recognition of the pervasiveness of whiteness and White supremacy. It is also consistent with reconstructive poststructuralism’s awareness of how individuals may engage state apparatuses as (classified) members of social groups with which they may or may not self-identify. Consequently, as intersectionality is not merely about identity convergences (Stewart, 2010), a researcher using this perspective can take an intracategorical approach (McCall, 2005) to identity categories that recognizes their material effects despite their fluidity and impermanence. These ontological assumptions led me to centers the voices and experiences of those closest to the issues, phenomenon, and effects under study. Through such a subjectivist approach (Brinkmann, 2014; Ellingson, 2011; Habermas, 1984; Jones et al., 2014), I derived meaning-making from the insights of my lived experiences. Moreover, through an intersectional critical-poststructural lens, I understood power to shape my narrative and interpretations of lived experience (Jones et al., 2014; Lather, 2003). These three conceptual frameworks were employed through the following four conceptual metaphors applicable to gender: the demilitarized zone, the human sensorium, the production of docile bodies through brick walls, and post-humanism possibility.

**Gender’s demilitarized zone**

There are at least three demilitarized zones (DMZ) in the world, including the one I visited between North and South Korea. Each of these DMZs is the product of state violence and imperialism. In the case of the DMZ at the 38th parallel on the Korean Peninsula, that state actor is external to either nation-state, the US. Tuck and Yang (2012) described colonialism as external (strips land of natural resources), internal (segregation, criminalization, and other modes of control), and settler colonialism
(when the occupiers come to stay). DMZs do not quite reflect any of these three forms of colonialism, but perhaps represent a fourth: *vacating colonialism*. In vacating colonialism, external nation-states do not make the land they take over their home but do retain rights to it as a source of capital while interrupting Indigenous relationships to the land. For example, Korean nationals are disallowed from visiting the DMZ, but it is marketed as a tourist destination to US visitors, who constitute the majority of those touring the area. Vacating colonialism is a structure of proprietorship that disoccupies land, separating families across an impassable artificial border, and divorces Indigenous relationships to the land. These rhetorics of disoccupation remake the now vacated land as property belonging to the imperial nation-state controlling human relationships to the land through the nation-state, admitting some and blocking others. Moreover, as illustrated in my opening narrative, the DMZ functions as a de-sensitizing space, making invisible that which is present.

Heeding Tuck and Yang’s (2012) caution, I do not describe NB/GQT* identities as gender’s DMZ merely as a metaphor divorced from the material effects of the DMZ as a tool of capitalist-imperialism. Rather, I align gender with capitalist-imperialism as two of the oppressive social structures meant to elevate whiteness, similar to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Civilizationism philosophy (Alridge, 2007). Through enforcing biologically essentialist, binarist understandings of gender, rigid heteronormative and patriarchal familial structures can be maintained, a sign of a civilized society. In the material field of everyday life, gender’s DMZ disrupts notions of gender as a continuum, leaving those who disidentify with those essentialist binaries (NB/GQT* people) barred from occupying the vacated space. In the meantime, cisgender actors are allowed to engage in gender border tourism through co-optations of drag (e.g. performances of cross-dressing meant to ridicule and mock; Nicolazzo, 2015). The effect is to instantiate the gender binary, while vacating the legitimacy of the gender continuum as an autonomous territory within which to make meaning.

**Gender and the human sensorium**

I am seen but unseen, visible yet invisible, observed but not regarded by a cisgender society and its institutional systems that center and reproduce binary gender norms. This relationship between ‘conception and perception,’ defined as the *human sensorium*, reflects the specific ways that culture orders our senses according to hierarchical arrangements (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 82).

> Privileging sight as means to “read” and make legible trans* ppl
> >> compulsory trans aesthetic
> >> compulsory medicalization
> All in service of maintaining binary gender systems while “accommodating” trans* identities. (11 July 2015)

Relative to how we sense (perceive) disability, Titchkosky (2011) asserted that it is a reflection of ‘the dense weave of historical experience that organizes perception and the relations among the senses, as well as conceptions of what the senses are good for’ (p. 82). Yet, as noted by Butler (2004), ‘No recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor’ (p. 30). We have never received ‘an education regarding what is knowable and thus sense-able’ (p. 83) regarding non-binary transgender identities. Like Titchkosky asserted for wheelchair users, non-binary transgender people are outside what is sensed and therefore what is known and know-able.

> But really, this “betwixt-and-betweenness” (J. Harris, personal communication, 6/17/2015), visible invisibility, observant disregard has been a recurrent theme in my life since – well – always. I don’t fit myself. The only times I have ever fit have been when I have attempted to squeeze all that is myself into someone else’s phantasm of me. (17 June 2015)

In this paper, I consider the ways in which NB/GQT* identities trans*verse the primary socializing gender systems, structures, and norms that inform their lives inside higher education. The de-sensitizing nature of gender’s DMZ prevents NB/GQT* from being sensed (seen, heard, smelled, felt, tasted) through the absence of recognition by state-authorized structures and administrative protocols (Spade, 2015). In this way, the society is dis-educated about NB/GQT* identities and lives.
Gender: docile bodies and brick walls

So [what] does it mean then to seek to be visible/seen/regarded within this construct that is violent, abusive, and corrupt? How have I NOT abandoned feminism (or womanism ...) to embrace an anti-feminism by seeking to be recognized as embodying masculinity? (17 June 2015)

To deploy NB/GQT* identities defies the assumed normativity, naturalness, and expectations of ontological gender as an orienting construct for higher education and its participants. In particular, the fraught relationship of MoC NB/GQT* identities with patriarchy and misogyny warrant specific attention. The existence of gender’s DMZ and the pervasive dis-education of the human sensorium through state apparatuses creates constant surveillance of gendered bodies. Deviations from purportedly natural, normal expressions of sexuality and gender are chastised and punished (Foucault, 1995). Proofs of masculinity are limited to expressions of patriarchy and misogyny (Catalano, 2015b; Kimmel, 2008). Attempts to resist patriarchal socializations result in bruises, as the structures and norms erected are ‘brick walls’ (Ahmed, 2012) that seem impervious to transformation. Despite multiple waves of feminist activism in the US, the current moment still surfaces incorrigible sexism and misogyny. The gender binary is a structure of surveillance creating docile bodies meant to cooperate with the vacating colonialism of gender’s DMZ.

(Non-binary) gender and Butler’s post-humanism

Yet, NB/GQT* identities are claimed and those who do are living lives as fugitive occupants of gender’s DMZ. Becoming possible, Butler’s (2004) post-humanist project regarding transgender identities, is not about whether one is actually alive as a biological reality. Rather, Butler asserted being perceived as a possibility was necessary to being perceived as human and therefore worthy of dignity, care, respect, and love. Is it possible for this kind of person to be understood as a conceptual idea? This is a post-humanist inquiry with material consequences: ‘The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity,’ (Butler, 2004, p. 31). Possibility is necessary because of the many ways that the state, through its various institutional apparatuses, codifies and defines the extent and limits of being human. The conditions under which one is allowed to go to school, seek a job, receive state-issued identification necessary for school, employment, travel, voting, and all interactions with state actors are governed by binary gender. In this way, gender is everywhere both surveilling and curtailing people’s lives. Moreover, under these conditions, NB/GQT* people are rendered impossible people who cannot interact as themselves to fulfill life as a human.

Employing promiscuous high-density theorizing

This way of engaging data and analysis exposes binary thinking and systems to turn them inside–out to arrive at previously imperceptible meaning constructions and modes of being (Jones et al., 2014; Lather, 2007). Through such an epistemological stance, research is valuable when its effects primarily seek to transform structures and make visible pathways toward greater emancipation for individuals and communities (Lather, 1986). In this way, I am in conversation with postmodern feminist, queer, and critical postmodern theories that

(a) seek to challenge the binary and essentialist notions of male/female; (b) recognize that gender and sexuality shift and are socially constructed within historical and cultural context; (c) name, empower, and encourage transgression and subversion of seemingly stable identities and structures; and (d) call for a systemic examination of oppression. (Jourian, 2015, p. 462)

As a researcher who is a member of multiple minoritized communities, completing this project alongside and within the communities of which I am a member is a practice of resilience and resistance.
Gender in higher education

Gender is written into the genetic code of postsecondary institutions. From its earliest foundations, higher education has acknowledged, accepted, enforced, and reproduced a system of policies, practices, and physical arrangements that normalized a dichotomous, binary, bio-deterministic, and hierarchical conception of gender (for further discussion, see Marine, 2011; this issue). For nearly two centuries in the US, only men could be admitted to colleges and universities, even when women like Lucinda Foote were qualified applicants (Thelin, 2011). Ratifications for the exclusion of women were based in pseudo-scientific analyses of women’s intellectual capacity and physical health, as well as their sexual and reproductive health (Zschoche, 1989). Even nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminist apologetics for the higher education of women were rooted in Victorian gender philosophies of women’s roles as wives and mothers (Turpin, 2010).

The advent of ‘co-education,’ reifying the gender binary even in its naming, was done in a manner to cement heteronormative social relationships based on binary gender. Men and women were housed separately with different codes of conduct governing men’s and women’s freedom of movement around campus, standards of dress for class and other activities, and participation in extracurricular activities, including gender-segregated or gender-exclusive campus rituals (e.g. homecoming) (Thelin, 2011). In all of this, transsexual and gender non-conforming students were unacknowledged. Students assigned male at birth, who exhibited contrary mannerisms and tastes, eventually were commonly assumed to be homosexual and violently suppressed (Dilley, 2002). Although there are some women’s colleges moving to admit some trans* students, institutional rationales have preference students with stable, ‘consistent’ gender identities as women (Chandler, 2015). In these ways, administrative policies and practices perform ‘administrative violence’ (Spade, 2015) against NB/GQT* identities, making their presence impossible and un-sense-ible. There is no perception of the possibility of NB/GQT* identities that dis-occupy the gender binary.

Titchkosky [2011] asks, access to what? We may also ask for minoritized populations in higher education, inclusion in what? Involvement in what? Persistence and retention become acts of collusion within a system still structured to support, reflect, and reward supremacist and hegemonic systems. We orient new students, faculty, and staff to most effectively engage in the maintenance of these hegemonic systems. (11 July 2015)

Higher education reproduces and enforces gender’s DMZ on campus, while seeking ways to provide ‘access’ to trans* students, who are only understood within the brick wall (Ahmed, 2012) of the gender binary.

In this way, higher education environments bruise their inhabitants. Gender is as inescapable as air and only know-able in the sensorium as a stable, consistent binary with an equally stable and consistent hierarchy that prioritizes cismen and hegemonic masculinity. The gender walls on college and university campuses create docile students, faculty, and administrators. A rigid and bruising binary gender system is maintained through the focused, intense surveillance (Foucault, 1995) administered by campus policies, practices, physical arrangements, and traditions. These systems reproduce and maintain a majoritarian narrative of patriarchal gender that leave NB/GQT* identities still looking to become possible in higher education and afforded those opportunities for education, recreation, and engagement experienced by binary gendered students on campus. Those daring to trans*verse the DMZ must therefore construct and articulate their own gender paradigms, speaking ‘as if they are human’ to those who dispassionately disregard their existence.

Knowing through a critical-poststructural autoethnographic method

What is (a) man, not embodied but philosophically? If not embodied, what is the possibility and function of men? (18 July 2015)

The purpose of this inquiry is to explicate how I, as a MoC-NB/GQT* occupant of gender’s DMZ have attempted to construct and articulate an alternate gender paradigm – a transmasculine criticality – to make sense of my own possibilities as I navigate higher education. My total cultural immersion in
higher education contexts means that my perspectives on gender and the ways that I am challenged by gender pervade my experiences. As a critical poststructuralist, my ontological, epistemological, and axiological premises acknowledge the pervasiveness of intersectional oppressive systems, serve as a witness to communal subjectivities for knowledge creation and confirmation, and adamantly insist on proliferating liberatory outcomes for minoritized groups.

**Autoethnography as abduction**

These paradigmatic assertions work well with autoethnography as a methodological approach, described by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) as both ‘process and product’ (para. 1). Autoethnographic researchers focus on cultural analysis through making connections between personal narratives and culture using various sources as data, including dialog, emotion, and self-consciousness (Jones et al., 2014). A researcher’s analysis of these data intends to help both other cultural members and outsiders to better understand the interplay between history, social structure, and the relational and institutional context of one’s stories (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2014).

However, the abductive approach I employed embraced ‘entanglement’ and ‘gave up representational and binary logics’ (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013) consistent with my goals to surface a non-binary episteme. In this breakdown-driven inquiry, ‘instances’ (data) of the phenomenon of a NB/GQ transmasculine criticality were considered (collected) ‘as [any] occurrence that evidenced the operation of a set of cultural understandings, providing multiple things to ‘stumble upon’ as data (Brinkmann, 2014, pp. 723, 724). Moreover, abduction fits with the critical sense-making and counter-storytelling required to live as a trans* person against cisnormative brick walls vacating gender’s DMZ. In other words, trans* people, including those who are NB/GQT*, are consistently engaged in the process of stumbling upon and into the sensory limitations of binary gender. Trans* people first begin to make sense of themselves through being in community with other trans* kin, whether through physical, virtual, or literary modes (Nicolazzo, 2017). Therefore, extant literature becomes absorbed into the sense-making of trans* people, not as a citation practice. Higher education is also an environment that deliberately irrupts externalities (e.g. admissions and housing applications; class readings and discussions; Christian proselytizers in campus free speech zones) into students’ internal worlds (Bailey, 2016; Stewart, 2008). Therefore, what counts as data expands to include all of life’s materials with which one is confronted and required to assimilate or accommodate into the self. The resultant interpretations better reflect the complex interactions of power, community, and self that are intended to be prioritized in the critical-poststructuralist paradigm I have used.

As a product then, this critical-poststructuralist (non-binary) autoethnography is a layered account, juxtaposing the simultaneity of data collection and analysis (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnographic research is framed as a ‘source of questions and comparisons’ instead of as answers to be validated, using ‘vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection’ to produce an evocative text that is both concrete and abstract (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 20).

Over a period of 11 months from June 2015 to April 2016, I attended to the stumble-data Brinkmann’s (2014) I was encountering, allowing those instances to propel me into breakdown-driven research. During the first three months of this period, I was evaluating a book, Butler (2004), for a course I was planning to teach. Reading Butler revealed mysteries for me to explore and seek to understand; Butler’s text was itself ‘stumble-data.’ I wanted to capture my thinking through private reflection (journaling) and communal reflection (via Twitter). I felt it was most appropriate to layer this account with those curated thoughts, inspirations, and inclinations represented throughout consistent with an abductive approach as discussed earlier. Although I have chronicled my thoughts longitudinally over a specific time period, I do not presume that chronology is indicative of any progressive, ordered linearity in the development of my thoughts. Therefore, I intentionally do not present these instances of stumble-data in chronological order. The twists and turns in my thinking and layers of themes and stories depict the bruising effects of higher education’s enforcement of docile bodies toward cisnormativity and genderism. These instances of breakdown, then, bring the reader into the paper and move the reader
Trans*versing the terrain of the DMZ

I now return to the focus of this inquiry: What is (a) man? What is the possibility and function of masculinity/man? I pose these as philosophical queries with material effects.

But what if the very categories of the human have excluded those who should be described and sheltered within its terms? What if those who ought to belong to the human do not operate within the modes of reasoning and justifying validity claims that have been proffered by western forms of rationalism? Have we ever yet known the human? (Butler, 2004, p. 36)

As a MoC-NB/GQT* person, I claim to access masculinity apart from how my anatomy was characterized at birth. I have transgressed the DMZ by daring to define my humanity in rebellion to authoritarian sociocultural regimes that would use my senses to enforce the vacancy of the DMZ. As I bring the reader along with me as I trans*verse this DMZ, two outposts signal the orienting questions that direct my path through this terrain: (1) What does it mean to be a man/masculine? (2) What are the origin/(al) effects of gender and masculinity?

Grasping at masculinity: definitions

At this first outpost, I consider the definition of (a) man and masculinity. Here, my reflections feature the role of the phallus in defining (a) man and masculinity, as well as the primacy of masculine embodiment to define (a) man and masculinity over and above identity.

Catalano (2015a, 2015b), and Jourian (2015) both discuss the emphasis on body morphology in the scholarship about sex and gender generally and in relationship to transgender identities. In this literature, phallocentric sensory educations make the presence or absence of a penis the determinant of biological sex designations (Jourian, 2015).

When you strip away the T [testosterone] and the phallus and the extra body hair, what is (a) man? I find this question particularly important for trans* lives and identities which assert claims to masculinity. As a non-binary genderqueer masculine-of-centre AFAB [assigned female at birth] person, who am I as (a) man? What is the nature of my masculinity? (18 July 2015)

As an academic, I am constantly exposed to the human sensorium of genderism in higher education: I have been taught that (a) man is recognized by certain sights, sounds, touch, smells, and tastes. Yet, given my location in the academy, I have also been trained in the critical theoretical paradigms that resist it. Therefore, I find myself stumbling over this rejection of gender essentialism. Postmodern feminism and queer theory disrupt the premise that biological sex determines gender identity or that biological sex is itself static (Jourian, 2015). Yet, gender is constructed socially in community with others and awareness of academic theories of gender seems inadequate to refute the internalized gender essentialist and phallocentric definitions of (a) man and masculinity.

At my last therapy session, I brought up my gender dysphoria finally. I told her how frustrated I am being misgendered as a woman. That it’s hard for me to look at my own body and not see a woman. She asked me if my desire to change my body was really about wanting to design the body I want to have or just wanting the body that others will better understand, that will be more legible to others. But I don’t know if that binary opposition is legit. Can’t it be both-and? (10 March 2016)

Here my therapist is resisting the idea (that has fallen out of favor in therapeutic communities guided by WPATH guidelines13 [Catalano, 2015b]) that one’s body must be changed in order for one’s gender to be legitimate. Yet, the emphasis on how I feel about my gender reveals another false premise. Reflecting on the case of Brenda/David; Butler (2004) exposed the inferences made by the health care professionals with whom Brenda/David had to engage: ‘[inferences] that suggest that a body must be a certain way for a gender to work, another which says that a body must feel a certain way for a gender to work’ (p. 71). These inferences come together to limit the possibilities for transmen to understand their own
relationship between their bodies and their gender identities. Determining what should take the place of the senses in educating the self and others to perceive the possibility of NB/GQT* identities is fraught.

As much as having a phallus (working – what does that even mean? – or not) does not make one a man, neither does liking clothing, toys, and activities made for men, make one a man. So, we return to the question: What is gender? And, more to the point of these wonderings, what is masculinity and manhood? Can it still be valid to say that one is a man based on greater consistency with social truths about masculinity (clothing, toys, activities, posture) and/or desire for a biologically deterministic male body form? If these things are not sufficient to make one a man, then what is necessary?

(7 September 2015)

Here, my focus is on the relationship between my body morphology and gender expression. It remains apparent that I have internalized this miseducation of the human sensorium. I have intellectualized the critical theoretical critique of gender essentialism, but am struggling to internally theorize man and masculinity beyond such essentialism. Catalano (2015b) found in his research that some of his transmen collegians also struggled with whether they were ‘man enough’ or ‘trans enough’ based on how well their bodies and behaviors conformed to social expectations of what a man was supposed to look and act like. Reflecting on one participant’s discussion of the ways that genderqueer people are sometimes considered not trans, Catalano wrote, ‘there are widely known opinions that those who are not interested in transition options are not “really” transgender or transsexual men’ (p. 417, emphasis added). In this way, manhood within some trans* communities may be reserved for those who access hormones and surgery. Yet, Catalano also found participants whose manhood was erased by cismen once they learned about their trans* identity, re-centering biological essentialism to define (a) man and masculinity. Higher education is not inherently a site for liberation, but rather its brick walls may only further press its participants into docility.

Phallocentric essentialist understandings of (a) man and masculinity feed the ideas that confronted Brenda/David in Butler’s (2004) analysis and are foundational to Cromwell’s (1999) discussion of the ‘wrong body’ narrative cited by Catalano (2015b). Cromwell challenged the notion that the body was inherently wrong, asking for whom the body was wrong and asserting that the sex/gender binary is responsible for the effect of gender dysphoria experienced by some trans* people. Yet this ‘wrong body’ narrative is reinforced and taught, transmitted from parent to child.

[To be honest], I’ve always found Adam’s apples to be adorable, sexy even … I remember being fascinated by Adam’s apples even as long ago as 30 years ago when I was 12. All the (cis) boys in school were suddenly showing up with these bulges in their throats. And I remember wanting one and wondering when I was going to grow one. I think I remember even asking my mom about it: When will I get to have an Adam’s apple? The response was derisive and belittling and I remember feeling stupid for not knowing that “only boys have an Adam’s apple” and as a girl I wouldn’t grow one. I remember feeling disappointed and trying to think of ways to make my throat look like I had a bulge there too. Maybe I could just will it there. Could I pray for God to give me an Adam’s apple even if I was a girl? At some point, I just let it go, suppressed it and internalized how ridiculous and stupid it was of me to want a bulge in my throat like a boy’s. […] I converted it into a sexual desire for other peoples’. (25 April 2016)

Adam’s apples are something boys have. Your body will not grow one, so therefore you are not a boy. (A) Man and masculinity are continually defined by possession – possession of body parts, of habits, of access, of privilege – and vacancy of any space in between.

Jourian’s (2015) critique of the Lev model (2004)14 also seeks to disrupt binary assumptions: although ‘[the model] portrayed sex, gender, and sexuality as fluid and socially constructed,’ the constructs (i.e. male, man, masculine, and female, feminine, woman) at both ends of each continuum ‘remain steady’ such that ‘the binary is privileged across all these dimensions’ (Jourian, 2015, p. 464).

One thing I have come to understand about liberal feminists is their inability to disassemble gender from biological assignments. I was assigned female at birth, so I can still be in “women’s” circles because I’m really still “female” regardless of my gender identity. No. I am not female. I wasn’t born a girl and became something else. I have a body that has secondary sex characteristics typical of bodies assigned and labeled as female. I was told I was a girl at birth and throughout my childhood and adulthood because my body continued to perform in alignment with the social expectations of girlhood. I refuse to continue to take up space in women’s spaces when I am not a woman. (3 April 2016)

The vacating colonialism of gender’s DMZ operates through my interactions with cisgender others to attempt to have me vacate my transmasculine non-binary gender identity. Since publicly coming out
as trans*, I have nonetheless continued to be invited to participate in spaces designed and intended for (cis) women. From invitations to women of color support groups to women's spaces within professional associations to invitations to write about women that are meant to center women's perspectives about (their) gender, I have been assumed to be ‘woman enough’ by the sense-ing of my body morphology (e.g. the visible presence of breasts, no protruding Adam’s apple, no noticeable bulge where a phallus would be) despite my MoC-NB/GQT* gender identity. When I announce discomfort with or resistance to being in those spaces to ciswomen feminists, I am met with confusion, blank stares, or attempts to openly refute my claims to prioritize my gender self-determination over the (il)legibility of my body. The gender sensorium is itself a brick wall producing docility in otherwise activist-minded women.

I have said time and again – and I believe it to be true yet – my masculinity is not kink and it is not a mere fashion statement. […] If there is no ontologically real masculinity; if masculinity has no phenomenological essence; if the biophysical effects of hormones and primary sex characteristics constitute man – then who am I and what possibility is there for the proliferation of genders that Butler calls for?? (18 July 2015, emphasis in original)


Origin/(al) effects of gender and masculinity

The origin and effects of gender and its products, including masculinity and femininity as well as bodies classified according to gender, do not lie within the body. Despite the gender sensorium that equates bodies with sense-ible gender markers, bodies are not the beginning of the story. According to Butler (2004), feminist scholar Catherine MacKinnon has contended that the hierarchy of heterosexuality that puts men on top and women on the bottom is what produces gender. This does not resolve where the gendered bodies come from and how they have been made docile subjects of gender’s discipline and surveillance (Butler, 2004). There is little doubt though that without a system of gender and a construct of man/masculinity, there would be no patriarchy (Butler, 1990). In this origin story, whether gender and masculinity or patriarchy came first may matter for living as a MoC-NB/GQT*.

Sensing a masculinity apart from patriarchy

Postmodern feminism, queer, and critical theories have asserted that the gender binary is inherently a patriarchal construct (Butler, 1990, 2004; Johnson, 1997; Jourian, 2015). Patriarchy privileges men and masculinity as optimal modes of being in the world. 

If we must – as Butler contends and I believe she is correct in this – become real subjects through the communal negotiation of (in)legible symbols, then what are the masculine signifiers of anti-oppressive relationships to and about femininity/(a) woman? (18 July 2015)

Is there something to masculinity beyond what patriarchy has put into it? Other MoC/transmasculine people have also questioned this (Cole, 2016; Denise, 2016; Green, 2016; Joyner, 2016; Justus, 2016). Butler (2004) suggested that becoming human necessitates the communal construction of identities. Like Williams (1922) velveteen rabbit, we become real through engaging each other through our senses, negotiated relationships formed in acceptance and acknowledgment. However, it is unclear whether there is communal recognition of a masculinity that is more than a kinder, gentler paternalism, but rather is actively anti-(trans)misogyn(oir)ist.

Nevertheless, I have struggled with the messages learned and absorbed through my higher education student involvement and the work of multicultural student services professionals that Black women are magic, powerful beings that should be honored.

Letting go of, not embracing the assigned markers of femininity? That’s seen as betrayal. Sell-out, gender version of a racial oreo.15 (8 October 2015)
Moreover, as a Black woman, by virtue of my sex assignment at birth as female, I should be proud of my womanhood and even embrace a womanist way of being in the world. I can quote from memory Walker’s (1983) definition: ‘Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.’ (preface). Although men are not objects of hatred and suspicion, one’s desire to be one when not born as one certainly is.

It feels like so much betrayal to totally strip the rest of what makes me look feminine. It already feels like a death, an abandonment, a rejection to say that I am transmasculine. I grew up immersed in Black women’s power, magic, and beauty. I was taught to love and value that in myself first and in others. I have already turned my back on who I was supposed to be. (10 March 2016)

To claim a transmasculine genderqueer identity requires a letting go, a refusal of Black womanhood. This is a refusal that makes relationships with some Black ciswomen and some other ciswomen of color in higher education awkward to say the least. I typically find myself still looking to become possible in their eyes, to enter their perception of the sensorium and become a human worthy of engagement and fellowship. In this way, gender essentialism may resist patriarchal effects but it relies on reinforcing the gender binary. Patriarchy still wins.

White feminism has also been guilty of this. Equating White middle-class femininity with womanhood has supported the exclusion of women of color, lesbians, and transwomen – all of whom were seen as failed women in some respect – in certain feminist circles (Butler, 1990; Davis, 1989; Lorde, 2007). Each of these groups, especially in their intersections, was perceived as being too masculine to be truly anti-patriarchal in their politics. In the case of Black women, a refusal to ignore the ways that Black men were vulnerable to the state through a different form of gendered racism, alluded to in Walker’s (1983) womanist definition, also was seen as failed feminism. Resistance to the inclusion of transwomen in feminism continues to this day through the diatribes of trans-exclusionary radical feminists (Williams, 2013). Nonconformity with ideal visions of womanhood (typically White, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and cisgender) have been and still is met with suspicion in some feminist circles.

In all these discussions, neither masculinity nor the gender binary that fuels patriarchy has been directly engaged while feminists dealt with the necessary contentions around expanding possibilities for the category of woman – what she can know, do, and control. Feminism has been a humanizing project in this respect. Yet, this disengagement has not transformed masculinity; it is still associated with hegemonic effects that must be abated (Johnson, 1997). Masculinity interrupts femininity (often, literally), exerting power and dominance. These practices, resulting in a ‘chilly climate,’ have been long documented in higher education. As stated earlier, masculinity becomes the vehicle for patriarchy in a binary gender system (Butler, 1990; Johnson, 1997).

To transgress masculinity (as I feel I must), then what is the masculinity that I assert? Paternalistic enactments of masculinity are still hegemonic masculinities. This is like asking what is whiteness without racism and White supremacy. (18 July 2015)

In a world where the two genders, men and women, are equal everyone should embrace feminine ways of being in the world (Adichie, 2014). Yet, gender essentialism – the seed of patriarchy – is not disrupted. Moreover, the overlap of primarily indigenous and other non-European modes of being and forms of organization suggests cultural appropriation, a colonizing of indigenous ways of being by White feminism.

Although still bound partially by biophysiological determinism, the feminist project has made accessible to all bodies, desirable to all bodies, “feminine” traits: nurturing, emotionally rich, gentle, soft, compassionate, caring, endurance, and strength. We have also gendered as feminine and feminist [the] processes and methods of leadership and work which emphasize collaboration; non-hierarchical distributions of power, status, and authority; and which value transparency, communication, and reflect a process versus an outcome orientation. (Whether these modes reflect gendered alternatives or cultural – non-European mainly – orientations is another, though not irrelevant discussion, which may reflect the operation of White supremacy – colonialism – within feminism.) So there is a feminine subject that is distinguished from a corporeal manifestation such that any body seen enacting/exhibiting such ways of being in the world as a social being is declared to be practicing feminism. (18 July 2015)

There is a danger in accepting a benevolent masculinity that is still invested in the gender binary and in privileging men and masculinity. Under the guise of religious rhetoric about covenant relationships
between genders – a project that is unabashedly cis-heteronormative – patriarchy and paternalism are shrouded under euphemisms intended to justify male dominance and make it more palatable to women.

It is perhaps no wonder then that modern day “men’s” movements have sought to reposition masculinity as viable, desirable, and valuable – even purposeful – to the human being. These movements […] seem to assert a kinder, gentler man/masculinity which still reflects an embrace of gendered divisions of labor […] (A) Man/masculinity as hunter, provider, protector, and – in (Christian) religious circles, covering – for women and children as the “natural” role of (a) man and the posture of masculinity. Yet, as I’ve already pointed out, this still reflects a paternalistic and supremacist relationship to women, while not recognizing any other gender possibilities. […] even if it is “nicer.” This is dangerous. (18 July 2015)

There does not seem to be a way to think of masculinity without defaulting to binary gender in a way that still makes men and masculinity the ‘head.’ In the academy, this looks like Walk a Mile in Her Shoes (Nicolazzo, 2015) and other anti-violence programs that seek to use social norming to persuade men to resist and speak up and out about toxic masculinity (Kimmel, 2008).

I think I’m stuck at this point. I literally cannot think of a single way to make gender(s) real without relying on ultimately flawed systems of biodeterministic, culturally normed characteristics reliant on biophysiological effects that are widely variant. An impasse. At least for those whose genders are non-corporeally contained and communicated beyond the body. (18 July 2015)

If gender is a structural system of norms which instantiates masculinity and femininity (Butler, 2004) and is then reproduced by those instantiations, then we cannot rethink masculinity outside gender. Gender confines masculinity to its hegemonic norm, even as transmen and MoC-NB/GQT+ people disrupt the corporeal confines of (a) man and masculinity. There is no place within gender’s DMZ for masculinity to exist. Upon realizing this trap, why then would I seek to be understood as and to understand myself as masculine? Is hegemonic masculinity a permanent effect of gender? If yes is the answer, then what do we do with (a) man? Perhaps there is something else going on that has been obscured.

A masculinity that is still premised on the need to dominate (protect, cover – pick your euphemism) other genders, is still implicated by whiteness and therefore cannot help but devolve to toxic, misogynistic relations with other genders. (8 April 2016)

Outgrowths of whiteness
Whiteness encompasses power in ways that distinguish it from other systems of power such that it consumes and subsumes other normative projects of privilege (Fine et al., 1997).

Gender is an effect of the norm of whiteness. If man/woman and masculinity/femininity is the effect of gender norms (Butler, 2004), then I assert that gender itself is an effect of hegemonic whiteness. Inasmuch as gender regulations normalized power relations primarily among White, monied/properlytied men and women, gender was only real for White people. (18 July 2015)

If sexuality, social class, and religion are implicated by whiteness and there is evidence to support this (Johnson, 2001; National Poverty Center, 2016; Stewart & Lozano, 2009), then why would gender not also? White supremacy would assert that all these constructs simply exist as natural and expected entities, instead of imbued and enforced by whiteness. Yet, womanist and feminist of color scholars have long pointed to gender norms as a function of whiteness as property (Davis, 1989; Harris, 1993; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 2007; Wallace, 1990; White, 2010). To be understood as a man or as a woman carried certain rights and protections in the antebellum period. Since those who were enslaved had no rights, they could not be gendered as men or women which would suggest that they should be granted certain rights. Enslaved African women could not assert a right to protection from rape by their White owners, from being separated from their children through their sale as property. By making claims to gender and to the rights and protections afforded to gender, enslaved Africans and their descendants were transgressively gender(ed).

Black (cis)womyn have theorized themselves in defiance of a White femininity based in frailty and subject to White men (toxic femininity). (8 April 2016)

The use of a y to spell womyn has been used to signal a decentering of manhood and patriarchy from the definition of woman (N. Croom, personal communication, September 2014), as well as making
room for MoC and genderqueer people assigned female at birth who dis-identify with the term ‘woman’ (Cole, 2016). My use of it in this tweet above signals the ways that Black womyn have resisted patriarchal encroachments on their gender self-determination through feminist and womanist movements. Through the Victorian era, gender essentialism constructed femininity and thus true womanhood as dainty, fragile, frail, delicate, and dutifully submissive to men (Alridge, 2007). Women were to be feminine, like orchids who must be housed in glass vases to be admired and displayed for their beauty but not purposeful or capable. It was always a construct of femininity that was reserved for White, upper-class, elite, Christian women. Black women had always been held outside of it.

Disallowed from accessing (White) womanhood by racism, Black womyn redefined the standards by which to self-determine their own gender. (8 April 2016)

This redefinition and self-determination were done within limits. The need to deflect racist stereotypes that had come to characterize Black womyn as Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels (Wallace, 1990) led to the enforcement of respectability politics (White, 2010). The desire for Black women to reflect a gentility that would be deserving of respect from (White) men as feminine women was strong and can be seen in the moralizing character attributed to dress codes and decorum that came to be touted among middle-class, college-educated Black families and communities. Yet, this is not a flat narrative. As much as decorum and modesty may still be touted in some spaces (e.g. the Black church, Black sororities), this message exists alongside a lived reality of Black women as lively, sassy, womanish (Walker, 1983) leaders. This message becomes problematic when used to ignore the support needs of Black women in educational environments, including higher education (Patton & Croom, 2016). Rendering Black women as possible humans – not mythical and magical – is still an elusive project.

Yet what of Black men? The whiteness of hegemonic womanhood has been uncovered, but what of the whiteness of hegemonic manhood? If we fail to theorize a racialized gender identity as a whole, we fail to call out the whiteness embedded in hegemonic masculinity. (8 April 2016)

Hegemonic masculinity inherently, particularly, and intentionally erupts from White supremacy, from whiteness. The ultimate aim of masculinity as it functions as part of a global whiteness project (along with hegemonic femininity, religion, capitalist-imperialism, disability, etc.) is to uphold a racialized hierarchy that puts White (capitalist, economically privileged, temporarily able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, Christian) men at the top. In so doing, racially minoritized men are not included within the characteristics of (White) masculinity. They (we) are held outside of masculinity as much as racially minoritized women have been held outside (White) femininity. An intersectional praxis realizes that these rhetorics of dis-occupation within gender’s DMZ vacate multiple social groups. Higher education is also complicit rendering Black and Latinx men as ‘endangered’ while ignoring Black and Latinx women (Crenshaw, 2014). As an outgrowth of whiteness, gender regulations both produce and concretize gender (Butler, 2004) as hegemonic. Attempting to make sense of myself within such a construct would imprison my masculinity within the supremacist container of whiteness. The vacancy colonialism of gender’s DMZ endures and its brick walls continue to bruise.

A redemption song

Given all of these considerations, the implications for answering the questions that framed this inquiry are significant. In ‘Redemption Songs,’ Marley (1980) asserted that we must ‘emancipate [our]selves from mental slavery. None but our self [sic] can free our minds.’ To answer what is (a) man and masculinity, I must leave the sensorium of gender and (hegemonic) masculinity behind.

I don’t have to stay within cis masculinity to rearticulate masculinity – or gender either for that matter. How do I define what masculinity is from a transmasculine epistemology? How can I draw upon Black feminist and womanist writings to differently situate and locate the ways my masculinity shows up? (5 August 2015)

Constructing an emancipated non-binary transmyrsclusinity is a strategy to theorize racialized (trans) gyners. This follows Johnson’s (2001) approach to ‘quare’ theory as a vehicle for theorizing racialized sexuality. As referenced earlier, some Black feminists and MoC womyn have adopted this spelling to
signal the redefinition of their gender outside men’s influence. In similar fashion and reflecting my debt to Black feminism and womanism, I am textually displacing the normative spellings of gender and masculinity as gynder and mysculinity to invoke the epistemological displacement of whiteness and its products (particularly racism, colonialism, and binary gender systems). Theorizing racialized (trans)gynders is intended to liberate gynder and mysculinity from the container of White supremacy.

It seems Black cishe Men scholars have expended more energy in defying the subjugation of White supremacy than in rejecting all its products … including genders, religiosity, class matrices, abilities, sexualities, family compositions, and nationalisms and colonialisms … They are all tainted by the illogics of White supremacy thus liberation is not gained from one without severing ties with all. (8 April 2016)

The discussions of Black masculinity that I have been privy to in the academy center the need to prioritize and protect Black manhood from the effects of systemic racism. There is little discussion of rejecting sexism and patriarchy, embracing queer masculinities, or recognizing fellowship with trans-masculinities. The aim has seemed to be to win a share in the enterprise of (White men’s) patriarchy and paternalism – to be seen as equal and the same as White men, albeit perhaps more benevolent. This is instead of constructing a vision of Black mynhood that deliberately rejects the foundation of colonial oppression upon which White hegemonic masculinity stands.

Liberatory praxis for Black mynhoods across genders must redefine the standards by which myn self-determine our selfhood. (8 April 2016)

There are transmen and MoC-NB/GQT* people in college who have already taken up this work to dismantle and disrupt the internalization of hegemonic White supremacist masculinity. Jourian’s (2015) dynamic gender and sexuality model illustrated how beginning with those on the margins can result in proliferated possibilities for recognizing (making perceptible as human) gender identity and its interactions with sex, gender expression, and sexuality. Further, transmen in college have also reframed definitions of masculinity by centering love (Jourian, 2016, this issue). I believe these dynamic visions reflect an intersectional ethic of care that is (social) justice-oriented; putting compassion and empathy in conversation with equity.

A racialized (trans)gynder theory of mysculinity is not premised on rejecting womyn or seeing itself as oppositional or mutually exclusive of femme identities or womynhood. Rather, it seeks to embrace it because it was born in and of Black womynhood.

I mean, I’m not a Black trans masculine genderqueer person because Black womanhood failed me. No. Black womanhood saved my life, gave me sisters, home girls, a community. Not perfect, no. But [those imperfections are] not why I am letting go of all I ever tried to squeeze myself into and reimagine myself as. Black womanhood did not fail me. I simply could not be contained, explained, understood within the singularity of Black womanhood. (8 October 2015)

For my own survival, I need to find a way to exist as a Black NB/GQT* transmyn, shaped by and filled with the strength, love, intuition, and brilliance of Black womyn. My mysculinity must be twinned with and cleave to femme-ness, not be formed in opposition to it. I must see my difference from femmes not as better than but as interdependent with; not as superior to but as related to; not as supreme over but as devoted to mutual support and accountability alongside of. My mysculinity is because her/their/ hir/his femme-ness is – and I am not myself without it.

**Implications for researching/theorizing NB/GQT* gynders**

The materiality of NB/GQT* identities and lives does not conform to either data-driven (inductive) or theory-driven (deductive) analytical approaches. Rather, the pervasive interplay of situations interrupting and prompting sense-making for NB/GQT* individuals require abduction, a ‘form of reasoning used in situations of uncertainty, when we need an understanding or explanation of something that happens’ (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 722). An abductive process is nimble enough to make room for fugitive incursions into gender’s DMZ intended to motivate sense-making to understand life’s situations. Like NB/GQT* people having to navigate the de-sense-ing and vacating experience of the DMZ within and beyond higher education, this process of abduction is perpetual and lifelong (Brinkmann, 2014). Therefore,
research into trans* lives is best undertaken in the ‘post’ – post-qualitative (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013) and post-coding (Brinkmann, 2014; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). It must not seek to arrive at some form of representational logic that is fixed and universal as (NB/GQ) trans* identities are not necessarily fixed or universal. It would behoove higher education researchers to recognize the situatedness of NB/GQT* identities lived in dynamic interplay with specific institutional settings and forms of (comm/dis) unity leading to materially different opportunities for breakdowns and stumble-data to emerge. An abductive approach is likely to lead to more nuanced analyses that address the particular mysteries and challenges confronted throughout the life course, improving the life chances of NB/GQT* participants in higher education instead of providing institutional ‘best practices’ that do little to nothing to tear down the brick walls erected to maintain the imperceptibility of (NB/GQ)T* possibilities within the gender sensorium (Nicolazzo, 2017). I encourage readers to consider Nicolazzo’s (in press) proposal for a trans* epistemology, which provides further implications for centering trans* lives and theory in higher education research and practice.

Conclusion

This paper began with my remembrances of the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea and being observed intently by a soldier while inside the room where the peace accords were signed. I compared my journeys in and through gender and masculinity to being in gender’s demilitarized zone. Through journaling and analysis, I excavated the challenges I faced to hold onto a semblance of gender self-determination in defiance of higher education’s brick walls that privilege cisnormativity and gender essentialist expectations of masculinity. These binaries were incommensurate with my non-binary transgender identity. Nevertheless, I seemed unable to think my way out of them until I got beyond them.

By applying an intersectional lens that recognized how race and gender were mutually constitutive, whiteness was remembered to be the origin story for gender and masculinity. As a Black racialized person, constructing a (trans)gender theory of mysculinity means becoming comfortable with flagrantly violating the vacating colonialism of the DMZ. The words of the sensorium inform the language I must use; it is restricted to only that which is already perceived to be possible. Yet, this language is a site of struggle and contention (hooks, 1990). ‘The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle’ (hooks, 1990, p. 146). Throughout this non-binary autoethnographic exploration, language has been emphasized and words have been shown to have meanings that can be remade and displaced to have different meanings. In many ways, struggling with/against masculinity has been a ‘struggle of memory against forgetting’ (hooks, 1990, p. 147). It has been a refusal to abandon the Black womynhood that I was born of and into even as I recognize that I have evolved to be something other than it. It is a ‘remembering that illuminates and transforms the present’ (hooks, 1990, p. 147).

For staff in higher education, the gender sensorium that educates those participating in colleges and universities has deleterious effects. Gender norms and expectations are encoded in both the most banal and the most ceremonial of moments. This constant barrage of reminders that one does not belong and is impossible requires the resiliency of trans* participants (Nicolazzo, 2017). Yet, in the midst of these deleterious effects are spaces where other modalities can be accessed. My ability to transverse the DMZ was directly due to my exposure to the critical poststructuralism inhabited in postmodern feminism, queer, and CRT spaces in higher education. The presence and support of gender and sexuality studies, ethnic studies, and other critical theoretical fields of study are mandatory for proliferating possibilities for genders/gynders on campus. This is where visibility must begin. I am always already present as a trans* person whether I announce that presence or not. Recognizing my presence is not about me announcing myself so that I can be accommodated. It is about cis people’s ability to let go of their assumptions about gender as written on bodies, as inherently binary, as linearly related to heterosexuality. In this way, the gender sensorium can be reeducated to perceive the MoC-NB/GQT* and other trans* identities that have been vacated and dis-occupied.
When I am no longer presumed impossible; when my possibility is no longer presumed threatening, then I and all my trans*kin with me will no longer be impossible apparitions. (2 April 2016)

Notes

1. The term masculine of centre was coined by B. Cole in 2008 as discussed in Cole's essay (2016) as a ‘more encompassing and less racially and class-specific [term] than butch’ (pp. 98–99) perceived to be ‘white and older’ (p. 98). Cole (2016) further explains, MoC also speaks to the cultural nuances of female masculinity, while still recognizing our commonalities – independent of who we partner with. The inclusion of the language ‘of centre’ sees beyond the traditional binary of male and female to female masculinity as a continuum. ‘Of centre’ is a way of acknowledging that the balance each of us determines around our own masculinity and femininity in the discovery of our gendered selves is never truly fixed. Masculine of centre recognizes the cultural breadth and depth of identity for lesbian/queer womyn who tilt toward the masculine side of the gender scale, and the term includes a wide range of identities such as butch, stud, aggressive/AG, tom, macha, boi, dom, etc. (p. 99).

Individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) identifying as MoC may use any pronouns, including both binary and non-binary options.

2. I am greatly indebted to Thompson (2003) and her illustration of providing such direct and intentional signposting for readers.

3. The abductive approach is discussed further in the section ‘Autoethnography as an abductive method.’

4. As such, this is not knowledge for knowledge’s sake. I have heard such projects as this derisively called ‘me-search’ that is nothing more than navel-gazing, unfit to be called rigorous research and devoid of applicability in educational policy and practice. Such views fail to recognize the very real material effects of systematic oppression in educational and other cultural institutions. Considering means and strategies of becoming ‘possibility models,’ as Laverne Cox named (Bell, 2013), in such spaces is about enabling the life chances of ourselves as minoritized peoples in education. What such self-reflective research (e.g. autoethnography, scholarly personal narrative, and autobiography) offers are opportunities to realize ‘trick up educational practices’ (Nicolazzo, 2016) that expand educational and life chances for those who are most marginalized in educational institutions. Moreover, it takes seriously the task of using research as a written craft of memory-ing minoritized peoples as a counternarrative to the deficit perspectives of minoritized peoples with which higher education is overrun (Stewart, 2016).

5. The phrase ‘put a pin in that’ (also ‘put a pin in it’) has been traced to World War II and refers to putting a pin back in a grenade to ‘save’ it for later; as an idiom it suggests a way to defer discussion of a point until later (tubalcain, 2009).

6. As Thompson (2003) explained, defensive citation works to prove that the author has done zir homework and is familiar with the existing literature of zir topic while archival citation seeks to provide intellectual resources for others who may want to take up study in the same area.

7. Although CRT has evolved to include intersectionality as one of its central tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), intersectionality first emerged through the work of Black feminist scholars in critical legal studies such as Crenshaw (1991). It has since expanded into CRT, as well as feminist scholarship (Collins, 1998; McCall, 2005). I, therefore, acknowledge intersectionality as a distinct, but related, theoretical perspective from CRT.

8. This is adapted from TwoTrees (1993) idea of a ‘kaleidoscope.’

9. The popularity of such ‘border tourism’ was apparent through a two-minute Google search.


11. I must acknowledge the ways that vacant colonialism is yet incommensurate (Tuck & Yang, 2012) with decolonization as Laverne Cox named (Bell, 2013), in such spaces is about enabling the life chances of ourselves as minoritized educational and other cultural institutions. Considering means and strategies of becoming ‘possibility models,’ as Laverne Cox named (Bell, 2013), in such spaces is about enabling the life chances of ourselves as minoritized peoples in education. What such self-reflective research (e.g. autoethnography, scholarly personal narrative, and autobiography) offers are opportunities to realize ‘trick up educational practices’ (Nicolazzo, 2016) that expand educational and life chances for those who are most marginalized in educational institutions. Moreover, it takes seriously the task of using research as a written craft of memory-ing minoritized peoples as a counternarrative to the deficit perspectives of minoritized peoples with which higher education is overrun (Stewart, 2016).

12. Lucinda Foote applied to Yale in 1783 and was found to be fully qualified excepting only for her gender (Thelin, 2011).

13. WPATH is the World Professional Association for Transgender Health; they publish standards of care for transgender individuals ‘based on the best available science and expert professional consensus’ (World Professional Association for Transgender Health [WPATH], 2016).


15. An ‘oreo’ is a colloquial reference to a Black person who appears to be Black on the outside but has assimilated so much into White culture, that they are White on the ‘inside.’

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Notes on contributor

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