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The Drive of Queer Exceptionalism: Transgender Authenticity as Queer Aesthetic

Levi C. R. Hord

In “Judith Butler: Queer Feminisms, Transgender and the Transubstantiation of Sex”, Jay Prosser suggests that queer communities have appropriated the symbols of gender transition, exposing the “mechanism by which queer can sustain its very queerness [...] by periodically adding subjects who appear ever queerer precisely by virtue of their marginality in relation to queer” (279). Situating this claim in a contemporary context, I will develop this line of thought by suggesting that transgender embodiment (or the symbolic aesthetic of it) has become a marker of queer authenticity¹. Immersed in a culture where transgender narratives are defined by movement towards an “authentic self,” transgender bodies have come to signify as expression of realness. In this essay, I will argue that combining the assumption of transgender authenticity and the individualism of queer neoliberal exceptionalism works not only to appropriate transition as a symbol to affirm the queerness of “queer”, but to affirm gender ambiguity as the epitome of authentic queer embodiment. Thus, genderqueerness has not only become part of a queer political critique, but may function to explain shifts in queer selfhood, proliferations of trans identifications from within queer communities, and ongoing border wars. I will begin my analysis by providing foundational theorizations of authentic subjectivity, neoliberal society, and queer exceptionalism. I will then describe how transgender bodies are equated with transgression, and how they are created as inherently more authentic than other modes of embodiment. Situating my argument within these terms, I demonstrate how transgender

¹ For the purposes of this essay, I define “transgender” and “trans” as pertaining to individuals who wish to transition away from an initially defined gender position, whether medically or socially. I define “queer” as pertaining to individuals whose sexuality falls outside of heteronormative structures. I am aware that the division between the two is often unclear in practice (and that transgender people can have queer sexualities, etc.), and hope to elucidate through my arguments one area in which this slippage occurs.

authenticity is adopted as a queer aesthetic, illustrating these claims with a brief exploration of Tumblr's digital archive of aestheticism. I conclude by suggesting that further analysis of the processes of identity formation and performance may be useful in defining a middle ground amid ongoing trans and queer border wars.

The appropriation of transgender as a symbol of authenticity is predicated on a specific model of embodiment that permeates contemporary societies. In our culture, authenticity (i.e. "realness") is an ideal that is invariably tied to the notion of individuality. First finding expression in the Enlightenment period, authenticity as an ethical imperative continues to position the individual as "a naturally occurring unit" and insist that "true freedom and fulfillment can only be gained by rejecting social pressures, and by giving individuality uninhibited expression" (Mansfield 18). Authenticity is perhaps especially idealized in queer cultures and narratives, as the discovery and externalization of an "authentic self" is something of a prerequisite for queer visibility (I, personally, have never heard a coming-out story that has not relied on this trope). The employment of "authentic" as a self-descriptor also benefits people as it allows for legitimized movement outside of a given social position (e.g. within the gender binary, or a heteronormative society). Film theorist Katalin Kis points out that authenticity "prioritizes the autonomous individual over a conventional society" (2) and creates cultures that valorize those who "thrive in their own way" (2), moving through social hierarchies and shedding the yoke of determination that comes with supposedly fixed birth circumstances.

As is already quite apparent, the prevalence of authenticity is both prompted by and bolsters an era of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as defined by Roger Foster, is "a political rationality that seeks to generalize the notion of self-governed freedom [...], transforming sites of solidarity and collectivism into forms of structured competition" (101). Neoliberalism uses the

discourse of authentic individualism to justify positioning the individual as a capitalist consumer, forwarding the notion that our individuality comes with the duty to use personal desires and ambitions to “fuel the economy” and contribute to the wealth and power of our nations (Mansfield 21). Thus, under neoliberalism, authentic individuality works to create social *cohesion* “through its normalizing of the [notion] of individual responsibility” (Foster 108), rather than working to create genuine uniqueness. Individuality becomes a compulsory organizing principle, an oxymoronic “coercive liberation” or “enforced freedom” (Foster 109). In this way, neoliberalism serves to provide a cultural template for subjectivity, suggesting that there is a correct way to be authentic. This process is precisely what allows transgender identity and transition to be adopted as markers of authenticity on a large scale, especially when transgressive individuality has become a requirement in queer cultures.

This drive towards individuality has fueled what Jasbir Puar terms “queer exceptionalism,” which describes how queerness is equated with transgression in a way “that is wedded to individualism and the rational, liberal humanist subject” (22). Puar describes queer exceptionalism as a process that links queerness and queer transgression to notions of neoliberal individualism. Indeed, queer belonging is moderated through the ability to transgress norms, whereby “[i]ndividual freedom becomes the barometer of choice in the valuation, and ultimately, regulation, of queerness” (Puar 22). Queer exceptionalism privileges the individual over collectivity, buying into a definition of queerness that subscribes to Eve Sedgwick’s claim that “there are important senses in which ‘queer’ can signify only when attached to the first person” (9). Queer collectivity takes second place to a model of queerness that is individually performed and self-serving. Puar argues that queerness is inherently exceptional because it “claims itself as an anti-, trans-, or unidentity” (21), and these qualifiers serve to “recenter the normative queer

subject as an exclusively transgressive one” (Puar 22). Claiming this exceptionalism as a queer subject also serves to accentuate one’s authentic individuality and status outside of social norms, as Jack Halberstam points out: “‘transgressive exceptionalism’ refers to the practice of taking the moral high ground by claiming to be more oppressed and more extraordinary than others” (*In a Queer Time* 20). Puar confirms that queer exceptionalism produces the idea that the sole way to access agency as a queer subject is to resist normativity, often (paradoxically) through the same methods and means that everyone is resisting it. As is generally true in cultures that prize individual authenticity, the act of challenging norms “resonates with liberal humanism’s authorization of the fully self-possessed speaking subject” in such a way that individual agency (especially for queer people!) is only apparent in “resistance to norms rather than complicity with them” (Puar 23). Queer exceptionalism, then, instates transgression as mandatory in a way that regulates expressions of queerness in our society. The forces that form neoliberal subjectivity work in conjunction with the pull of exceptionalism to create queer subjects that define their position in opposition to dominant society.

It is under these circumstances of social identity formation that the transgender body has become a symbol of post-modern queer transgression. Prosser provides the most thorough theorization of how and why transgender has become a queer trope, noting that trans bodies comprise the ultimate queer symbol because of their multiple and literal border crossings. By crossing the boundaries of gender and sex, trans bodies reveal naturalized categories and borders “to be always already fictional and precarious” (Prosser 258), thus serving as the empirical backing for a queer politics that insists on queering these structures and occupying liminal spaces. Due to the physical reality of transition and the ways in which it challenges our ideas about gender, trans individuals are usually assumed by queer and non-queer people alike to have

transgressive politics (Prosser 259) and a desire to participate in the postmodern project of “rethink[ing] the practice of cultural production” in a moment of instability (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 6). Indeed, transgender identity is thought to be especially subversive in its mixing of embodied subjectivity and somatic reality with postmodern queer ideals of flexibility and fluidity (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 17). Due to this dual status, and to the reading of queer political agendas onto transgender bodies, transgender existence and transition have become beacons of what some describe as a post-gender future; in other words, they signify “futurity itself, a kind of heroic fulfillment of postmodern promises of gender flexibility” (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 18). This signification is powerful because it suggests practical and visible paths towards gender liberation. Use of the transitioning figure in queer politics as a transgressive body, I argue, has recently begun to extend past the strictly political and into processes of queer identity formation as part of the drive towards authenticity and exceptionalism. However, in order to be fully compatible with queer identity qualifiers in neoliberal cultures, the transgender body must be read as especially authentic – a reality I will explore in the coming paragraph.

While perhaps not in a biological sense, transgender bodies are often read as more authentic than other bodies in their physical movement towards internal authentic selfhood. This joins their supposed transgression with the ideal of authenticity in individualistic cultures, creating trans bodies as the ultimate liberated and exceptional subjects. This association with authenticity is accomplished largely through the employment of a recognizable “wrong body” narrative, which for decades has defined descriptions of transgender identity² and bids for social tolerance. This narrative holds that transgender identity includes “an ‘authentic’ gendered core

² While not all transgender people describe their experience of gender as wrong embodiment, a majority rely on a version of this narrative because it is culturally intelligible. See Sandy Stone’s “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” for a detailed discussion about how medical and psychological institutions instated this narrative as standard for transitioning individuals.

‘trapped’ within a mismatched corporeality” (Lovelock 1) that transition works to liberate. This concept has come to dominate media representation of trans subjects. The attachment to the body and drive towards authentic embodiment captured by this narrative are also used to differentiate trans experience from all other queer experiences. Prosser, a vocal proponent of this position, claims that many things about trans experience are incompatible with generic queerness, including “the importance of the flesh to self, the difference between sex and gender identity, [and] the desire to pass as ‘real-ly-gendered’ in the world without trouble” (279). Authenticity, for many trans individuals themselves, is accessed through the abidingness of “place, location, and specificity” (Halberstam, “Transgender Butch” 305) that works against queer’s more constructed (and thus less authentic) acceptance of fluidity, freedom, and mobility. Because of the intersection between literal embodiment and exceptionalism, some transgender people (like Prosser) view themselves as inherently more real or authentic than other queers. The emphasis on transgender realness has been effective both as a strategy of self-affirmation and legitimization for the purposes of gaining societal acceptance and rights. Michael Boucher, in his dissertation on transgender representation and the politics of the “real,” asserts that realness is an invaluable strategy for making the self intelligible to the majority. The looming ideal of authenticity, he claims, “works through the concept of gendered ‘realness’ in ways that force trans people to evoke a core, stable gender identity in order to prove their social and legal legitimacy” (vii). While transgender people are categorically no more authentic than any other group per se, claims for rights and the acknowledgement of citizenship depend on the purposeful act of “condensing difference into an individual identity category that can be socially-sanctioned as ‘real’” (Boucher 4). This strategy, unsurprisingly, has been one of the most effective for gains in transgender recognition and acceptance in neoliberal individualistic cultures because it relies

on the sanctioning of personal authenticity. It is a combination of these progressive successes via the “wrong body” narrative and the compelling nature of the authentic self that creates the transgender body as a desirable queer symbol. Ideally transgressive and irrefutably authentic, employing the symbolism of transition through aestheticism appears to offer queer subjects a gateway through which to access their most exceptional selves.

Given the above descriptions of contemporary subjectivity, it is little wonder that transgender identifications and genderqueer embodiments are increasing among queer communities. As trans theorist Henry Rubin notes, “[t]rans phenomena are the new queer chic” (276), leading to what he calls a widespread “appropriation of transsexuals by nontranssexual queers” (276). There are several specific reasons why people who identify as queer may choose to employ the symbolism of transgender in order to fulfill the demands of queer exceptionalism and remain outside of social norms. First, adopting transgender authenticity as aesthetic rearticulates the transgressive nature of a subject’s individual queerness, emphasizing their uniqueness. Prosser identifies this process in the quote that opens this essay, noting that the fascination with and inclusion of transgender ultimately serves queerness by making it more marginal, or exceptional. For queer communities, then, as well as for individual queer subjects, the appropriation of transgender allows “queer” to resist becoming normative and mainstream – the antithesis to queer’s very ethos. In fact, theorists like Judith Butler advocate for the expansion of queer in this very manner, in hopes of maintaining its status as “that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (Butler 19). The status of queer as inherently marginal, captured by discourses of queer exceptionalism, makes the appropriation of transgender a sanctioned act for the higher cause of queer’s continued livelihood. At the level

of the individual, being able to claim and demonstrate a position outside of pervasive binaries and categories accentuates the movement towards an authentic self that is prized over these social structures. Halberstam notes the prevalence of this line of thought among younger generations, recognizing that “young gays and lesbians think of themselves as part of a ‘post-gender’ world” in which labelling is restrictive, and in which “their uniqueness cannot be captured by the application of a blanket term” (*In a Queer Time* 19). The figure of the transgender person has been integral to this shift, as the post-gender and anti-binary sentiments of many young people rely on the “proof” provided by transgender bodies that gender binaries really are fragile constructs. Another reason for the appropriation of transgender identity is the fact that the act of transitioning (even if it is a movement towards ambiguity rather than a binary position) is viewed always as an incontestable movement *towards* authentic selfhood. And, if transition is always depicted as “a means of realising one’s authenticity” (Lovelock 4), it stands to reason that the act of queering gender affords the exceptional queer subject greater access to the powerful politics of the “real”. As well, the act of transitioning is often depicted as inherently non-normative, anarchist, or queer in that it directly demonstrates the lack of essential gender and the legitimacy of queer theories like performativity (Prosser 261). This factor also makes transgender existence the perfect affirmation of queer exceptionalism, as it demonstrates (in queer discourses, at least) that sex is not biologically binding. This embodied demonstration, of course, epitomizes the neoliberal championing of the individual and the belief in the power of the individual to transgress given social positioning.

Transgender subjectivity has become hyper-visible in queer communities, yet there remains a barrier between those who desire to irreversibly change their sex (whether surgically, hormonally, or socially) due to the experience of dysphoria and those who want to change their

gender presentation, most often fluidly, for the gains it affords them under queer exceptionalist frameworks. Hence, transgender authenticity and the markers of transition or gender-crossing are adopted as a recognizable queer aesthetic that includes a variety of visual markers. An ongoing cultural archive of these aesthetics can be found on Tumblr, a blogging platform with a large queer following. An examination of mood boards (collages around affective themes) and selfies created by Tumblr users yields a remarkably cohesive picture of the elements of transgender identity that are being co-opted as queer aesthetic. These include androgynous bodies (usually thin and lacking observable secondary sex characteristics), chest binders (either shown as a clothing article or as straps underneath other clothing), gendered undergarments either on androgynous or the “wrong” gendered body (particularly the waistbands of briefs or bra straps), and pointedly gender ambiguous hairstyles and clothing. These elements are associated with transgender identity through text on the website or through a temporal culture of insider common sense. They are also all elements that can be relatively easily adopted by queer people in order to signify transgender identification to others with a similar understanding of the aesthetic code. These markers have, as I observe in my own social circle, been widely adopted by queer communities to emphasize readable queerness through play with gender signifiers. Also popular on Tumblr are romanticized photosets of scars from chest surgery³; while these are not easily attainable, the example serves to clarify the valorization of clear markers of transgender identity. While from a theoretical perspective the adoption of “transgender aesthetic” is easily identifiable as a form of cultural appropriation, it also approximates the normalized process of accessing bodily authenticity through consumerist practices – something that is sanctioned and encouraged in individualistic neoliberal societies. Media analyst Michael Lovelock connects the adoption of

³ The photosets I am referring to were made by someone other than the person who had the chest surgery, and usually included photos of multiple bodies with these scars.

specific aesthetics, fashion trends, and socially intelligible looks to the corporate promise “that the authentic self can be accessed and released via the effective application of appropriate, body-oriented consumption practises” (5). In what Lovelock identifies as “intensely visual consumer culture[s]” (5), bodies serve as signifiers of identity and expressions of authentic selfhood. In queer subcultural spaces, bodies that adopt the aesthetic markers of gender-crossing, transition, or ambiguity are read as accessing an authenticity and individual liberation that exceeds what is assumed to come with normative gender expression, regardless of sexual orientation.

Having theorized the process through which transgender embodiment and its connotations of authenticity come to be employed as queer aesthetic, I wish to conclude by speculating about how this process may affect queer and trans communities moving forward. The perceived appropriation of transgender identity, especially when accompanied by ignorance regarding the often violent and discriminatory circumstances of “real” trans people, has already prompted border wars between these communities. Recognizing neoliberal individualistic culture as an unavoidable constraint, I posit that there are ways in which this process can be reconfigured as liberatory for both queer and transgender subjects. Halberstam, since the beginning of these debates, has suggested that more gender variance (regardless of differences in paths towards it) will serve to destigmatize and normalize it rather than pigeonhole subjects into exactly the types of impenetrable categories that breed cis- and hetero-normativity. He insists that “many bodies are gender strange to some degree or another,” regardless of desire or willingness to transition, and that it would serve queer *and* trans communities better to decolonize gender variance, “complicat[ing] the models that assign gender queerness only to transsexual bodies and gender normativity to all others” (“Transgender Butch” 301). Henry Rubin, from the opposite side of the queer theory/trans theory divide, arrives at much the same

conclusion, arguing that trans people (represented as dually transgressive and authentic) have been saddled with the “revolutionary burden of overthrowing gender or imagining what to replace it with” (273). If gender variance were not seen as the exclusively rightful property of transitioning bodies, this burden could be shared amongst a larger group of people who already have a vested interest in attacking an oppressive gender system. Being open to the possibility of aesthetic identification, even for initially self-serving purposes, may benefit trans communities by creating a pool of allies who purposefully and willingly do gender variance *as* resistance and have the potential to effect political change. Embracing the aestheticization of transgender also troubles the idea that there is a right way to be trans or a correct narrative trajectory that legitimizes trans identity. Rubin cedes to the idea that a mixing of queer and transgender has already “provided many trans people with more options and fewer regulations about the ‘right’ way to pursue their life projects” (275). Complementing this advancement, widespread gender variance in queer communities confronts the idea that there is a right way to be cisgender (i.e. gender normativity), which has been a longstanding goal of many branches of feminism. Regardless of the many advantages to the widening of transgender identification, it is important to be aware that “transgender”, as a subversive figure, will also inevitably meet its end as the epitome of transgression. In later work, Halberstam describes new identifications with transgender as simultaneously “the successful outcome of years of gender activism” and “the sign of the reincorporation of a radical subculture back into the flexible economy of postmodern culture” (*In a Queer Time* 21). The mainstreaming of transgender, when it outgrows its use as a queer symbol, has the potential to erase the lived experiences of trans people as well as make light of the struggles of being transgender in a cisnormative world. These experiences, unlike

aesthetics, cannot be so easily abandoned when they no longer serve queer's exceptionalist purposes.

In this essay, I have drawn on theories of authentic selfhood, neoliberalism, and queer exceptionalism to describe the contemporary proliferation of queer-transgender identifications. Due to the association of transgender identity with valorized models of authenticity and gender transgression, gender-crossing and the bodies that engage in it have become symbols for the project of queering binaries and norms. The prevalence of authenticity in accepted narratives of transition also works to create transgender bodies as especially fulfilled neoliberal subjects, making transgender identity appear even more desirable in its agreement with contemporary queer exceptionalist drives. This partiality to the symbolism and associated traits of transgender has found expression within queer aestheticism, including fashions and embodiments that partake in gender ambiguity or fluidity. I have argued that, by drawing on trans aesthetics in this way, queer subjects gain access to an even queerer mode of transgression and authenticity that is used to maintain their exceptional status. While this has been critiqued as detrimental to transgender communities (and in some ways certainly is), the enactment of "aesthetic trans" or gender crossing by queer subjects has liberatory potential in the fight for gender diversity. Understanding the social circumstances in which this queer exceptionalist urge is formed allows for a better understanding of how to deploy it in politically effective ways, rather than personally detrimental ones, for the benefit of all gendered subjects.

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