

In Search of Her: An Autoethnographic Search For Self in Virtual Landscapes

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Abstract

In this manuscript, I write about my ongoing exploration of my possible gendered future, using the avatar creation site Bitmoji as a virtual landscape through which to do so. To do so, I use an autoethnographic methodological process, allowing me to think about my own individual experience and how it is influenced by/influences broader macro-discourses of gender. As a result, I use my self-explorations to inform how others—in particular, college educators—think about gender as a mediating discourse throughout postsecondary educational contexts. In other words, my own searching for her, my feminine gendered self, exposes possibilities for gender-based praxis on college campuses.

Keywords: *Trans, femininity, autoethnography, online, bitmoji*

*“We [trans women] want to want. We desire to desire”
(Hayward, personal communication).*

“Maybe the internet raised us” (Lorde, 2013).

What does it mean to be(come) a trans woman in a digital age? Who is she, and how do I search for her in a world rife with proclamations that trans women should not exist? Hailing the words of the Black trans actress and activist Laverne Cox, Hayward (2017) wrote, “Trans women are dying because they don’t exist—for black trans women, this equation reveals a matrix of ‘gratuitous violence’ forged in relation to ‘don’t exist’” (p. 192). That is, non-existence is made as both a social mandate and an ontological futurity; despite their literal existence, trans women, and particularly trans women of color, are caught in a necropolitical web in which they come into social existence as a result of their being erased from existence. The public then counts how many have died this year, which is always the bloodiest year on record for trans women. Names are attached to hashtags, and our collective hearts break while our sisters are misgendered, misnamed, and further erased, even in death. So, I ask again, what does it mean to be(come) a trans woman in a digital age?

I start with the death of my sisters, and primarily my sisters of color, not to further tropes of the tragic trans woman (Serano, 2007), or to suggest a simplistic success/failure binary. I start here because I must; because in a field of education marked by an overt niceness that belies the ongoing presence of white supremacy and trans oppression (Ahmed, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Nicolazzo, 2017b; Patton, 2016), I must point out how coming into ourselves as trans women, especially those amongst us who are trans women of color, is not all that easy. Because even in a college environment that is continually marked as a time of self-exploration—so much so that this has become an oft-lauded trope in itself—some of us are told, tacitly and otherwise, that to explore

is to not exist. I start here because educators need to reckon with the ways they have continued to cut trans women, and trans women of color, out of the frame. In a world in which trans women are deemed non-human, where Blackness is made synonymous with being animalistic, where is the space to find and hold onto who we can be(come) as trans women? In a world dedicated to binaries—gay/straight, cis/trans, accepted/denied, in/out—who is responsible for changing the structures that deny humanity, worth, and existence to those most on the margins? And what role must educators play in this social transformation? I start with the death of my sisters because calling them back to existence, having them on these pages with me, is a refusal to the ongoing claims of our inhumanity. By calling them (back) into existence here—even through the binary code of a computer screen—I can begin to search for my self, and my place amongst our community.

Welcoming You into My Bodily Becoming

Before exploring the above questions, I ought to tell you my why. As I share with students working on manuscripts, the ending should never be a surprise, in that the reader should know how we will all get there together. So while I intend for this manuscript to prick your consciousness, and to stay with you well beyond your reading the words displayed here (Mazzei, 2013), I want to be clear about my intentions, because in some ways, they have both nothing and everything to do with you. What I mean by this is that while I wish to use my search for her, my trans feminine self, as a vehicle to push the boundaries of educational praxis—which is for you as a reader—the process of my searching is just that: mine. Again, calling on the work of Hayward (2008), she wrote:

From the first, a transsexual woman embodiment does not necessarily foreground a wish to “look like” or “look more like a woman” (i.e. passing)—though for some transwomen this may indeed be a wish (fulfilled or not). The point of view of the looker (those who might “read” her) is not the most important feature of transsubjectivity—the trans-woman wishes to be of her body, to “speak” from her body. (p. 72)

That is, although I will slide between the false binary of public/private through my searching, I seek to be “of [my] body, to ‘speak’ from [my] body.”

In what follows, I will discuss my ongoing search for my self as a trans woman, a label I admittedly hold rather loosely and will explore as well. Recognizing that we as trans people are always already in transition (Cooper, 2012; Hayward, 2010; Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015), I use digital media to find who I may be(come), as a way to explore future iterations of self as a trans woman. To frame my discussion, I use one specific digital platform, the avatar creation site Bitmoji, as the site of my explorations. Using an autoethnographic approach, I connect my self-explorations to broader educational and social discourses about trans femininity, as well as the ongoing contestations regarding womanhood. My search for her, then, mirrors the *trickle up education* approach I have discussed in previous work (Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017b) in that I am seeking to unearth, center, and spend time with those who are on the margins of the margins (e.g., trans women) as a way to reimagine how we as educators do our work. In essence, I use my autoethnographic wanderings through the virtual landscape of Bitmoji as a way to imagine liberatory educational praxis—that which does not currently exist—into existence. Furthermore, doing so will not only serve as an important intervention for and alongside trans women, but will also encourage

the creation of a praxis that aids—or at the very least does not negatively harm—those with more access and privilege (e.g., nontrans people).

In a move that may perturb some readers, and may well confuse and constrict my readership, I make a firm stand to *not define gender terminology*. My goal here is not to further obfuscate, but to make a firm stand in support of trans humanity. That is, should readers need to learn terms contained in this piece, I would encourage them (and perhaps you) to make use of the variety of trans-based glossaries in existence (see Catalano & Griffin, 2016; Jourian, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2017b; Stryker, 2017; Nicolazzo, n.d.). In funneling readers to these resources, I am urging that we all—myself as an author and the readers who are alongside me—put time and energy toward focusing on trans people. This move is both performative in not penning a widely profuse community within the confines of definitions, and also a reminder of how putting effort into learning is an act of solidarity. While some may find this tedious, I hope refusal to write palatable and simple in-text definitions helps readers confront a simple question: if our existence matters as trans people, is it much of an imposition at all to look up a couple of definitions?

A Note on Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a rich methodology through which to understand cultural sites, such as educational institutions. Using the metaphor of a camera lens, Chang (2008) described how autoethnography allows for the researcher to zoom in on personal experiences as a way of making meaning of broader cultural discourses, and vice-versa. By moving back-and-forth between self and culture, autoethnography allows not only for deeper understandings of the cultural milieu, but of who we are as individuals, and how we may interact with each other across spaces and times. Situating the practice of autoethnography alongside trans selves, Hayward (2010) used the metaphor of neighborhoods in her autoethnographic explorations of transsexuality, pointing out that our bodies are not just of our own making, but are un/re/done by our spatial locations. As she wrote,

If we set aside debates (without losing focus on their political import) about what sex/gender transsexuals have been or become, we might begin to recognize transsexuality as about more than gender/sex, conceivably about the *profusive* potential of bodily change, the ways bodies intensify (and are intensified by) habitats, environments, neighborhoods. (p. 227, italics in original)

Thus, autoethnography not only provides a lens through which to zoom out/in between culture and self, but also marks an essential tethering of the two, signaling how one both produces and is produced by habitats, environments, and neighborhoods.

Autoethnography is an ideal methodology for this manuscript, as it extends the self-exploration, confession, and revelation of the memoir genre trans people have used to discuss our trans identities (e.g., Grace, 2016) via the cultural investigation of ethnography. Through my own searching for her, my feminine gendered self, I will expose the coded meanings of gendered futures that bleed across virtual and physical domains. As a result, I will be able to use my self-explorations to inform how others—in particular, college educators—think about gender as a mediating discourse throughout postsecondary educational contexts, especially in a cultural context in which much of student life is mediated by the Internet. Indeed, the primordial stuff of the digital world,

binary code, the 1s and 0s that serve as building blocks for our digital selves, are laced with gendered meanings. Described as *transreality* by trans scholar and artist micha cárdenas (2016), the exploration of gendered futurities through digital spaces “is a ‘post-post-modern’ medium to explore the ‘mysteries and complexities of the flesh, the poetry of the flesh’” (Juliano, 2010, p. 25). The current autoethnographic investigation, then, is a meditation on how my unfolding awareness of the mysteries and complexities of my own trans flesh, addressed through virtual platforms, can pry open future possibilities and further broader gender-based praxis in educational settings.

For this particular autoethnography, I spent time creating an image of myself on the avatar creation platform Bitmoji. Once I did this, I decided upon several Bitmoji images to journal about. I chose images that induced reflections on three particular aspects of my gender that my Bitmoji—which I refer to as her—confronted me with: questions of naming my identity, exploring the monstrosity of my gender, and the affective dimensions of my (searching for) gender. I then did some journaling about these images, letting my mind wander between personal and academic connections, as well as across time (i.e., my reflections discuss past and current experiences, as well as future possibilities).

Between journaling about each of the three Bitmoji images I selected—and that are reproduced below—I then connected these personal reflections with broader cultural discourses. Replicating Chang’s (2008) commentary about autoethnography as a way to zoom in and out between self and culture, I went back-and-forth between my own personal reflections and cultural explorations of gender. Also, as a way to honor the power of autoethnography, I attempted to write in those places that scare me (Chödrön, 2001). That is, I attempted to not write a kind, easy, or polite narrative, but took seriously Waheed’s (2013) maxim: “the thing you are most afraid to write. write that” (p. 233). I also shared my work with multiple people with whom I remain in close relationship as a way to ensure I was being as honest as possible with my journaling reflections and, as a result, increasing the face validity (Lather, 1991) of my autoethnographic explorations.

As is true with any (auto)ethnography, there are more nuances and contours than one can adequately address within the word limitations of academic writing. Thus, what I outline in this piece may feel to some like a “teaser,” making readers wonder what was left on the cutting room floor as I wrote and revised this manuscript. This manuscript is indeed part of a broader project related to exploring digital landscapes and affect through educational praxis. As such, it serves as one of multiple steps to theorize differently, to push beyond that which is already present in educational discourse. Because scholars often develop ideas over time, I hope readers will be patient with me when reading this manuscript. My goal is not to disappoint, but to spark interest, and to lay groundwork for various new ideas for how educators can think about bodies, environments, and affect in/beyond sites of education.

Binaries, Bits, and Bytes: The Emergence of Virtual Environments in Education Literature

*“Oh come my love and swim with me
Out in this vast Binary Sea
Zeros and ones patterns appear
They’ll prove to all that we were here.”
(Death Cab For Cutie, 2015)*

While some warn of negative effects regarding the proliferation of trans youth using the Internet as a tool for community, connection, and exploration (e.g., Halberstam, 2018), some educational scholars are finding the opposite to be true. For example, I (Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017) and Miller (2017) found online communities to be vibrant spaces for trans and queer students to come into their own senses of self, as well as to connect with others with shared/similar identities. Our work echoes that of Cultural Studies scholars who recognize the potency of virtual spaces, especially in their ability to allow various marginalized populations—be they queer or not—access to world-making practices (e.g., Chen, 2017; Horak, 2014; Pham, 2015). Indeed, entire social movements—some of which have touched college campuses, such as the Movement for Black Lives—have toppled governments and administrations largely due to the use of virtual platforms (Castells, 2015). Thus, the way people with diverse sexualities and genders are accessing, using, and crafting the Internet as a site for deep connection is nothing short of revolutionary and worth further serious consideration in educational settings.

Described as *virtual kinship networks* (Nicolazzo, 2016, 2017b) and *virtual domains* (Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2015), trans and queer students found online communities important spaces to learn about themselves and connect with others. Rupturing the binaristic notions of public/private and visible/invisible, trans college students are using online (seemingly private and invisible) spaces to come into (public and visible) communities. As Jackson, a participant from my 18-month ethnographic study of trans college students who I often cite in regard to virtual platforms stated, “The Internet is basically my hometown.” Harkening back to Hayward’s neighborhood metaphor, Jackson uses the notion of a hometown to mark a congealing of disparate parts (e.g., coffee shops, parks, roads, newspapers, galleries, apartment complexes) into a coherent spatial and temporal location where Jackson feels they fit, where they literally *feel at home*. It does not matter that such a place does not exist “in real life;” what matters is the affective investments Jackson makes in the Internet that then make it so intimate, and so close, to be their home. In the remainder of this manuscript, I follow Jackson’s lead and fall headlong into the Internet, seeing how I can envision it as my hometown, and what it may mean for educational praxis.

In Search of Her

Journal Entry #1: But Who is She?



Here she is. I am. We are? It's strange to stare at yourself on a screen, especially as I think she is a much better representation of me than many photographs. But that said, I don't really know what to call her. Does she have a name? Is she a trans woman? A trans girl? A trans femme? Does it even matter at this—or any—point? And are we the same person? Or two different people? Are there moments where we converge, and others where we are on our own? The more I look at her, the less I feel like I know about us both, and the more I feel the sedimented history of who I am stripped away. Looking at/for her has me thinking about possible futures for her/me/us. Who may she/I/we be tomorrow? Next week? What possibilities exist? My mind wanders to Dean Spade's (2002) statement,

So a part of this fashioning we're doing needs to be about diversifying the set of aesthetic practices we're open to seeing, and promoting a possibility of us all looking very very different from one another while we fight together for a new world. I want to be disturbed by what you're wearing, I want to be shocked and undone and delighted by what you're doing and how you're living. And I don't want anyone to be afraid to put on their look, their body, their clothes anymore. (p. 15)

Names cease to matter with her, in some senses. I mean, I get they are important, and I want to name and be named as I am...but what if I don't know how I want to be named? And what about the compulsion to name and be named may occlude or overshadow the "possibility of us all looking very very different from one another," from disturbing, shocking, undoing, and delighting ourselves and others by what we are all doing and wearing? Maybe my concern and fear and worry about naming is itself a reification of the binary; I am this, not that. But how I name my gender need not stay the same. Or perhaps it will...but it could shift, and likely will as a result of the ongoing, negotiated relational nature of gender, mediated by the interactions I have with other people and the surrounding worlds in which we live (Meadow, 2018). Looking at her, there with her cool pose as she leans against the margins, shows me a vision of possibility...or possibilities, really. If I follow her gaze, I think we can imagine them together.

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In the above journaling exercise, I come face-to-face (or face-to-screen?) with her. As with other avatar creation platforms, she is a self-curated and fashioned version of me. She exists in multiplicity, representing who I may have always been, who I may currently be, and who I could possibly become. And when I look at her, when I really begin to explore who she/I am through my careful curation and ongoing attention to fashioning her/my self,¹ I begin to realize I don't even know how to name her/my self...or even if that is an important task. She is a mirror of my desires, a virtual manifestation of my sublimated dreams of self. Going back to Spade's (2002) writing, she disturbs, shocks, undoes, and delights me by what she is doing and how she is living. She is not afraid to put on her look, her body, and her clothes anymore. As a result, she is a reminder

1. Bitmoji allows users to change physique, appearance, and fashion accessories whenever they wish, all while maintaining various gendered norms. For example, Bitmoji disallows me from both being a woman and having a beard in their platform.

that perhaps, instead of thinking about how to name her/my self—an internal/individualistic process—she/I/we may do well to think more about the ways in which the gendering process operates as discourse that mediates how we even can come to know ourselves.

I am not suggesting here that names are unimportant, or that they do not carry a specific weight with them. I am also not suggesting that it “doesn’t matter” if I am a trans woman or trans femme. Instead, what I am saying is that the process by which she/I/we search for selfhood is itself a technology of the gendering process, of the way that gender discourses mediate the choices we had/have/may have available to us at any given time. In this sense, what becomes important is not just who we ourselves are, but *how we come to know ourselves*. That is, we do not just have genders, but genders are foreclosed, proliferated, and imagined in various permutations due to our cultural milieu. And, as my previous journaling elucidates, my virtual self unlocks new possibilities for gendered selfhood that previously felt off limits to me.

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Journal Entry #2: Monstrous Bodies



She is a monster. She destroys structures, stomps out antiquated and limited modes of existence, and is the embodiment of futurity. Like other monsters who defy human-centric notions of gender by their simply being monsters, she gestures to a new terrain, one in which gender can mean more, where she/I/we can fall into our desires, and where she/I/we are the destroyers, not the destroyed. What seems beautiful about her monstrosity, too, is that she wears it so dang well. She is not ashamed of being deviant, of the mess she makes of gender. Much to the contrary, she revels in it. She is intentionally making a mess and moving through the rubble. She will not clean up after herself because what is there really to clean up? Modernity? Racialized capitalism? Settler colonialism? These systems were never built with us in mind, and are traps into which our life chances are increasingly surveilled, restricted, codified, and made abject (Gossett, Stanley, & Burton, 2017; Spade, 2015). In fact, these systems mark her/me/us as weapons set to destroy the state, and therefore, targets that must be destroyed, eradicated, wiped out, especially those of us who are Black, Brown, and Indigenous (Puar, 2005, 2007; Beauchamp, 2013, 2019).

When I see her knocking over a skyscraper, I imagine it to be a building emblazoned with a health insurance name across the top, maybe on one of the sides that is hidden from view. Maybe it is a governmental building, one that holds administrative records that categorize her/me/us as people who we are not, and therefore, which negatively influences the livability of our lives.² In some ways, the exact type of building it is does not matter; it is metonymic of the barriers of everyday life and the choices we must make simply by waking up and living public lives. Knowing this, she has decided to not even seek admittance, to find a seat at one of the various tables in any of the assorted “room[s] where it happens” (Manuel, 2015), because whatever is happening is closely associated with the furthering of trans necropolitics. In those rooms, we do not exist, and are again (and again) called upon to not do so. Their panic about our desiring more, of wanting more from gender, is palpable, and so they bang on the table and kick their feet, and find ways to administratively erase us—a reality we know cannot actually happen (Spade, 2018), and yet, has “crushingly real consequences” for the livability of our lives (Patel, 2015, para. 9). And through this all, she knows the score. She cares not to be in the room where our demise is planned. Instead, she delights in the destruction of these spaces, crunching glass, steel, and limiting ideologies under her monstrous claws. She is a monster. And maybe so am I. And maybe so are we all.

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The metaphor of trans-as-monster is not a new one for scholars writing in transgender studies, especially as it relates to our heralding our monstrosity as a form of bodily reclamation (Jaekel & Nicolazzo, 2017; Stryker, 1994). Deemed monstrous by others, our bodies and ways of being in the world are an affront not only to other people, as countless trans personal narratives and memoirs expose, but also to the very societies in which we live. Said another way, we create institutional havoc through our being deemed impossible people, and composing an impossible population (Marine, 2017; Nicolazzo, forthcoming; Spade, 2015). Moreover, the bodies of trans people of color have been deemed weapons, bringing to the fore notions of gender transgression as a form of terrorism (Puar, 2005, 2007) in need of hyper-surveillance and containment (Beauchamp, 2013, 2019). The institutional response to our gendered and raced monstrosity, then, is one of violent erasure and containment. Our monstrosity is reflected back to us and the broader public as a detriment, as something about which to fear and blot out. These cultural discourses seep into our skin and frame our existence. Again, we hear the (sometimes not so quiet) maxim: don’t exist (Hayward, 2017).

But what is the counternarrative to our monstrosity? What happens when we claim our positions as monsters set to destroy that which is trying so very hard to destroy us? How can we think about our transgression as a form of destroying the modernist trappings of racialized capitalism—such as institutions of higher education—and playing in the rubble? What would it mean to

2. As Spade (2015) noted, administrative systems such as federal, state, and local records act as a means of population control, often erasing who trans people are and/or can become in lieu of reifying binary gender regimes. Even recent attempts by some state governments to allow nonbinary people to replace the M or F on certain documents with an X is a way to further normalize the immutability of the M and F, from which the X—and only the X—deviates. There are still only two genders (i.e., M and F), and the aberrant X, which will not be widely recognized, may only invite further precarity, threat, and risk, especially for those nonbinary people with multiple marginalized identities.

destroy these metonyms of normalized ideologies congealed over time and delight in their destruction? How can we pause and resist the urge to build back up (again) and just desire the latent possibility that comes with dissolution? For if there is nothing there, then anything could grow in its place...or not. In other words, perhaps higher education could use a little more destruction. Perhaps our monstrosity could help batter, bash, and annihilate the ways gender is baked into our buildings, systems, and ways of operating, laying the scene for new possibilities...or just allowing for there to be no mention of gender where it need not be.

Educational institutions are prominent beacons of modernity. Despite the ongoing creation of queer and transgender theory occurring from these spaces, they have yet to radically alter them (Renn, 2010). Moreover, the programs, initiatives, offices, funding and staffing models, and how faculty and educational administrators go about their work largely used throughout education are replications of this modernity. Harkening back to Tuchman's (2009) discussion of audit culture, and Magolda's (2016) articulation of corporate managerialism, the boundary lines are clear and the stakes are high; cultural reproduction as an outgrowth of neoliberal ideologies continues to serve as a form of containment where subaltern people, modes of being, and ways of thinking are routinely kept out of the frame of higher education.

In response to the trap of neoliberalism, Stewart (2017) advocated resisting the urge to pull up a seat to the proverbial table. In response to the desire to "be in the room where it happens" (Manuel, 2015), he suggested educators ask, "Who is trying to get in the room but can't? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure" (Stewart, 2017, para. 18)? I extend this thinking by suggesting that as gender monsters, perhaps we destroy the rooms and delight in the rubble. I wonder out loud what it may mean to start over, to tear down that which we have built, because it continues to enact forms of erasure, violence, and normalization that are nothing but a clear and visible threat to multiple marginalized populations, including trans people. I am not advocating literally destroying buildings; instead, I am advocating a strong rebuke of those ways of being, programming, researching, and organizing our institutional lives that reify gender binary discourses (Nicolazzo, 2017b). In the rubble, then, is where we can dream and imagine differently; where we can create that which has yet to be, that which I have even yet to imagine as an educator, theorist, and trans girl. It is in this rubble where best practices are cast aside in favor of localized and historically rooted responses to the gender binary. What can we do together to envision these possibilities together, rather than wait for someone to tell us what to do?

This is what I am learning from her. This is what she is teaching me. This is how she and I are inextricably linked across the material and virtual worlds in which we inhabit. Both monsters, and both set on embracing our destructive appetites as best we can.

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Journal Entry #3: Feeling Through my Transness



Searching for her means digging through my past. Before I met her, I kept looking other places for...someone. I didn't have the language then of capaciousness and capacity, of the multitudes gender could hold. I remember times after I would get out of the bath or shower as a youth when I would pull my hair back away from my forehead—I had that ubiquitous bowl cut, and my hair was stick straight—lean in over the vanity, and stare at my blue eyes in the mirror. I remember staying like that for minutes that seemed like hours, and wondering, “Was I meant to be a girl?” I was searching for her even before I knew she could be a possibility for me/us. Thinking back to these private bathroom moments makes me think about Laura Jane Grace's (2016) memoir, in which she wrote,

When I grew bored, I would lock myself in the bathroom and try on my mother's dresses that were in the hamper. I'd stand there as long as I could, looking at myself in the mirror, wishing I was someone else, wishing I was her. (p. 11)

My eyes scanned every inch of my face, wondering where, how, or when this label of “boy” got placed onto me. I didn't feel like I was in the “wrong body,” but I felt like there was more to my story, to my life, to my gendered narrative. I desired to find her, wished at times to be her, thought how my life would be different were I to meet her.

And all the while, I did my seeking privately, sneaking moments in the bathroom mirror, making sure not to make these moments too long, lest someone ask what I was doing. I never really was a good fibber. So, I never expressed my wonderings to my mother, and definitely did not say anything to my brother or father. Looking back on these experiences, I realize the reason I didn't say anything was likely associated with patriarchy-induced shame. If I embraced, moved toward, recognized, or uttered my femininity, then I was somehow abject, wrong, deviant, bad. Shame is a powerful emotion. It stigmatizes, and as a result, moved me further away from her for years. Although I always considered myself a feminist as a young adult, and came out as queer in high school (after years of sublimating my queer desires), I made sure to find ways to distance myself from femininity. Patriarchy-induced shame led to the ingestion of sexist attitudes. I cared for

women, as long as I was not. I never engaged in active and vocal sexist rhetoric, but how many times did I sit idly by while other boys did, gritting my teeth and biting my tongue so as to show I, too, was down with the patriarchy? Sitting here typing this makes me queasy. The shame is building again, like bile in my throat. I want to throw it all up, but I know it won't change my past, and I am not seeking absolution anyway. Instead, I am tracing the ways that shame, femme-phobia, and sexism snuck into my very being, when at the very same time I began to see glimpses of her in the mirror.

And in many ways, it hasn't gotten all the easier for me now. I still struggle with the years of internalized shame I was surrounded by as a youth. My mind wanders to Tourmaline (Grace, 2015), who talked about the implications of being a woman in an age of virulent racism and sexism. She, too, talked about her experience with mirrors. Quoted at length—because she said it so much better than I ever could—she recalled:

Mirrors have held so much power for me, and not in ways that have always helped me feel good about myself. There was a time in Boston maybe 20 years ago when I looked in a mirror and I started crying. I was so consistently navigating a racist and transphobic gaze that I couldn't help but reflect that back at myself. I was overwhelmed by the me that existed through that lens.

What I connected to at the club with the mirrors was a different gaze that reminded me of the powerful moments of becoming I've had in front of mirrors, seeing and imagining myself for who I want to be, or who I already might be. The becoming gaze happening that night helped me feel confident enough that I wanted to risk feeling humiliated, risk feeling beautiful and powerful. So often, it's the same risk. Something I've learned is that it's harder to accept that I might be beautiful, powerful, maybe even hot, than it is to organize against the institutions I hate.

So the next day, the Sunday we went to Jewel's Catch One, I put on a dress. And I was hit with an incredible wave of embarrassment. I was overwhelmed by embarrassment. I wasn't surprised—this feeling is why I hadn't worn a dress in years. The history of laws and punishment and shame washed over me and through me. After so long, and so much work, it's still so fucking hard to be a public woman.

Even in social movements, capitalism gets reproduced and tells me that I'm not supposed to be in a place of becoming, that I'm supposed to have arrived on the scene already with a sense of my own internal power and a brilliant political analysis to articulate it. We're told that if we have emotions that say otherwise, they're our own fault. I felt embarrassed of my embarrassment. I am deeply embarrassed by my own embarrassment.

What I needed in that moment was for my friend to tell me I looked okay, or even that I looked hot as hell. So many of us depend on other people to reflect back who we are, how we want to be seen. I'm trying to understand those moments not just through a framework of trans liberation, but also through dependency. I believe dependency is one of our greatest sources of power. (Grace, 2015, para. 23-27)

Maybe my experiences searching for her as a youth aren't so different from my experiences now. Both are riddled by the ways that sexism, transphobia, and femme-phobia continue to influence the gatekeeping of femininity. In both moments, I am still trying to navigate these discourses, trying to resist them, however unsuccessful I maybe was/is. In both moments, the reality that it is still so fucking hard to be a public woman were/are staring back at my from the mirror.

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Ahmed (2004) stated, “Feelings are not about the inside getting out or the outside getting in, but that they ‘affect’ the very distinction of inside and outside in the first place” (p. 29). Thinking about the camera lens effect of autoethnography, then, it would make sense that affect would be an important feature of thinking through how self and culture are mutually co-constitutive. Furthermore, Gilbert (2016) stated, “Affectively, public knowledge is as much a matter of expression as it is a collection of facts. Truth is not facticity. It is feeling” (p. 98). In this sense, emotion and fact are sutured together in the creation of public knowledge. Similar to medical suturing, facts and expression merge to become one: a body of knowledge.

As my journaling elucidated, the shame I experienced was as much mine as it was given to me by the culture in which I was socialized as a youth. Patriarchy gave me my shame, and I then aided its growth in my own self as well as culturally. Even in the brief moments where I courted her, those private bathroom moments, shame was present in that I could not even think to name this with others, including my mother, with whom I have always had a deeply loving and affirming relationship. While some readers—perhaps you?—will tell me to be more generous to younger me, that I cannot blame my younger self for not naming my desires publicly, I am not convinced that is the point. It is less about chastising my younger self, and more about understanding how cultural discourses of patriarchy lead to individual experiences of shame that then, over time, congeal to reinforce patriarchy and sexism, however tacit it may seem. Every time I did not speak up when people joked about women, or when I laughed along, or when, a year before coming out as trans—which I did in my late 20s—I went to the gym to change my body to be more masculine, I was motivated by patriarchy-induced shame. There are patterns I am tracing, and they started in a back-and-forth, mutually reinforcing dialectic between me and the culture in which I grew up when I was young. I am not castigating my younger self, but I cannot let that youth off the hook, either. We all have varying degrees of agency, even in our youth, and although it is painful to expose, it feels—there is that word again—important to excavate.

Peering through the Trap Door: But What Does this Mean for Educators?

Gossett, Stanley, and Burton (2017) discussed the metaphor of trap doors as holding future potentialities, as well as imposing limits on how we understand ourselves as trans people. That is, the notion of visibility as a construct of racialized capitalism has been a limiting trap by which many of the most vulnerable trans people are continually erased from view; however, there are also ways that one can think of trap doors as thresholds through which we can arrive at new understandings of self, as well as possibilities for who we can become as individuals and societies. Many scholars, activists, and artists have pointed out the trap of visibility, me included. What I am more interested in for this piece, however, is how educators can look through the trap door of

virtual visibility—as explored through the avatar creation platform Bitmoji—to think about possible gendered futures in and beyond higher education. In other words, I seek to answer the question, “But what does this autoethnographic exploration of self through digital space mean for educators?”

As Cavalcante (2016), Cannon et al. (2017), and Rawson (2014) discussed, there are distinct possibilities for trans people to recognize current and future iterations of self, as well as practice worldmaking through online spaces. There are clearly pitfalls of engaging with online spaces, especially given that homonormative discourses (Duggan, 2003) do not begin and end in material spaces (e.g., Bartone, 2018); however, the Internet is also a robust site for the development of “virtual counterpublics” where trans people may be more likely to find community (Cavalcante, 2016). As a result of coming into virtual community with other trans people, trans individuals may also be able to find various modes of gendered self-expression that make sense for who they are currently, as well as who they desire to become (Cavalcante, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2017b).

Higher education administrators have been relatively slow to embrace how digital platforms could be sites of self-exploration and understanding alongside trans youth. As my autoethnography elucidates, the ways avatar creation platforms could be leveraged to explore who we desire to be as trans people as well as the affective dimensions of our transness are full of possibility. For example, virtual platforms like Bitmoji could be used with students who are exploring their genders, creating private, safer spaces for them to do so. Educators could work individually with students, or encourage students to work with each other (e.g., in queer student organizations) to discuss how, why, and to what extent their virtual self-representations align with their public lives. If there are disconnections, educators and students could discuss what spaces—material and virtual—may exist that feel safe for students to begin shifting closer to their virtual self (if they want to do so).

Educators may also want to use virtual platforms as a way to engage in feeling work. By this, I mean it may be important for educators not to distance themselves from the feelings associated with identity exploration for trans students. Although most educational administrators are not trained counseling professionals, it would be disingenuous at best to pretend as though feelings are not a part of everyday life, especially for trans students who are navigating oppressive college contexts (Jourian, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017b). Helping trans students at least name the feelings they are having, validating those feelings are real and important to explore, and then connecting trans students to affirmative resources where they can go deeper in their affective explorations are vital steps educators can take. Moreover, nontrans educators would be well advised to do their own feeling work, particularly as it relates to conceptualizations of gender. Oftentimes, conversations of gender are theorized, but not felt. For example, Catalano (2015) found trans students were often cast as gender theorists by others. Some of this positioning by nontrans people may be related to their own discomfort exploring their own gender, and thus, recognizing the lived realities inscribed therein (e.g., Nicolazzo, Marine, & Wagner, 2018; Wagner, Marine, & Nicolazzo, 2018). Nontrans educators thinking about how gender mediates their lives, and how their own conceptualizations of gender may have shifted across time and space would help improve their understandings of gender as an ontological reality. For example, a group guided reading and discussion of Catalano and Griffin’s (2016) curriculum design could be helpful in raising one’s consciousness through reflective practice.

Embracing Spade’s (2015) notion of trickle up activism as a way to focus our attention and work alongside those who are most vulnerable, Stewart and I (2018) suggested we may need to “destroy” the current conceptualization of high impact practices, and instead think about how we

can play in the rubble to build something new. Educators may also want to (re)consider how initiatives, frameworks, and theories—including those often deemed “foundational” to their profession—simply do not work for trans students and, as alluded to in the above journaling, may need to be “destroyed.” For example, Stewart and I (2018) proposed a new iteration of high impact practices that centers trans people of color and, as a result, resist the ideology of whiteness in which the original high impact practices framework was developed. This current manuscript furthers this call, and invites readers to be attentive to what else may benefit from creative destruction.

Finally, it is important to note that the use of digital spaces for self-exploration is not just about increasing representation. While virtual spaces certainly have increased exponentially the ways of thinking and being trans (Cavalcante, 2018), educators must also engage in how virtual platforms both reify and resist discourses of power, as well as how they can serve as archival projects through which gender-based histories are able to survive and be shared across generations. As Chang (2016) noted,

Artists and activists have long demanded better representation for people of color, women, poor people, and rural people. They have asked: Who is represented in and through cultural production? How does this representation, underrepresentation, or misrepresentation undo or reproduce various forms of inequality? But cultural equity is not just about representation. It is also about access and power. How can important cultural knowledge survive? Who has access to the means of production of culture? Who has the power to shape culture? (pp. 56-57)

Thus, as the previous autoethnographic exploration details, virtual spaces and platforms are not just about finding/increasing representations of self, but of trans cultural production, as well as striving for new ways to leverage power in trans oppressive cultural climates.

Conclusion

As cárdenas (2016) stated, “The way we experience the virtual bodies we inhabit in games is through our experience and memory of our own body” (para. 11). Thus, by inhabiting our virtual bodies, and exploring new future gendered possibilities for our digital selves, we may be able to recreate notions of our own material bodies. Moreover, we can create new memories of various different bodies, such as the ethereal notion of the “student body,” which I have described elsewhere as currently being—but not having to be—an artifact of gender binary discourse (Nicolazzo, 2017b). Said another way, if we take seriously the inherent possibilities of gendered self-exploration in virtual spaces, we may be able to unyoke our understandings of who people are, can become, or need to be in material spaces, as well. In so doing, we can create new possibilities for not just individual student bodies, but the student body as a broader public moving in, through, and beyond college campuses.

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