Thinking with trans-masculinities in times of crises

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Thinking with trans- masculinities in times of crises.

When I received the invite to engage with colleagues about the development of alternative masculinities over the next 25 years, my immediate reaction was one of concern. The current socio-political climate is chilling. While many masculinity studies scholars speak of the “crisis of masculinity”, I am positioned with critical scholars who think with masculinity amidst crisis. I don’t know what performance of masculinity will be dominant in the future. However, we live in a violent present grounded in hetero-patriarchy and misogyny, whiteness as property which gives privilege to masculine identified persons recognizable as white, and neoliberalism which informs hegemonic masculinity through discourses espousing hyper-individualism and economic self-sufficiency – which is becoming an increasingly unattainable ideal during times of economic crises and in the awake of strengthening austerity measures.

Trans – masculinities offer us a glimpse of the ways that normative masculinity is constructed, the demands on those recognized as real men and the dire consequences for those cannot or are not “doing” masculinity correctly in the age of what Michael Kimmel terms “aggrieved entitlement”. Anxiety and rage are palpable as white middle class men often feeling vulnerable of losing socio-economic security for the first time fight for the “good life” that they have been promised and take for granted as theirs to possess.

My presentation this morning is based on my current qualitative research project on unemployment and underemployment among trans* identified people in Ontario and British Columbia. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 trans* identified individuals who offered personal narratives of their labor histories pre-, during and post transition. Today I want to focus on what the particular experiences of two trans* masculine identified subjects reveal about the interconnectedness of masculinity and contemporary political economic relations.
structuring Canadian society – primarily post-Fordism, neoliberal austerity, socio-economic crises. Urging other critical masculinity scholars to “think with” trans* masculinities, I pose two questions: (1) How do the job-related experiences of trans* men reflect the co-constitutive relationship between hegemonic masculinity and employability? And (2) How do the experiences of gendered labor relations as a site of violence gesture towards the necessity of incorporating emotional justice into labor politics?

*Theoretical Frameworks*

My analysis of the relationship between trans- masculinities and the politics of employability is informed by three theoretical frameworks: trans- theory, affect theory, and feminist political economy. Trans- theory comes out of Transgender Studies, an interdisciplinary field of scholastic inquiry and praxis. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore, in their article “Trans, trans- or transgender”, argue for a trans – (hyphen method) theory that cannot be contained to horizontal movement across sex and/or gender categories (i.e. transitioning from female to male). Rather, trans- theory creates space to further analyze the ways that gendered subjectivities are constructed relationally with other systems of power. The production of recognizable and valued masculine embodiment is contingent upon hetero-patriarchy, neoliberal capitalism and the politics of economic crises.

Drawing from Susan Stryker’s arguments in her seminal essay “My Words to Victor Frankstein…” (1991), the fraught workplace experiences that trans* men detail throughout the interviews reveal the ways that their embodied trans- masculinity is monstrous. Stryker reminds us that the monster literally means story teller. Like Frankenstein’s monster – the artificial nature of masculinity that seeps through the bodies of trans* men particularly those undergoing the early stages of medical transition forces non-trans men to confront the performative nature of
their own masculinity. I believe that the fact that trans* masculine job seekers and employees reveal the constructed nature of hegemonic masculinity is even more destabilizing amongst non-trans managers and co-workers in times of economic crises where precarity is on the rise.

Affect theory also informs my analysis. Borrowing from Ben Anderson, the experiences of trans men at work demonstrate the ways that masculinity, labor relations within post-Fordism and the workplace function as an “affective atmosphere”. I pare affect theory with the work of feminist political economists such as Lisa Adkins, Angela McRobbie and Beverley Skeggs who focus on gendered labor relations within post-industrial society. Post-Fordism is defined in significant part as a regime of capital accumulation based on a service-relations. Post-Fordism is based significantly on “immaterial” or “affective labor” where workers are required to produce positive feeling states among clientele, customers and I would add co-workers.

Worker’s employability rests on their ability to be recognized as able to perform the affective labor necessary to incite feelings of excitement, satisfaction, security. Employability is a key term to consider when analyzing the narratives provided by female-to-male (FTM) trans men concerning their experiences trying to obtain or maintain a job. Employability reflects neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurship and personal responsibility. The proper man is the one who invests in himself as human capital to hone the skills necessary to obtain work. Employability stresses the onus placed on individuals to ensure their physical, mental and spiritual fitness as a crucial component of rendering themselves job-ready. Employability shifts attention towards individual men rather than towards more structural questions concerning the decline of ‘good jobs” and the high rates of under and unemployment. Within this economy, one must hone their employability while accepting that there is no guarantee of obtaining employment or achieving job security.
Trans* Men’s Embodied Experiences

I want to focus on two trans men to demonstrate the connections between hegemonic masculinity—employability—and affective labor. The first narrative is provided from a trans man working within a large urban center in Ontario. He speaks of approaching his employer for time off to undergo top surgery: “so I had to go up to my manager and say: “I have to take time off”, “Why?” “Well it’s pretty personal. Medical related”. And she said: “Here’s the deal. You’re still a temp. If you take too much time off, we are going to get rid of you”. I was like “But you liked me, you kept me on. I would like to think that I could take some time off and that would be less of a hassle than you getting a new person. I have now got all of this experience behind me”. And we were down to four people from the original thirty because they got rid of people as some of us became better and could do the job... But I was very much pressured into taking as little time as possible off. And you are completely disposable... She didn’t say anything horrible but she [saw], as all of my employers tend to want to see, transition as this completely elective cosmetic thing... So at the end I was given three days off total including the day of surgery and I went back into work with drains in my chest... I was sort of healing while at work, going into the washroom to empty my drain and passing that off as standing to pee in the stall”.

A few years later, he tells of experiencing the same reluctance on the part of his employer to enable him to have the adequate time off necessary to recover from bottom surgery. Gender is not absent from employment relations and one cannot help but read into this text discourses of normative masculinity - this guy certainly ‘manned up’ – he returned to work and made efforts to hide his compromised body while on the job. He speaks of this return to work: And – fitting in my wound dressing changes – that was heaps of fun... Like excusing myself and going back to the washroom – eight wound dressing changes a day...You’re bleeding and bleeding and bleeding. I
hope nobody will freak out if they look at the garbage... The system will not let me have time off with pay so I arrive at work bleeding. There it is. I know one guy who has managed to do it without disclosing [at all to his employer] and it blows my mind. And he has had a major complication. I have no understanding of how the hell he’s pulled it off.

This participant is not alone. A similar narrative focusing on the necessity of trans men hiding their surgeries was provided to me by a participant who like the guy above also identifies as a man. “when I was... working for this restaurant...that really was my first job passing as male... when I went to have my hysterectomy, I wanted to give them some notice just to be courteous so “Oh I’m going to need six weeks off” and I thought, how the fuck do I do this without, you know, faking a last minute crisis...So I researched carefully surgeries that were similar to hysterectomy that would prevent me from lifting and also have injury and trauma in the same body area and came up with an Inguinal hernia. So like intestine perforating my abdomen and those aren’t acute enough that you need surgery like now, now, now so I was able to give them a couple week’s notice like: “Hey, I went to the doctor and guess what they discovered, this thing and, oh my god, like it is pretty serious and I am going to go have surgery in two weeks and need like six weeks off” and I came back to my job...I had it all worked out. I wanted to make my story hole proof.

Given the expanding pools of workers growing increasingly desperate for employment in these austere times, this particular trans man’s experience illuminates the ways that time off work is a contentious issue. However, it is removed from the public arena of labor politics and becomes the responsibility of the working man. Not only must he show up for work despite his body being compromised from major surgery, he is also attentive to the fact that he must hide his suffering and compromised physical state as work. Or in the case of the second trans* man
interviewed, he has to put in immense effort to conjure up a lie to protect his image as a responsible employee to keep his job. Furthermore, these FTMs recollections of undergoing surgery while working for two separate employers demonstrates the ways that the failed performance of masculinity increasing risk disposability.

Such working conditions function as an affective atmosphere not only concerning the ways that these employees must hide their compromised physical states - and risk injury – to reassure management that they can and will remain productive. Additionally, such refusal to grant time off, or medical leave weighs heavily on trans men. In the case of the first FTM quoted, he came out to his employer as trans while requesting time off work while the other trans man chose to remain stealth. Both cases point to the exhaustion, frustration and resentment that festers within masculine-identified workers as they are called upon to give an embodied performance of rationality, strength, dedicated work ethic and independence on the job.

The experiences offered by a third participant demonstrates that trans- men are required to perform affective labor to ease the anxieties, fears and rage of other male-identified co-workers. Their job, in part, is to contribute to a team atmosphere and ensure a peaceful environment conducive to worker productivity. The visibility of unruly bodies during transition can trigger “ugly feelings” among co-workers and attention is directed towards this individual’s transitioning in the work place rather than concentrating on the work itself. One trans man told of his horrific experience on the job: “I had been there about a year and a half at this point. I had just started T... So suddenly my voice is starting to crack and, you know, [I am] starting to get the blemishes and little in-grown hairs here and there and whatever. So it started becoming more in their face. And I was at lunch break ... and, ah, I was sitting on a bench and a guy walked up and said “Can I talk to you for a minute?” And I knew he belonged to a group of guys
that had an issue with me. And they used to call themselves the SS group, the Secret Society...

Where he waved me to go is called the Bonds room and that is where computer guys were above the warehouse that analyze things. So I thought...well it is quieter maybe he wants to talk to me but it is safe because there are computer guys there... I was wrong. They had cleared the room out. And there were eight guys and they locked me in the room. One guy stood and guarded the door while they proceeded to tell me... I had no business lying to them. I tricked them, what kind of fucking human being am I? They were going to...show me that I wasn’t a man. They were going to teach me what it was like to be a woman because I should be a woman. And they started getting physically aggressive and I started being very agile and I am...going under desks as they are pinning desks up against me against the wall. And I had a guy grab me and... I really thought that was it. And as the sparks start to unfold a guy broke the goddamn door open because he couldn’t figure out why the door had been locked... And the door busts open and I didn’t even look, I just fuckin’ ran. And I bolted out of the room. I went downstairs to the supervisor’s office of all places...I go... “this has just happened. You know, I can’t stay”. Panic started happening...?

This personal narrative of sexual violence must not be reduced to a matter of interpersonal relationships. Instead, we must think through the way that visible gender difference is mapped onto this masculine body within the broader context of white masculinity in times of socio-economic crises. Post-industrialism with its focus on affective labor, as well as the increasing vulnerability workers face in the midst of economic insecurity plays a role in the targeting of this transsexual man for sexual violence. His monstrous body reveals the undoing of gender and threatens his non-trans co-worker’s exclusive claim on masculinity. These men
sought to obliterate their trans male co-worker through attempted rape, physical and emotional violence.

*Doing Emotional Justice as Labor Advocacy*

[discussion]