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Transnational Reflections on Embodying Non-binary Pronouns

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The recent aspirations to move beyond the generic “masculine neutral” in French, known as *l’écriture inclusive*, have not been without controversy. According to an article in *Libération*, some teachers have described the proposed writing system as “ridicule” and stated that it “rend la langue incompréhensible” (in Lacroux 2017). French philosophy teacher and television host Raphaël Enthoven went further by calling the writing system an affront in an interview on the radio station *Europe 1*. If language is a record of history, as he says, language is “une mémoire dont les mots sont les cicatrices” (2017). Therefore, changing the French language is “Orwellien” because it is “un lifting du langage qui croit abolir les injustices du passé en supprimant leur trace” (Europe 1, 2017).

Enthoven’s claim that inclusive language is analogous to the word police in George Orwell’s dystopian novel, *1984*, is certainly provocative. The official language of the fascist state of *1984*, Newspeak, is one that has removed any and all unnecessary language from public vocabulary to limit freedom of political thought. In contrast, *l’écriture inclusive* is not an erasure of language but a proliferation of it; it adds e’s and dashes or interpoints to existing words to recognize that the generic category of masculine excludes others, as well as adding new pronouns to honor the existence of a multiplicity of genders (Alpheratz 2018; Ashley 2017). *L’écriture inclusive* emerges from the activism of feminists and queer and trans people, and the willing participation of those in greater positions of power, including government officials, teachers, and politicians.¹ Rather than further analyze Enthoven’s Orwellian fears, this essay begins with his description of language as containing both traces and scars as a springboard: I consider how language has important bodily effects. Attending to the entanglement of words and bodies grounds the ongoing debates for more gender-inclusive languages and highlights the material stakes at hand.

In so doing, this essay builds upon decades of transnational feminist theorizing on the body. Feminist scholarship has articulated the body as embedded and co-created in discourse, and, consequently, the body is both a site of oppression and a unique source of resistance. Some have

¹ I use the word “people” here as other trans and queer individuals customarily do in the US. It is worth noting that “people” has a unique valence in the francophone context in its invocation of the nation-state. Unlike the multiplicity of words used in French, such as *gens*, *personnes*, and *peuple*, English speakers often use the word “people” in both casual and formal conversation. By employing the noun “people” with the adjective “trans,” I am not arguing for a state-based validation of transness. For a rich exploration of the tension between nation-state and individual personhood with respect to trans experiences, see the special issue of *Esprit Créateur*, “Transgender France,” edited by Todd Reeser (2013).

highlighted how Western discourses about women in the Global South often enact discursive violence by framing them as passive victims in need of saving (Abu-Lughod 2013; Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Mohanty 1991). Tracing their embodied, lived experiences has become an important method of countering these discourses and enacting transnational feminist justice. Women of Color feminists in North America have strategically retooled objectifying discourses by reflecting upon and sharing their experiential knowledges. For instance, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa put forward a “theory in the flesh” in their edited collection of poems, stories, and theoretical essays in *This Bridge Called My Back* where “the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (1983, p. 23).²

Transnational feminism has highlighted how these embodied knowledges often straddle space and time as well as national and language borders. This paper is thus inspired in part by Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing on the *Borderlands / La Frontera* of the US-Mexico border, where the “First and Third World hemorrhage and bleeds [...] staking fence rods in [her] flesh” (1987, p. 2). Language is the means of resistance as she honors her experiences as a liminal subject through writing in a hybrid language including English, Spanish, Nahuatl, among others, and inviting her readers to “meet us halfway” (Preface, 1987).

This essay builds upon these feminist onto-epistemologies of discursive embodied knowledges to explore the significance of language to transgender people’s embodied knowledges. I explore how trans people’s embodied experiences with language are a crucial and often missing piece in transnational debates about gender-inclusive language. In feminist auto-ethnographic fashion, I begin from my own experience. I will focus on binary gendered language, my own my embodied reflections on gender pronouns in English, French, and German, and thus the stakes of pronouns.

Although this paper cannot address many aspects of gender-inclusive language, it is worth noting that current inclusive strategies include using dots and e’s (les écrivain•e•s) instead of a masculine default plural noun (les écrivains) as well as referring to others with the pronouns and names they request, including ones such as *iel* or *yel* in French or *they* or *ze* in English. Given how gender-inclusive language is continually being produced and expanded outside of spheres of linguistic authority, it is impossible to address the full array of its terms and strategies. I hope that this paper will further discussions about ethical means of engagement, including those interrogate the colonialism in shaping binary gender norms.³

I. (Re)Framing Dysphoria

I completed an undergraduate degree in French and Francophone Studies, studied in France for a semester, lived in Paris for a year and a half, and worked as a translation consultant and French instructor. I nonetheless feel like an outsider in the context of *H-France*, since I now rarely speak

² It is worth noting that Moraga has made publicly transphobic statements, most clearly in “Still Loving in the (Still) War Years: On Keeping Queer Queer” (2009). My reading of her work in *Bridge* is thus reparative.

³ See Driskill et al. 2011 and Boellstorff et al. 2014.

French and have left the field of French and Francophone Studies. This is akin to the uneasiness I felt in preparing for the Vassar College Symposium in April of 2018, “Legitimizing Iel?” which was the seed out of which this special issue grew. My peripheral status posed--and poses--important questions: Who should have a say in the growing debates on whether to formalize gender-inclusive language? Should language learners be legitimized for using neo-pronouns rather than those sanctioned by the *Académie Française*? I use my seeming outsider status to invite us to rethink what it means to accommodate people linguistically.

When I mention feeling discomfort in the same breath that I disclose my non-binary gender, some people presume I am referring to *dysphoria*: the dissonance between one's gender identity and one's physical body which causes pronounced anxiety, agitation, and/or depression. While the word *dysphoria* is in and of itself not limited to gender dissonance, the word has become a hallmark symptom that trans people experience. This makes sense, as many cisgender people first learn the word “transgender” as a descriptor for a person experiencing a mind-body gender dissonance. But language, such as the word “dysphoria,” is not just a detached clinical descriptor but a material actant on the bodies it describes.

When people assume my dysphoria, they silently animate the cultural associations with *dys-* as a prefix. The Latin etymology of the prefix, *dys-* shows that it signifies “bad” or “difficult” or “diseased” which offers insight as to why it is often used as a prefix in the names of pathologies such as *dyspepsia*, *dysplasia*, or *dysentery* (Collins English Dictionary 2012). Similarly, these associations are reflected in the recent history of “gender identity disorder” as a diagnosable mental illness in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV-TR* (DSM) in the US, and around the world. Though “gender identity disorder” was recently replaced by the phrase “gender dysphoria,” the historical and ongoing treatment of transgender people as having a medical disease cements the notion that transgender discomfort is an individual phenomenon that must be treated at the level of the individual.

Etymologically, *dysphoria* comes from the Greek word *dusphorus*, which means “something too difficult to bear.” When *dys-* is used as a prefix to refer to the *dysphoria* of a single transgender person, it suggests their gender is too difficult for their current body to bear; they are a stranger in their own body. The assumption that gender-based discomfort is an internal and insular phenomenon (i.e. existing within one's individual self) poses several ethical problems. Most significantly, individualizing a transgender person's discomfort (assuming they feel it) fails to recognize the ways that societies continue to create uncomfortable and unsafe spaces for transgender people. This structural discomfort is not always intentional or overtly malicious on the part of cisgender people. As much as transgender people have become fascinating in the current political moment, evident in the uptake of trans issues in popular media, shows, and such, non-binary people simultaneously function as an ontological *dusphorus* for societies; we are burdensome to dominant understandings of how language works. (As one person advised me after I disclosed my pronouns, “unfortunately the rest of the world just doesn't work like that”). Certainly, trans people are not mere objects of this marginalization; trans people have strategically mobilized their objectification and medicalization to gain access to medical and economic resources they need (Gill-Peterson 2018; Najmabadi 2013; Spade 2011).

Through conversations with other trans folks, I found language to describe the discomfort I was feeling: *social dysphoria*. In my case, it was my movement through institutions that continue to act as if I match a binary gender that causes me the most discomfort. I don't often experience dissonance between my body and my gender, and when I do it is directly connected to how others interact with me. I am continually put into a place of discomfort when filling out employment applications, insurance forms, or medical intake questionnaires. Popular narratives about transgender continue to assume that it is an individual experience of discomfort and the burden is upon me to ask for accommodation. This overlooks the possibility that cisgender people might benefit from (re)examining the mundane institutional assumptions about gender.⁴

II. Embodying Violence and Resistance through Language

Being in community with other trans people has been grounding, and I have found that choosing and nursing my pronouns to health has been an important gender-affirming technique. Identifying the non-binary pronouns that suit me best and building my confidence to introduce them to others has been a heartening practice made easier by the reciprocity and support of others. In community with other non-binary people, pronouns are a reminder that language has the potential to be disrupted. Language can even be euphoric. I find great satisfaction from the fact that the pronoun harnesses a kind of loophole in the English language: the singular pronoun *they* already exists in common parlance to define an unknown person. For instance, "Someone left their bag here. Do you think *they* will return to get it?" When people throw up their arms in dismay at the grammatical challenges, I am able to use the same logic by reminding them these pronouns already exist. By gaming the system in this way, I thread myself through this loop(hole) to stitch together imaginaries of resistance that interrupt my own feelings of powerlessness. It gives me the gusto to mobilize my body as a *dusphorus*, an insurrectionary force.

But gender pronouns are not always joyous. In practice, many trans people make concessions about the cuts and stitches they make to the discursive fabric, often based on the risk of violence, eviction, or unemployment they face in making those disruptions. For example, I first decided to retire my "she" and "her" pronouns in the company of close friends. First, I preferred none at all. For instance: "Logan is going to the pharmacy to pick up Logan's prescription." The constant reiteration of my name instead of referential pronouns made for staccato sentences, and I wanted to support my dear friends and family who were trying to negotiate the treacherous waters of gendered language with me. For the sake of ease, I now ask people to refer to me using *they/them* pronouns and I know many trans people have made similar concessions for the sake of ease. For instance, a friend uses both *ze/zir* and *they/them* pronouns but accepts that people will, at best, use *they/them*. When I presented my concessional pronoun to a family member, they responded that "that's a grammar *nightmare!*" My stomach dropped. My request, I assumed, was too much to ask. After all, I depend on others to use these pronouns to describe me as I do not often refer to myself in the third person.

⁴ I understand that these institutions function through the regular disavowal of people, particularly people of color, people with disabilities, and others who are multiply marginalized. I do not presume that legal reform is a panacea for reasons that Dean Spade has eloquently articulated (see: *Normal Life*, 2011).

Part of my gender discomfort as a trans person comes not from the fact that we are often seen as being too needy in our requests for language accommodations but that we are barraged with binary language as a means of regulating our physical bodies. For instance, while my long, thick hair and my relatively small frame prompt people to read me as a cisgender woman, I have otherwise “masculine” features, such as thick hair on my arms and legs. My gender identity means I am usually meandering in the “men” and “boys” section of clothing stores in quest of something that will fit my liminal body.

Strangers have used gendered language to give unsolicited advice or harass me, usually based on my body hair. For instance, six years ago, I walked into the public library wearing shorts on a stifling Florida summer afternoon and a man on the bench outside eyed my legs and asked, “Are you a boy or a girl?” At first, I wanted to respond with something honest that gave the speaker the benefit of the doubt, something like “neither” or “both.” I erred on the side of caution by saying nothing. When I exited the library a few minutes later, he was on his feet with two other men. They moved quickly towards me while shouting “So are you a boy or a girl? *What* are you?!” I sped to my car and did not look back.

This was not the first time I was presented with the boy/girl dyad or even the first time that I had been abruptly asked to explain my gender to a stranger. When it was accompanied by a threat, it reminded me of the entrenchment of gendered categories I was continually failing and the risks of doing so. Not only was I discursively infantilized (as “boy” or “girl,” the diminutive forms of man and woman) and dehumanized into an object (“*what* are you”), but my ambiguous and anomalous body required investigation and, potentially, violent intervention. This memory grew into my hair follicles, like the very moment when I wish my hair could have temporarily retracted and I could have passed unremarkably through the space. Recurring experiences of this kind have led me to physically, mentally, or emotionally dissociate in preparation for future and inevitable threats of violence. This protective stasis is not just a symptom of my internal gender dysphoria but rather an indicator of the regular disavowal of trans life through binary language.

It is necessary to note that my experiences negotiating and overcoming gendered violence have always been shaped by my intersecting privileges: my light skin, my economic support network, the fact that I am masculine- rather than feminine-leaning in presentation, and that I am physically capable of running away from a dangerous situation.⁵ My gender transgressions are sometimes generously read as being a “tomboy” whereas a feminine boy I knew was threatened with slurs and physical assault. Given the disproportionate rates of homelessness, unemployment, murder, and suicide among trans people, particularly trans women of color, this is not something I take lightly (National Center for Transgender Equality 2017). According to a report from *FirstCoast News*, my hometown of Jacksonville, Florida “leads the nation in the number of transgender murders” (Destiny Johnson 2018). In 2018 alone, at least three Black transgender women were murdered in separate instances across the city: Celine Walker, Antash'a English, and Cathalina Christina James. At least two others were shot this year, likely by people they knew. Most of these women were misgendered in public news reports about their murders,

⁵ In this way, I echo Sarah Ahmed asks us to think through *bodies with skins* as not just gendered but also racialized (2000, 45).

enacting a unnecessary discursive violence that has mobilized the activism of the Jacksonville Transgender Awareness Project.

My own gendered body has been shaped by the physical landscape in which I grew up; it was where I was first harassed in bathrooms, where I first came to understand my gender and sexuality, and where I learned my gender was confusing, irksome, disgusting, and offensive. The city's position as one of the highest murder rates of trans women of color in the country has further hardened me to see the importance of gender affirmation. While conversations about gender pronouns cannot necessarily change the physical violence that trans people face, wider discussion of trans people can enact the ontological shift that frame transgender subjugation as less of individual dysphoria and more of a structural disavowal. Though I no longer live in Jacksonville – in fact I escaped as soon as I could – I carry the city with me as a kind of scar, a reminder of where my gender began.

III: Trans-Atlantic Travels and Gender Hospitality

My gender resilience has grown since leaving Jacksonville, in large part because I have met many remarkable souls who have shared strategies of survival and resistance. This was unsettled, however, when I travelled to Germany for my grandfather's funeral this summer. This was the first time that I would be visiting relatives after being relatively "out" as trans in the US. When approaching the security line at the airport, I removed my belt and remembered I was wearing pants I had bought in the "men's" section, presumably designed for male-bodied people. The pants sank down slightly as I awkwardly waddled through the security scanner, I raised my arms and waited silently for the employee on the other end to wave me through. The employee informed me that my loose pants warranted a pat-down. Without delay, the attendant pressed her hands firmly against my genitals, a jarring experience of feeling unseen in a sea of many, in the well-populated security area of the airport. Despite hearing the daily struggles that my trans-feminine friends undergo at the airport, I was unprepared. Facing a U.S. flag mural with the inscription "Never Forget," I remembered how anti-terrorism campaigns often animate transphobic rhetoric, where the U.S. War on Terror's fears about cross-dressing terrorists (Beauchamp 2019; Clarkson 2015). My sartorial choices came under scrutiny because I failed to match the "pink" or "blue" choice of the security detector.

Upon entry to Europe after a long flight, I had separated myself from the rest of my family who were traveling on their European Union passports. I mustered the half-hearted excuse that I had forgotten to update my German passport after changing my name the year before. I didn't have the courage to explain that updating my name on the passport from outside of the country is nearly impossible. Germany has had a progressive turn as of late with respect to gender, as it recently ratified the implementation of a third gender marker for identity documents (Eddy and Bennett 2017). But it also used to require newborn children to be registered with names clearly distinguishable as male or female and, until 2011, mandated the sterilization of trans people prior to changing legal identification documents. My waning confidence in my German skills and my inability to fly to Germany just for a court hearing to change my name made me risk losing citizenship altogether.

Shuffling into the “All Other Passports” line at the Hamburg International Airport, I reflected on the passage of my trans body across national borders. I am the legal citizen of two countries at a time when both thrive economically on the subjugation of low-wage labor from migrants and disavow integral residents through refusal of citizenship and resources and outright deportation. Waiting in line at customs as a white, masculine-leaning transgender person with U.S. citizenship and a command of the German language made this an inconvenience at most. Trans people are often grounded, literally, because changing forms of identification is prohibitively expensive or because their citizenship is targeted under national travel bans. Undocumented trans people seeking asylum have to carefully negotiate their travels, or risk exile, deportation, or refusal of entry. I imagine that my own discomfort negotiating my gender in my second language was a fraction of the hesitance that multiply-marginalized trans people feel.

After crossing the gate at customs, I nonetheless swallowed the confidence I had built up using gender-neutral pronouns to refer to myself in English in solidarity with other trans folks. I suspected my relatives might be confused or even frustrated by my recent name change. While I had become adept at explaining how easy it can be to use *they/them* pronouns in English, I felt like my gender was no longer valid once I left my anglophone space. I had read about non-binary people using the pronoun *sier* in German, a combination of the “feminine” and “masculine” pronouns *sie* and *er* and attempted to claim solidarity with that discursive frame. When I suggested it later that week, one relative looked at me blankly and stammered, “Hm. I guess that could work.” I felt that if my German wasn’t so rusty, I might have been able to make a stronger case.

Being transgender in two languages beckoned me to define myself in the target language. In so doing, I would sometimes drag my words in English alongside me, as if these words were old friends who I felt too anxious to introduce to my family. I wanted to be respectful and not reify other US people’s bludgeoning of languages other than English. My pronouns, *they and them*, often felt like uninvited guests; there weren’t often chairs for them to sit at the table, they dominated the conversation, caused rifts, tension, and discomfort when they did enter the conversation. They caused temporal “friction” and were temporally dragging me to the past, beckoning me to introduce them as I had in the U.S.

I was relying on the hospitality of friends and family who graciously hosted me on their sofas and floors, served us food, and helped us to find closure with the life of grandfather. With my relatives, many of whom I had not seen for several years, I knew this was not the time. Since there was no custom to ask my pronouns or to even assume I might not be a woman, the onus was on me to decide. I knew I had already crossed a national border and was thus out of my familiar territory, but I did not want to cross any unspoken boundaries of family or friends. I had come to mourn my grandfather and celebrate his life. This was not the time to discuss my gender and, quite frankly, I don’t know how my grandfather would have reacted if he were alive. I quietly carried my non-binary pronouns alongside me, but didn’t introduce them. But this silence caused a friction of its own, every time I was referred to as *sie*. This embodied discomfort at the interstices of two languages has further hardened me to recognize the significance of broader conversations about gender pronouns and, moreover, the taking seriously of the lived experiences of trans people.

IV: Trans-forming Language

Many of the debates about gender-inclusive language are framed in terms of wanting to “accommodate” trans people. In the French context, they are entangled with the history of metaphors of *hospitality* in immigration law. Accommodating trans people is often initially an outstretched hand, a welcoming and a support, but it is worth noting that the framing of accommodating a guest should be one of reciprocity and mutuality. As Mireille Rosello notes, “isn’t a guest always implicitly an equal, who could, presumably, reciprocate at a later date, in a different space, at a different time?” (2002: 6). True hospitality or accommodation should interrogate the structure that continue to imbue certain people with the power to extend hospitality in the first place. As a transgender person who resides primarily in the English language, I relish these gestures. I enter these languages with vivid memories of experiencing violence as a trans person within my primary language, and am particularly grateful when people who are in greater positions of power recognize the embodied, structural violence that many trans people face.

I have recognized that my embodied experiences are the site of my power, and thus I use my relative social privilege to encourage us to think about pronouns not just as a panacea. As a teacher of gender, women, and sexuality studies, I open each of my classes by going around the room and inviting students to share their names and pronouns, rather than doing roll call from the roster, whose names might not match the names they use. I start with myself: “I’m Logan and I use they/them pronouns. This means that if you’re referring to me in class with another student, you’d say ‘they just handed out the worksheets.’” This practice is a recognition of the power that I have as an educator and that I am always enforcing gendered, racialized norms in the classroom whether I think about it or not. I take a risk for the purposes of building camaraderie with students, remembering the uncomfortable pit in my stomach when I’ve been misgendered by teachers in the past. Gender-nonconforming students have expressed gratitude for these go-arounds as well as my gently correcting other students when they make mistakes.

I cannot imagine how affirming this would have been in my early French language coursework in both high school and as an undergraduate. And I remember being entranced whenever we spent time discussing radical resistance to the French of the *Académie Française*, including *verlan* and playful hybridized uses of French and Arabic because they reminded me of the animacy of the French language. The potential to discuss gender-neutral language and neopronouns in these classes would have been riveting. In fact, I remember falling in love with the French language even more in those moments of disruption.

These experiences with the fluidity of language have highlighted how calls for inclusive language are not simply erasing the imperial and colonial histories that brought them into existence. It is also possible to recognize the violence enacted by the language—often a prerequisite to finding stable employment, accessing services, or being recognized as legitimate in the eyes of the state—and harness it, tweak it, twist it anew rather than dismiss it wholesale. With this, I am inspired by the late José Esteban Muñoz, who traced how queer artists of color in the U.S. have strategically used dominant white culture as an opening for their own gains. Rather than reframe their engagement as assimilation or rejection, Muñoz offers a third frame: disidentification. Gender-inclusive language can be a means of simultaneously “working on and

against” the structure at play, in Muñozian spirit (p. 11). In my case, language has beaten me down, pathologized me at the same time that I know I have benefitted from having a rough command of it. In all of its complexity, language is a horizon of potentiality and has particularly unique possibilities for gender.

Surprisingly enough, I first learned about the possibility of multiple genders existing in a single person in a French class. I was mesmerized by gender studies ironically at the same that (or perhaps because) I was struggling to remember the “genders” of the various objects, phenomena, and ephemera with which I interacted in my daily life. As a student at Université Paris VII in 2009, my instructor wrote nouns on the chalkboard with the suffix -e-s to highlight the discursive violence of the masculine singular. I vowed from thereon out to write my nouns similarly. Sometimes my professors abroad would circle these words with a question mark, but I had no intention of stopping. After spending six years trying to develop a mastery over the language, I realized that doing justice to a language did not necessarily mean reproducing it as it has been legitimized. It can also mean stretching it and reshaping it. Without even mentioning non-binary people (which I hadn’t realized included me at the time), the hyphen offered an opening to radically rethink gender and the assumptions I had about it. Nine years after that class, I had completed my Ph.D. in Feminist Studies and am excited to engage students, faculty, and community members with questions about language.

My social dysphoria, my scars and traces of violence, has made me all the more aware of the stakes of gender-inclusive language even beyond the hyphens and interpoints into the land of less-common pronouns. I understand the complicated position that French teachers inhabit, acknowledging trans people in an often binary language at the same time as they need to offer students the tools to make their own educated decisions about the language. I struggle with something similar every time I develop a syllabus and must decide whether to teach the canon or immerse students to imagine feminist studies anew. French holds within it many opportunities for fruitful disruption that can actually deepen students’ learning. While *l’écriture inclusive* is not a panacea that remedies the structural disavowal of trans people, it begins to take seriously the embodied realities of trans people in order to foster ethical reciprocity.

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