

Fuel to My Fire / You Can't Stop Desire

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...as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society.

-Audre Lorde²

I've tried, but you're fuel to my fire

You can't stop desire

-Tegan and Sara³

In 2019, I wrote my parent a letter informing them that I was transgender. Replying immediately to my e-mail, they reassured me that they have those same feelings sometimes, that they were aware that life as a different gender would be in some way easier. That they too felt out of place in their gender assigned at birth. They recognized a latent desire to change their gender, though they never explored what it would mean to embrace it. They said that everyone *must* feel such desires, but that God created man and woman, and though we may find it easier not to live that way, or struggle to accept the role God gave us, it is our responsibility to live out God's plan, no matter the difficulty.

So much for my coming out; we wouldn't talk about this for another two years. What was I to say to that response? That being trans is "my truth"? Or, that I was deeply truly a "woman" (or, rather, woman-adjacent)? Should I have explained that my trans identity was assured by biological necessities of some heretofore unknown neurology? That I was "trapped in the wrong body"? Was I to say that *God made me like this*, trying

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² 2007, *Sister Outsider*, p. 58.

³ "Stop Desire" from their 2016 album *Love You to Death*.

to use their Christianity to justify my choices? Any of these would have been an attempt at avoiding what I think they got exactly right: I did desire to change my gender. I did not want, nor did I feel comfortable, being a man as society has laid out that script. Unlike my parent, I do not think this is something one can simply ignore or reject, much less that someone *should* ignore or reject it.

Much of the current anti-trans political movement is rooted in the rejection and elimination of trans desires. Like the anti-gay political movements that came before it, and are being revitalized with it, the desires themselves are viewed as immoral or perverted. Many anti-trans activists claim that they are not against all trans people while making it as difficult as possible for us to transition, to act on our desire. They may argue that transition is *a mere desire*, or a mere desire for most, denying that we are who we say we are. Their denial is based on a naïve understanding human sexual biology, thinking that male and female are clear and discrete categories. They cast the net widely enough to deny transgender experience; while also claiming they are not against all trans people, intimating that “old-fashioned” transexuals who will pass and integrate into society are okay. The wrong body model becomes the only way to understand transitioning, despite their own rejection of its possibility.⁴ Denying that model, as many trans people have, means we’re groomers with a perverted desire.⁵ A desire that everyone *must* feel from time to time, but Biology created man and woman, and though it may be easier not to live that way, or we may struggle to accept the role Biology gave us, it is our responsibility to live out Biology’s plan, no matter the difficulty.

What is one supposed to say to that? Both cases draw out a kind of explanatory pressure that is constantly put on trans people; a pressure to explain why or how we know we’re trans.⁶ To justify why we transition and expect others to respect it. Whether the pressure comes from loving, but ignorant, family or discursively violent political activists, there is a constant expectation that trans people must make sense of ourselves on *others’*

⁴ For criticisms of the “wrong body model” by trans authors see Talia Mae Bettcher (2014) “Trapped in the Wrong Theory”, Miquel Missé (2022) *The Myth of the Wrong Body*, and Hernandez and Bell (forthcoming) *Much Ado About Nothing: Unmotivating Gender Identity*.

⁵ A duality that echoes Talia Mae Bettcher’s (2007) argument that trans women are often stuck in the duality of being seen as either Evil Deceivers or Make Believers.

⁶ Cameron Awkward-Rich (2017) draws out and discusses much of this explanatory pressure in his “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transexual.”

terms or else be defined out of existence.⁷ This explanatory pressure often puts us in an explanatory false dichotomy: either one is trans because of some natural, essentialist conception of gender where one is “born this way” or one is filled with a perverted desire to transition.⁸ Someone is trans due to either natural necessity or problematic choice. This explanatory false dichotomy, due to the explanatory pressure put on trans people, puts us in a political double-bind. With such limited options, and such significant pressure, we often reach for the answer that will stop the questioning. We feel a pressure to represent ourselves as being “born this way,” as if the entire rearrangement of our social lives is due to some unknown neurological “diversity” (read: disorder) or represent ourselves as acting on a mere whim, a silly desire to gender bend, i.e., not *real*. If we give in to the first horn of the double-bind, then we de-prioritize the autonomy to fully explore and fuck with gender outside of dominant gender norms.⁹ If we take the second horn of the double-bind, then we ignore that there is something deeply real and valuable about our genders, that being denied access to transitioning is denying us something central to who we are. Furthermore, transness as perverted desire gives permission criticize us as immoral or subhuman or even kill us.¹⁰

Part of what makes a false dichotomy ‘false’ is that it does not properly capture explanatory space. At times that means there are third, fourth, or fifth options that are not

⁷ Talia Mae Bettcher (2019) articulates this explanatory pressure as ‘theoretical pressure,’ she writes, “One of the reasons trans people exist under theoretical pressure is precisely that we don’t conform to everyday expectations—we’re considered anomalous. But, from the other side of the theory, we “anomalies” want to know what’s going on” (p. 4) Perry Zurn (2021) discusses this explanatory pressure as a form of curiosity that most people have about us, writing “As the object of curiosity at every turn, trans people are forced to live defensively, constantly parrying unwanted attention, often in a vain attempt to guard not only their privacy but their legitimacy” (p. 182).

⁸ I have briefly explored this false dichotomy elsewhere, see Hernandez (2023) “Gender Changes: Genderfluidity and Trans Possibilities.”

⁹ The locution “fuck with gender” follows Florence Ashley’s (forthcoming) argument that *genderfucking* is a critical legal methodology, “emanat[ing] from an appreciation of the limits of recognition” (p. 5). They argue a politics of recognition is helpful for those trans people who conform to gender roles, but leaves out those of us who refuse to neatly place ourselves in traditional gender roles. While Ashley is confining their arguments to the legal context, my use here follows that usage, recognizing that *transitioning* often involves fucking with gender.

¹⁰ As of writing this, the “trans panic defense” for murder is legal in the majority of the U.S. and even in states like California that have banned the “trans panic defense,” it still has been effectively used to reduce sentencing as Jules Gill-Peterson (2024) discusses in the case of Latisha King, a black trans girl who was effectively blamed in a California court with pushing a classmate to murder her with a gun he brought from home. Although lethal consequences are less common for trans people who present more masculine, they are still an everyday reality for trans women and femmes of color.

being recognized. But failing to properly capture explanatory space can also mean putting things in opposition that are not. The dichotomy creates an illusion of mutual exclusion between necessity and desire. The false dichotomy between the wrong body model and the perverted desire model rests on necessity being too natural and essential to fit with the freedom of desire, and desire is too flimsy, too whimsical to ground necessity. However, necessity need not be natural or essential—there are other kinds of necessity that could explain the need to transition. Similarly, desire need not be *mere*. Desires are incredibly important, central to how we make sense of ourselves and actions. As Jas Heaton (2023) has argued, “wanting is enough”: we lack not legitimate desires, but explanations on our own terms.

My goal in this essay is to provide an explanation of transitioning that avoids biological necessity and, in effect, the underlying gender essentialism. An explanation that takes trans desires seriously, not only as desires, but as grounds for the necessity of transition many, if not all, of us feel. Taking desire seriously is difficult though. Trans people are so often made to feel shame about our desires. An explanation of transitioning that takes desire seriously will need to answer specific questions. Why would someone desire gender transition in the first place? How does someone recognize such a desire? If we reject the explanatory false dichotomy, how could necessity and desire fit together? How can such a desire not only be permissible, but valuable? These are the questions I seek to answer.

Briefly, my answers to these questions are as follows. Trans people desire gender transition because of the stifling, difficult nature of living in the dominant gender system. Although not everyone feels stifled by the dominant gender system, it is entirely understandable that many people would. The dominant gender system *is* stifling. It was designed to constrain, limit, and dictate our social existence in the world. It is ever present, making escape seem impossible. In an important sense this is exactly right. However, transitioning can be a means for escape, defining oneself outside of the dominant gender system. Recognizing the desire to transition, though, only becomes possible once one views it as an option for oneself. Many people will experience myriad barriers to recognizing transition as an option for them; others may experience no barriers; and others will view the option and decide it is not for them. For many of us though, the desire is not only present but engulfing. The desire hits one as necessary, with other options seeming impossible. It is a desire central to our ethical identity, and without acting on that desire, we would feel immense shame. It is the relationship between shame and desire

that makes the decision to transition of practical necessity. When you consider how stifling the dominant gender system is it should be obvious why it would be so important. Finally, desire to transition is categorical in nature, it helps settle the question of why one should want to live. This explanation builds on Bernard Williams' (1981) work on categorical desires and the way such desires constitute an individual's ethical identity that can change through time. Categorical desires are so central to our ethical identity because they serve as a ground project that gives our lives meaning. There is something good about transitioning, something that changes the way we organize our lives around others.

It is worth noting that when I discuss 'the desire to transition' or 'gender transition' this does not imply medical transition like gender-affirming hormone therapy or top and bottom surgery—though it does include those options. *Transitioning* for my purposes should be understood broadly, as all the ways one might construct, express, engage, and fuck with one's gender, moving away from the gender one was assigned at birth. At times I may simplify to 'changing one's gender' to mark the importance of exiting from a previous position to a new one, but I am not claiming anything about the metaphysics of individuals' gender transitions. This definition is largely stipulatory, aiming to fix in place the object of explanation for the sake of clarity, broad enough to capture a wide variety of experiences, but not intended as an insight into the nature of trans existence. Such an exploration would have to focus on how trans people engage in transition, but my present topic concerns the desire to engage in such activities to begin with.

There are surely numerous, heterogeneous, reasons for why trans people desire to transition. The on-the-ground reasons that speak to an individual are unique and personal. When one theorizes about gender, or anything, there is always the risk that one's personal motivations and experiences overwhelmingly shape their theory. My current project runs this risk. I speak as someone who found the desire to transition well into my twenties, as someone who grew up knowing their Indigenous history, but always severed from ancestral Indigenous practices, as someone who suffered abuse that made them, for the sake of survival, abandon their desires. My story and experiences are specific, but I hope that I can say something illuminating about trans desire. That whatever an individual's specific reasons for desiring transition, we all transition against a particular

backdrop of social structures and psychological habits. The first layer of that backdrop is the stifling nature of the dominant gender system.¹¹

The dominant gender system is stifling due to how it makes gender salient, limiting, and natural. Marilyn Frye (1983) explores the way that society makes gender salient to us. She notes how “sex-identification intrudes into every moment of our lives and discourse,” getting in the way of whatever is the primary topic at hand (p. 10). Our lives are filled with ways to mark the differences between “the sexes,” whether through forms of address, the ways you congratulate a friend, or how you give and receive orders. Frye (1983) states that all the various interactions we have with another are bifurcated, “one does all of these things differently depending upon whether the relevant others are male or female” (p. 20). We are all under pressure to know everyone’s sex, and to constantly inform others of our sex. The overwhelming redundancy is meant to convey to us the truth and importance of this division. Furthermore, those bodies that don’t conform to a neat, tidy distinction between the sexes forcibly have their bodies altered at birth, either chemically or surgically, to conform to this dimorphism. This sexual dichotomy is therefore actively constructed in society. The creation of binary sex, and therefore gender, is central to Frye’s definition of sexism: it is the fact that humans are forced into a gender system of dominance and subservience that is itself sexist.

This dominant gender system does not universally arise, as one may assume, out of perceived biological dimorphism. Historically, the dominant gender system that currently pervades Western society is an invention of European colonialism (Maracle 2000; Lugones 2007). Prior to that point in time, and outside of colonial influence, many different gender systems existed. Indigenous nations of Turtle Island (current day North America) have a vibrant history of gender identities and roles beyond that of man and woman. Mohawk artist and writer Aiyiyana Maracle (2000) notes that while most societies have a male/female heterosexual structure due to the necessity of procreation, many societies have additional social roles or positions in recognition of genders beyond male and female (p. 39-40).¹² The extinction of these alternative gender systems is central to

¹¹ The *dominant gender system* is my shorthand for understanding how gender is constructed in our contemporary U.S./Anglo context, materially, socially, and perceptually.

¹² I should note that I am glossing over a rather important point. For many indigenous societies, there was no distinction between one’s gender and one’s sexuality. The creation of specific sexual identities on the one hand, and gender identities and roles on the other, is largely part of the dominant gender system. The contemporary indigenous catch all “two-spirit” is not a gender or sexuality but an identity to stand in for all the various ways in which indigenous societies created room for others to exist, largely due to the

settler colonialism. Over the course of our history, indigenous children were stolen in the hope that each subsequent generation of natives would be closer to being assimilated into Western culture. One of the primary methods of assimilation was inculcating children into the dominant gender system with heterosexual, monogamous sex and gender roles. The aim of this practice was to make us natives “civilized” (Maracle 2000; Lugones 2007; Marak & Tuennerman 2013). The history of settler colonialism includes a history of constructing race and gender for the point of control. ‘Stifling’ is an understatement.

To effectively maintain control, it is important for this division of the sexes to seem *natural*. Frye (1983) argues that,

For efficient subordination, what’s wanted is that the structure not appear to be a cultural artifact kept in place by human decision or custom, but that it appear *natural*—that it appears to be a quite direct consequence of facts about the beast which are beyond the scope of human manipulation or revision (emphasis Frye, p. 34).¹³

It’s not enough for sex-identification to be constantly present and transcendently important, it must also be natural. Biologists for decades have attested to the fact that biologically sex is not as clean and dry as “male” and “female” (Fausto-Sterling 1993 & 2001). The naturalizing of sex, and in effect gender, is important for how it shapes our perceptions and desires.

Psychologists Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978) call this naturalized perception of gender the “natural attitude” concerning gender. They argue that our beliefs about gender—that there are only two, immutable genders based in dimorphic sex—are mistakenly assumed to be vindicated by science, making any other outlook on gender “primitive” (!) and unscientific (1978, p 4-5). Importantly, this natural attitude about gender is the default way of perceiving the world in our society. Frye’s discussion of sex identification and the unquestionable truth and transcendent importance of its binary division shows how we are all inculcated with the natural attitude about gender. We may contrast this perception of gender with what Aiyana Maracle (2000) calls an “indigenous sense of gender” (p. 39). The indigenous sense of gender, instead of focusing on biology, focuses on choice. Maracle (2000) writes, “choice is a sacred thing... gender, as the

extermination and lack of original names and roles that were erased by years of settler colonialism. My own discussion of gender throughout the paper may be better understood as “sex/gender” the complex of one’s sexuality and gender, as it relates to cisheterosexual monogamy.

¹³ Maracle (2000) also discusses this naturalization.

keystone in the foundation of everything else that we are, must of course be the determination of the individual” (p. 40). For Indigenous populations around the world, choice is often central to gender positions. For the dominant gender system, biology is central to gender positions.

The Naturalization of the dominant gender system is important because it leads us to think that, however unfortunate the dominant gender system may be, “facts don’t care about your feelings.” Most people go along with it because they think it is necessary, not because of how they identify, wish to present, or what they want. One may wish to behave, dress, or be different, but think “it’s the unfortunate result of biological reality.” It is difficult to want something you do not know exists, to recognize it as an option. And even if one does recognize the false naturalization of gender, one may still not recognize the option to do anything differently. Even if it is not natural, it is still our present reality. It is too easy to think, “I may know of its fabrication, what about everyone else? Does not everyone else’s assent make it just as necessary?” Most people, even without necessarily reflecting on it, have good reason to be unsatisfied, if not frustrated, with the dominant gender system. Unfortunately, the lies inherent to the dominant gender system, and reasons for being unsatisfied with it, are often not enough to recognize a desire.

Audre Lorde (2007) writes about how our deepest desires are great sources of power. It is the power of desire that makes it so important for those in power to suffocate it. If everyone could access that power, then the institutionalized forms of power in society would be threatened. Barriers to recognizing desire are often placed before marginalized people who, when alienated from their own desires, conform more easily to the social structures that benefit others. In effect, marginalized people contort themselves in pursuit of survival and safety, instead of living in line with our own desires. Considering how dominant power structures suffocate such desires, how *does* one recognize a desire to transition? This is a natural extension of the question, “Why would someone desire to transition?” since this desire can hide out of sight until it falls on one like a piano, coming from out of nowhere and everywhere at once. But to answer this sufficiently we need to understand the perceptual manifestations and limits of desire and the ways in which institutionalized forms of power attempt to suffocate trans desires.

Often discussion of desires, both in philosophical literature and more generally, involves understanding how desires affect our actions. One desires something and wants to obtain it, to satiate that desire. Toward that end, one must have some beliefs about the world, especially beliefs about how to obtain the desired object. One’s actions, from this

view, are results of an interaction between how one desires the world to be and how one currently believes the world to be. However, desire also sneaks in before belief forms.

To form beliefs, one must perceive something about the world. It is common to think that one's perception of the world is unmediated, giving one direct access to the world as it is. Even though one's eyes and ears may at times play tricks on them, most seem to take those occurrences as exceptions to the rule. It is easy to think this because perceptual illusions are often the result of an odd external force tricking someone. One does not stop to consider that one is being tricked by one's self.

This is a central insight of Iris Murdoch's philosophy: that when one looks at the world, one does not see everything as it really is. One is interrupted by a "continually active [mind], fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world" (1971, p. 82). The anxious, self-preoccupied mind can't help but construct a view of the world that reassures or protects one from perceived threats; distorting what stands before one's senses. Perceiving, therefore, involves, to some extent, imagining. One may worry that the constant presence of imagination necessarily falsifies one's view, but this worry ignores the benefits of imagination. Murdoch (1999) argues that direct access to the world would be a much darker circumstance than the fact that perception is often mediated by the imagination. Perceiving the world around us, especially people, Murdoch stresses, must involve imagination. She writes, "We have to *attend* to people, we may have to have *faith* in them, and here justice and realism may demand the inhibition of certain pictures, the promotion of others" (1999, p. 199). In fact, when I interrogate my own desires, I do not want someone to coldly and cleanly attend to me. Certainly, I want them to be just to me and attentive to what is real, but I also want them to attend with sympathy and care. Furthermore, I'd prefer someone to attend to me with anger and frustration than coldness and cleanliness. I fear that coldly and cleanly attending to me is akin to them taking Strawson's (2008) objective stance regarding me. Again, Murdoch (1999) writes, "to be a human being is to know more than one can prove, to conceive of a reality which goes 'beyond the facts' in these familiar and natural ways" (p. 199). The presence of imagination is not always a flight of fancy and delusion, imagination can be lovingly attentive and appreciative of reality beyond our physical senses.

Imagination is often fueled by desire. Desire not only moves one's actions, but one's imagination. One may desire to accomplish something, and in desiring, imagines how the world might change so that one can accomplish it. There is far too much to attend

to without letting desire shape that attention—one can easily get lost in a sea of details. As Murdoch (1999) puts it, “When moments of decision arrive we see and are attracted by the world we have already (partly) made” (p. 200). Desire not only gives shape to one’s decisions, but shapes what one takes the decisions to be in the first place, dictating what one’s options are (Murdoch 1999). This point is important for understanding trans desires, but before we can fully understand how it illuminates trans desire, we must understand how the social world similarly shapes our perception and desires.

Murdoch’s own focus was on the anxious psyche as a source of distortions, but as other commentators have noted, social systems also significantly impact our perception, often drawing our attention away from what matters (Blum 2012; Hernandez 2021).¹⁴ We are bombarded with stories, stereotypes, and scripts that shape how we view the world and others in it, building out ideologies that capture and direct our attention. Such ideologies serve, as Charles Mills (2017) argues, “to justify, rationalize, legitimize, and/or obfuscate wrongful social domination” (p. 104). This is true of the dominant gender system. The natural attitude about gender justifies, rationalizes, and legitimizes the creation of the dominant gender system, obfuscating wrongful social domination. It does this by shaping our perception of the world around us to take gender to be natural, rigid, and transcendently important.

Importantly, social ideologies, when engaged with by individual perceivers, are not simply another veil draped over one’s senses, but intermingled with one’s anxious, self-preoccupied mind. One’s own specific anxieties, due to their own specific biographical details, will alter how ideology manifests in one’s perception; they will affect what one will imagine and what one will attend to (Hernandez 2021). One can describe ideology in broad strokes, based on the stories, stereotypes, and scripts that pervade society, but each individual manifestation will surely be as unique as our differing biographies. Ideology can shape our perception by shaping our desires.

There are two ways ideology shapes desires. First, the social world may shape what options we think are available to us, altering the landscape in which our desire touches down. Second, the social world may shape our desires via the meaning it imbues into our view of the world, making certain options seem good.¹⁵ The social world presents us with

¹⁴ These insights build on and integrate what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls “controlling images” into a perceptual moral psychology.

¹⁵ Rowan Bell (2024) articulates this problem as how concepts with both evaluative and descriptive content can “masquerade” as purely descriptive. Often, the choices we are presented with similarly have this masquerading quality, while implicitly informing us of their value.

things to desire. It is with these details in mind that we can understand the barriers to recognizing a desire to transition. I will consider them both in turn.

Ideologies will make apparent certain options and hide or disguise other options. It is difficult to desire something if you do not realize it as an option. (Of course, some people clearly desire more options, or things that are not options, which is important for understanding trans desires but this is a point that must be tabled for now.) Society, in giving one a particular view of the world, gives one specific desires within it. One can resonate with the stories or scripts and want to live out that narrative for oneself. Someone who understands gender via the natural attitude will not perceive *changing* one's gender as an option, much less one to be desired. In this way, the social world inhibits our imagination, shaping our desire by limiting what options we believe to be available to us. If we attend to the world thinking there are only two immutable genders, then it will be difficult to recognize a desire for changing one's gender. Limiting one's options is one way to limit one's desires.

Just as ideology shapes what we take to be our options, it also shapes our desires by imbuing meaning into those options. One who is stuck in the natural attitude about gender may not only fail to recognize a desire to change one's gender, but they may also actively desire to neatly fit into assigned gender roles. Gender roles provide safety, comfort, and privilege when fulfilled well. Our gender system is not just a discrete ontology of genders, but imbues meaning into those genders, how they must relate to each other, determining what makes a good man or a good woman, propagating rules for how to express one's masculinity or femininity. That is, gender comes with norms. As Judith Butler (1988) has argued, gender norms are punitive. Not following them comes at a cost. Conforming to them well, similarly, can often come with advantages. The social world does not just give us our options but tells us which options are beneficial and which are dangerous. In effect, the costs and benefits of conforming to gender norms shape the desirability of the options. One may have conflicting desires due to the complexity of the world and what is allowed.

Against this backdrop, one may be surprised that anyone desires to transition. How can an individual, especially a child, break out of this view of the world enough to determine they want something else? Often one does not. Often the frustrated desire sits in the body, resulting in stress, anxiety, or depression. Sometimes the desire finds itself morphing into something else without the appropriate outlet. It may turn into a quiet yearning, a yearning unable to make contact with the real world of possibilities but

holding fast to the object of desire.¹⁶ Frustrated desires may lead to feeling frustration, frustration with the world as it is, frustration with the stifling conditions of one's gendered life under the dominant gender system.¹⁷ Frustration may turn to anger, an anger that screams at the barriers that one finds in the dominant world, leading one to search for some escape.

This anger, and potentially the frustration and yearning, may be "hard-to-handle." María Lugones discusses "hard-to-handle" anger as an overwhelming anger, an anger that leaves one out of control, an anger that distances oneself from others. Lugones remarks that her own experience of this anger leaves her isolated. She writes of this anger, "I am firmly marginal but I also manage to be threatening while most of the time I do not succeed in destabilizing the hold of the official" (2003, p. 106). This kind of anger, according to Lugones, is second-order, it's not anger at some event or infraction, but an anger that screams at the borders between worlds. The kind of anger that frustrated desire brings up recognizes the limits between indigenous or trans senses of gender and the dominant system of gender—the borders between worlds of gendered meaning. Specifically, this anger is non-communicative, a kind of anger that Lugones relates to Anzaldúa's (1987) "in-between self," the self who, when stuck between worlds, finds a rage that insulates oneself against that which blocks them. When desire turns to anger, it is an anger that recognizes a conflict between perspectives but is so affectively strong that one must first cocoon into their anger before recognizing what it may be trying to teach one. The desire to transition, when suffocated and choked down into one's body can result in myriad discomforts, including the expression of these other emotions. Relief from these hard-to-handle affect will likely require a realization of the desire. Anger itself may lead one to recognize this desire by revealing a tension in one's perspective.

Although there may be multiple ways one can "discover" the desire, too many to fully enumerate here, a common underlying factor is how the desire is revealed by a perceptual tension. A tension between the social world as it's currently constructed and how one perceives it could be constructed. This tension helps reveal how one's affect connects with some real possibility. For someone to feel the desire to transition, one must perceive transitioning as an option for them. To understand how one can perceive transition as an option, we must dig deeper into the perceptual tension between views of gender.

¹⁶ Thanks to Talia Bettcher for this suggestion.

¹⁷ Thanks to Stephanie Kapusta for building on Talia's suggestion.

Perceptual tension arises when two or more views of gender are perceived simultaneously. After all, the natural attitude of gender is not the only way one may perceive gender. Maracle's indigenous sense of gender provides an alternative perception, and there are countless others. Many different communities, queer and indigenous alike, have constructed entirely different systems of gender and therefore, ways of perceiving gender (Maracle 2000; Bettcher 2013; Hernandez forthcoming). Trans people often have a double perception, perceiving the gender world both through the natural attitude and through indigenous, trans, or other resistant images of gender.¹⁸ We not only perceive how the social world is dominantly constructed but also other possible gender constructions. It is when one not only perceives gender with the natural attitude, but simultaneously perceives it as socially plastic that transition becomes an option. One views the world, simultaneously, as organized around a stifling dominant gender system and gender as something fluid, freer, and full of possibilities. Overlapping images reveal a practical contradiction, a felt tension as both images take hold of one's perception. Importantly, this perceptual experience is emotional, and not theoretical. One need not be conscious of all these elements, conscious of the double-perception, conscious of the tension, and conscious of the opening of possibilities. The theory is a way of putting into words what is ultimately an emotional journey. One can experience these elements without necessarily articulating them as such, as the articulation involves distance from the immediate experience.¹⁹ Although affective more than cognitive, the perceptual

¹⁸ This follows the same logic as W.E.B. DuBois' (2015) "double-consciousness." Du Bois recounts how, as a young boy, he recognizes that he lives in a different world from his white classmates, that they are the same in terms of their emotionality, personhood, and desire, but unlike by the opportunities, expectations, and duties in the world. He argues that in recognizing this personal similarity with social differences creates a "second-sight," the position of perceiving not only the world that whites inhabit, but the separate world that him and other Blacks inhabit. Importantly, this "second-sight," this altered perception fundamentally informs the Black experience in the U.S. It is a "twoness" that pervades how they experience and inhabit the world; it is a double-consciousness. Notably, this double-consciousness is considered an accomplishment. It is all too common for people of color to get trapped in the wrong perception, the one that devalues and marginalizes them, without recognizing the injustice of this situation. The accomplishment of double-consciousness is in recognizing the tension between the two worlds, the two ways of perceiving. It is the perceptual tension that lets one know that the white world limits their life and that these circumstances are unjust.

¹⁹ This echoes a claim made by John McDowell (1979) that the virtuous person need not articulate themselves as such or be able to clearly delineate the various virtues that they regularly engage on, but that such descriptions can be made "by a possibly more articulate, and more theoretically oriented, observer" (p. 332).

tension allows one to ask the question, “Do I really want to be a man?” It allows one to wonder if there are other options to explore.

The way this tension arises will be different for different people or may not appear at all for others. It is often remarked that the value of trans visibility is specifically in showing people that being trans is an option. Someone caught up in the natural attitude about gender might find their worldview shaken when seeing, meeting, or knowing a trans person.²⁰ The immutability of gender will now appear as a lie or misunderstanding. One can then ask themselves, “Do I too want to change my gender?” For some this might be just what they need to uncover their desire, but for others it may not be enough. The immutability of gender, as a universal rule, may be called into doubt, but this realization may not bring about the requisite tension for one to question their gender. Visibility may help someone perceive changing gender as an option *for some people*, but not for *them*. I say this as someone who had trans friends for years before realizing that transition was an option for *me*.

As one’s life circumstances change, including one’s access to material goods, the possibility of transitioning may become a live option for oneself.²¹ Maybe one needs to gain financial independence from a partner or family member, escape a toxic relationship, or live in an area where it is safe to be visibly trans. The conditions of one’s life can make transitioning unsafe for that individual if it could lead to losing one’s home, partner, or family. Sometimes, it is not enough for the option to be there, the option must also be safe for us. If one does not feel safe to transition, then the desire is frustrated, or cannot fully reveal itself.²²

²⁰ It is this fact that often makes representation and visibility important for trans people, however this alone can also be dangerous. See, Erique Zhang (2022) and Zhang, Glover, Kim, Kimoto, Moore, et al (2023).

²¹ There is an analogy between the way material conditions shape our perception of the possibility of transitioning and Sanda Bartky’s (2015) claim that the material conditions are relevant for feminist consciousness. Bartky argues that feminist consciousness is rooted in a “contradiction” in one’s present material conditions. She specifically looks at how easy access to contraception, increase in service jobs, and new technologies that made housework easier all contributed to a growing feminist consciousness in the U.S. For Bartky, feminist consciousness involves perceiving the same things differently. It is against the backdrop of new technologies and material conditions that women can recognize that their social role as housewives and mothers was not necessary but an unjust set of circumstances.

²² Full safety is of course impossible. There is a robust feminist literature on the role and illusions of safety. I take that as true here, but think there is an additional felt sense of safety that is relevant. Writing as someone with cPTSD, there seems to be a clear sense of felt safety that is important for expressing oneself. Since trans people often have cPTSD, this seems an important element to many of our experiences (see, Sullivan 2023).

Finally, there are some cases where the tension may not be necessary for the option to be perceived or the desire to be recognized. Some people are gifted with imaginations that care not for the borders and barriers the social world puts in our paths and some people will find such borders and barriers entirely nonsensical. Without the tension, such people recognize the option to transition formed purely from the desire to live in their own way. I can't help but think this is the case with many trans people who recognize this desire in childhood. It could be that the desire is recognized prior to taking up the natural attitude. Perhaps the natural attitude about gender simply has no purchase in some people's perception.

Just as one can find the desire without the tension, the tension does not necessitate the desire. While the tension reveals the option to transition, that does not mean that every person will desire it. Sometimes one may immediately recognize that they do not have any desire to transition, or perhaps the tension reveals a different desire to not conform to gender norms but does not change how one perceives their own gender. There is no necessary connection between the tension and desire such that the tension will always reveal the desire. Instead, the revelation of the desire sometimes requires a tension that creates space for the desire to emerge.²³

Once that desire emerges, once transition becomes an option for oneself, one feels pulled to it with such a force that transitioning becomes necessary. Not biologically necessary, revealing some hidden essential trait of a person, but a practical necessity. Deep desires, as Audre Lorde argues, reveal a "deep and irreplaceable knowledge of [our] capacity for joy" that calls us (insistently) to action. All other options for dealing with the desire become impossible. Bernard Williams (1981) argues that any notion of necessity comes along with a notion of impossibility (p. 127). For Williams, this reveals an incapacity in the agent, an inability to consider alternatives a serious option or an inability to will such options into ends (p. 128). Such an inability comes from an irreplaceable knowledge of our capacity for joy. It is in perceiving an option that would deeply fulfill one that makes one unable to act otherwise. Remember, deep desire, the erotic, Lorde argues, is a source of power. It is a way of recognizing our strength and allowing us to achieve personal excellence—it constitutes, in part, who we are—it constitutes our ethical identity.

²³ For a good discussion of how similar outlooks and experiences can lead to different ways of living gender, see Miquel Missé's (2022) discussion of himself and his sister, Blanca, who both grew up as "very masculine girls" with Miquel pursuing transition and his sister remaining satisfied with being a "very masculine adult woman" despite both believing that their genders exist in an "intermediate space, a grey area" (p. 36-42).

At this point one may find themselves skeptical. Could such a desire really make all other options impossible? Is it not the case that trans people regularly stay closeted? Acting on their desires in limited and private ways? Do people not *detransition*? Leaving their former trans lives behind for a safer, yet stifled, life? It is entirely possible that the closeted trans person has yet to perceive transition as an option for oneself, being aware of a desire that is continually choked down by shame and the natural attitude about gender. However, one may recognize transition as an option for oneself, and yet still live without acting on it. Such a case does not show that other options are possible, but that people can live with the impossible—that people can live with shame. When one acts against oneself, one cannot help but feel shame. We all have a particular conception of ourselves, and when we fail to act in accordance with the reasons inherent in that conception, we feel shame for failing those standards. Shame is what is left over when one does the impossible.

Shame is usually experienced as being perceived, being caught in one's own nakedness or foibles by another's gaze. The nature of this gaze, whose "eyes" are gazing, is a debated topic in moral philosophy. Is one caught in their own gaze? An idealized self who measures one's own shortcomings? Or, perhaps, it is the gaze of society at large?—the gaze of everyday people as they pass you on the street. I do not think there is a single answer—different perspectives may give rise to shame in different circumstances. But I think the shame that makes action necessary is rooted in an idealized perspective. Following Williams (2008), one can feel shame in the gaze of an imagined, idealized other, there need not be a specific individual, group, or community that represents this perspective. But for the shame to be motivating, it must be a perspective one can identify with, one where the reactive attitudes of the imagined other are reciprocated by the agent. Williams (2008) writes that the imagined other is, "conceived as one whose reactions I would respect, equally, [they are] conceived as someone who would respect those same reactions if they were appropriately directed at [them]" (p. 84). This point leads Williams to conclude that the imagined other can be identified in ethical terms. It can represent an idealized perspective, encoding norms and rules by which one should live. Although this perspective is idealized, abstracted in some ways, it must represent a real world, "in which [one] would have to live if [they] went on living" (2008, p. 85). Furthermore, shame is not about specific actions we may have taken but from who we are as a person. Shame, Williams (2008) says, "looks to who I am" (p. 93). The impossibility of other options, then,

consists of shame for failing to act on one's deepest desires, for failing to be who they take themselves to be. Let us consider a different example of this.

In the CBC Sitcom *Sort Of*, the protagonist Sabi finds themselves at a crossroads where they must make a difficult decision. Their friend 7ven has been offered an internship in Berlin and faced with this big move asks Sabi to come along. Simultaneously, Sabi's dear friend (and employer) Bessy is in a bicycle accident, resulting in a coma. Bessy and her husband Paul hired Sabi to be a nanny for their two kids. Nannying is certainly not Sabi's vocation, but they are deeply connected to Bessy, as she was integral to Sabi realizing they are non-binary. Here Sabi finds their difficult decision: to go to Berlin with 7ven, opening new possibilities for their life beyond the mundane, or stay and support Bessy's family as they enter this period without her. Finding the decision difficult, Sabi goes to their sister Aqsa for advice. It is Aqsa who tells Sabi that they are looking at the problem wrong, "going or not going, as if it's a choice: some things are just too big to be choices" (Baig, Filippo, and Engels 2021).

For Sabi, staying and supporting Bessy and her family is central to who Sabi takes themselves to be. While Berlin is tempting, seeming like an opportunity too good to pass up, it is 7ven's path, not theirs. Sabi has yet to fully unravel who they are, but central to them is this relationship with Bessy. The loving relationship with her is part of what grounds Sabi motivationally to the world, constituting part of their ethical identity.²⁴ Importantly for the show, Bessy's family has just fired Sabi as their nanny, but with Bessy left in the hospital indefinitely, they now require extra help. Having been fired, Sabi does not owe anything to this family and yet Sabi still believes staying and supporting them is necessary. The shame that Sabi would experience is not about abandoning the family but abandoning Bessy. Sabi might not owe anything to the family, and recognize that, but by not supporting the family, they would be failing to support Bessy. This reveals something deeper about Sabi's ethical identity, the need for them to engage in care work. If Sabi were to turn their back on Bessy, and by extension their role as a caregiver, they'd be overcome with shame. The shame reveals that while Sabi recognizes they ought to do more for themselves, they still must engage in care work or else the shame would be too much to live with. Their identity is wrapped up in that work. This circumstance is too big to be a choice.

²⁴ For more on loving relationships being categorical desires, see Wolf 2014.

Transitioning, for those who desire it, is too big to be a choice. There is a shame that undergirds our ethical identity that makes transition practically necessary. Faced with the option to transition, trans people are caught in the gaze of an idealized perspective, a perspective rooted in resistance to the natural attitude of gender. There is a real world of possibility outside of the dominant gender system, and by recognizing the possibility for oneself to transition, one conjures and identifies with that resistant perspective, making shame possible.²⁵ If upon recognizing the option one does not pursue transition, does not act on this desire, then one will be filled with shame. One realizes that the choice is not between transitioning and not transitioning, it is between transitioning and shame.²⁶

But this is not the only shame trans people experience. Remember, that trans people are caught in a double perception, not only of gender possibility, but also the natural attitude about gender. This double perception is as much a perception about oneself as it is about the world. One does not singularly identify with one perspective. Just as one is caught in the gaze of the resistant perspective, one is also caught in the gaze of the dominant perspective. The dominant perspective is also rooted in a real world, in many ways the most socially real world. One not only feels the need to transition, but the need for safety, conformity, and integration. The way one transitions, how one constructs, expresses, engages, and fucks with one's gender away from the dominant gender system is shaped by both needs.

The trans experience of shame is often a complex of shame.²⁷ A shame found in the tension between two contrary perspectives, oscillating between both as one tries to make oneself intelligible to the worlds one simultaneously inhabits.²⁸ One may simultaneously feel a pull toward gender fuckery and gender conformity. This complex of shame, the tension in dominant and resistant perspectives, creates the desire in some of us to *pass* as gender we may not fully identify with or want to project. Recognizing how passing can be motivated by more than conformity, but through a complex relationship

²⁵ This perspective is rooted in real worlds of trans people. For more, see Bettcher 2009 & 2013 and Hernandez 2024.

²⁶ Eli Clare (2009) discusses how shame is the "chasm of loathing lodged in our bodies," that discussions of dysphoria are often a way of talking around shame. Instead, we should grapple with our shame and determine the specifics of our shame so that we may resist it. Part of my engagement with shame here is to show the complexity of it, that the specifics of our shame is tied to transitioning, and therefore tied to multiple worlds of meaning.

²⁷ Jules Gill-Peterson's (2019) "Feeling Like a Bad Trans Object" is arguably a representation of the complex of shame, but with the additional factor of how race plays into our conception of gender.

²⁸ For more on simultaneously inhabiting different worlds see DuBois 2015 and Hernandez 2024.

between competing pressures, one's attempt at passing may aim to both fuck with and conform to the dominant gender system.²⁹

Due to this complex experience of shame, one may wonder if acting on the desire to transition gets one out of shame. Will they not just experience shame from the other side? From where does the knowledge for the capacity of joy come from if one will be caught between differing perspectives of shame? Although transitioning may not bring an end to shame, it also brings with it the fulfillment of desire. Desire is incredibly fulfilling, not because it satiates the hunger it puts us in, but because it does not satiate. Obtaining the object of a desire can fan the affective flame instead of putting it out (Brewer 2006). Fulfilling our deepest desires can motivate us, providing fuel to our fire. Fulfilling our deepest desires can give our lives meaning.

The desires that give our lives meaning are what Bernard Williams (1981) called "categorical desires." According to Williams, many of our desires are conditional on our being alive. We are alive and thus have many desires that shape our perception and motivate our actions. Categorical desires, on the other hand, give one reason to live. If the question, "Should I go on living?" ever arises, our categorical desires answer that question affirmatively, and often prevent that question from arising in the first place. For Williams, to have an identity at all involves having categorical desires, or "ground projects" that one identifies with.³⁰ Such desires lead us to the activities that bring us fulfillment and meaning. Among those things that are often considered categorical desires are the desires to make art, to have a family, to build a community, and to organize for social change. Such desires need not be moral, in the strict altruistic sense; they are instead ethical, they settle the question, "How should I live?"

Transitioning is a categorical desire, specifically because it can serve as a ground project. Rarely is transitioning an individual event with a clear start and stop, brand new

²⁹ There is a potential misreading of my point that I want to address. The relationship between shame and passing is not simple and universal, I am not trying to explain why some people are non-binary or gender queer, and some people are trans men and trans women. I take it that this matter is far more complex. What I am trying to explain is how some of us, who do not identify as a particular "binary" gender can still feel the pull of passing, can get caught up in the act of conformity despite desiring non-conformity. I think most trans people struggle with this in one way or another.

³⁰ My exposition of Williams here of categorical desires constituting one's *identity* is slightly different than how he put this point. Williams writes of categorical desires constituting one's *character*. The point of his discussion is contrast a view of a changing identity (one's "character") that does not require metaphysically splitting the self as argued by etc. I use *identity* because it more directly captures what is going on in Williams, both in terms of categorical desire and in terms of ethical necessity.

gender polished and ready for the world. Transition is often experienced as a continual process as each individual step taken minutely alters one's relationship to the world. A series of alterations and modifications that never quite stop. Transitioning often involves embracing a fluidity of gender and comfort with one's positionality being context sensitive. Living with such changes, while not always being easy or safe, makes transitioning a continual project. Not only does one grapple with changing relationships, names, or bodily features, but with changing terminology and concepts as we continue to construct and reconstruct gender together.

The meaning that ground projects give us goes beyond the fulfilment of a desire. The desire, the knowledge for the capacity of joy, is but one part of granting meaning. Meaning, it is important to remember, is not happiness, or continual joy, but a kind of flourishing. A flourishing that goes beyond mere happiness and may at times even bring us discomfort or frustration. Meaning connects us to the project, but it also connects us to the world. Susan Wolf (2010) argues that for a project to give one meaning, it must not only be subjectively loved, i.e. desired, but objectively valuable. Objective value should not be understood as altruistic, moral value, but are worth pursuing despite subjective desire. The project must have value beyond our interest or enjoyment in it, contributing to something larger than oneself. The project must lift or inspire others, build deep relationships, improve the world around us, or resist structures that harm us.

Transitioning has such value. The dominant gender system is not only stifling, but harmful, it gives form and meaning to multiple axes of oppression. It limits all human life and suffocates our desires. It also requires cooperation and organization. Deciding that one will act on their desires, instead of cooperating, can lift or inspire others, building deeper relationships, constructing the resistant "worlds" we live in, and resisting the structures that harm us.³¹ Transitioning is a project that is simultaneously subjectively desired, and objectively desirable. Far from perverted, immoral, or subhuman, the desire to transition is immensely valuable. The way transitioning can function as a ground project makes it centrally human, playing an all too human, all too necessary role in our lives.

My goal in this essay was to provide an alternative way of understanding why people transition. That transitioning need not require a ghost in the machine, with differing genitalia, neither is transitioning a mere desire, one that is immoral or perverted and

³¹ Tamara Fakhoury (2021) argues how forms of "quiet" resistance, resistance not rooted in considerations of justice but out of personal attachment, fulfills Wolf's account of meaning.

therefore to be resisted. Instead, I sought to take trans desire seriously, recognizing the legitimate reasons why one would want to transition, the barriers to recognizing that desire, the necessity of fulfilling that desire, the shame that arises when one doesn't, and the value of following through on that desire.

My initial framing of this essay was that trans people often experience explanatory pressure, a pressure that creates an explanatory false dichotomy leading to a political double-bind. We feel a pressure to either represent ourselves as being “born this way,” as if the entire rearrangement of our social lives is due to some unknown neurological “diversity” or to represent ourselves as acting on a mere whim, a silly desire to gender bend, i.e., not *real*. By breaking down the explanatory false dichotomy, recognizing how acting on desires can be practically necessary, I believe trans people can find a way out of the political double-bind. We can reject the false dichotomy, presenting an answer with more nuance and reality than is often expected of us. This path out of the double-bind is not without risk. Unfortunately, there is always risk in telling the truth, in being oneself. By embracing our desire, we risk feeding into the second horn of the double-bind. We must trust that non-trans people will accept our desires. That they can handle an answer that doesn't aim to give them simple understanding, but concepts to grapple with. One may be rightfully skeptical of non-trans people being able to do that—the risk may be too high.

The risk in this path is undeniable, but I am not sure it is completely without hope. There is something disarming about an earnest response. Too often, trans people are questioned, not to be understood but to be tested. Tested for authenticity. Tested for realness. Tested to determine whether we deserve respect. Tested to determine whether we deserve to transition. We know this; it shows in our answers, with how quick we reach for a familiar narrative to pass the test and move on with our day. The earnest response may serve as a way out of this script, a way to tear up the test in favor of giving a real answer. This hope may be nonexistent with the anti-trans political activist, but with others in our lives there is real value in giving an honest answer.

The answer I have sketched here is, of course, not the only honest answer. There is no single answer for why someone transitions. My goal has been to present one possible answer, an answer with explanatory power, taking into consideration social systems and psychological habits. An answer that presents an attractive possibility. Iris Murdoch (1971) remarks that it's not enough to just provide a conception of psychology, that if it is to be in any sense ethical, our conception must be attractive, creating an ideal for which we

strive. The job of the moral philosopher is not to just describe how things are, but to provide a vision for a better way of life. When reflecting on the stifling nature of the dominant gender system, I cannot think of a more appealing vision than one where gender is determined by desire, not biology. A vision of gender that does not divide and subordinate but presents an opportunity for people to live autonomously and authentically, embracing the beauty of change and difference, and the power of our desire.³²

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