Tracing Transgender Ghosts

Siguiendo el Rastro de los Espectros Trans

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Resumen: "Siguiendo el Rastro de los Espectros Trans" es una reflexión sobre el trabajo elaborado por la autora durante su tesis. En concreto, este artículo aborda los modos en los que "el espectro" funciona como un método para articular aquellos momentos en los que la subjetividad trans se colapsa. La subjetividad trans es a menudo demarcada por estructuras y procesos normativos de carácter institucional; sin embargo, esta experiencia raramente puede ser contenida por estos mismos límites normativos. Mediante aquellos momentos en los que el espectro articula interrupciones temporales en el proceso lineal de subjetivación, el sujeto trans ofrece la posibilidad de resistencia contra-discursiva. Siguiendo esta reflexión, en este artículo el espectro derrideano se convierte en una metáfora capaz de anticipar y explorar estas rupturas y filtraciones subjetivas.

Abstract: "Tracing Transgender Ghosts" is a reflection on the author's dissertation; specifically, it deals with how the ghost functions as a method of articulating moments where transgender subjectivity breaks down. Transgender subjectivity is often defined through normative institutional processes and structures. However, trans experience often exceeds this bounding. By investigating the moments when the trans subject is haunted by temporal disruptions to linear subjectivation, the transgender subject becomes a site of potential counter discursivity. In this paper, the Derridean ghost is the extended metaphor used to anticipate and explore these subjective ruptures and leakages.

Keywords: Spectre, ghost, Transitioning, Subjectivity, Transgender, Hauntology

"You don't believe in me," observed the Ghost.
"I don't," said Scrooge.
"What evidence would you have of my reality beyond that of your senses?"
"I don't know," said Scrooge.
"Why do you doubt your senses?"
"You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of
underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"
— Charles Dickens

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with ghosts and hauntings as a methodological tool. I arrived at these spectralities by accident. The object of my research master's dissertation for Utrecht University's Gender programme titled *Nether Worlds: Trans Spectralities, Liminal Transpositions, & Disjointed Time* (2020), was my experience as a trans woman transitioning in multiple institutional and geographic contexts. The dissertation uses autoethnography because its hybrid style and methodology are expansive and flexible enough to capture something as protean as transgender subjectivity. At the same time, it allows for the extrapolation of data from the self to help analyse the medicolegal social phenomenon of transitioning. The ghost appeared as a solution to the temporal and spatial challenges my subjectivity poses. Rather than moving through medical and legal systems to arrive at a *telos* of gender crossing, my experiences moving between systems and locations implied temporary transpositions—shifts, mutations, translations, and decompositions (I started medically transitioning in South Korea, moved to the Netherlands, but also had/have to engage with the medical and state gender registration systems of my home country, Canada). The effect of this on me as a trans subject is a fracturing; a process of simultaneously being positioned in incongruent subjective, medical, and legal positions. The ghost *appeared*—I will return to the concept of ghostly appearances—as a way of understanding the atemporality and breaking down of gender I experienced as I traversed institutional spaces— when going to the airport, visiting family, or going to the bank with mismatched identifications, as well as myriad other locations. For me, these landscapes are always haunted: haunted by ghosts of the past, but also ghosts of the future— like Dickens's Scrooge.

This paper begins with a short discussion of language, before defining out what I mean by "transgender subject." With these clarifications and theoretical interpretations in mind, I will then turn to ghosts and hauntings and how they help to reveal this process of subjectivation. The ghost helps to illuminate how transgender subjectivity can be understood as non-linear, as a counter-narrative

to the techno-scientific progress narratives that subjectivate it. What makes these apparitions more than insubstantial articulations of past and future temporalities is the site of the trans subject. Transgender subjectivity then becomes a site of potential counter-discursivity—counter to the transgender imperative to conform to and exemplify neoliberal, medical, and legal narratives (Stone, 2006; Beauchamp, 2009; Azura, 2018).

2. A QUICK NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Astute readers will undoubtedly notice the phantasmagoria of ghostly terms and synonyms already employed in this essay. This is on purpose. The spectral turn in cultural theory tends to follow Derrida by using "specter" (1994). "Spectre"[1] is as equally invested in invisibility/visibility and absence/presence, which are entangled with the Derridean deconstructive project, as it is to ghosts. However, other theorists such as Gordon prefer the term "ghost" (2004). I am here employing a spectrum of these terms to indicate the decompositional sense of the ghost. It is precisely its inability to be fully articulated into something solid that attracts me to it. And because of this, it can never be a full science in the traditional sense.

Similarly, the word "transgender" is like Proteus, hard to hold down, and therefore needs some contextualization. Its contemporary use dates back to at least Leslie Feinberg's 1992 seminal articulation of the word as an umbrella term for all types of crossing/liminal gender identities. And while this is a debated interpretation of the term, it reflects my usage. However, it is important to note that this essay is based on an autoethnographic study, and my position as a trans woman is that of one who has medically and legally transitioned—which brings up another term requiring clarification. When I write "transgender," or sometimes "trans," I am referring to this broad identity category—but also my specific instance of this identity. By medically and legally transitioning, I am defining myself within this category—and by some interpretations, submitting to a rigid narrative, which as I progress through this paper, I hope to show is not the case.

"Transitioning" is also a complex and fraught term. But generally, it covers some process of identify with a gender other than the one assigned to a person at birth. This may include psychotherapy, hormone replacement therapy (HRT), surgery, legal name and gender/sex (re)registration. But not all people who transition will select to undergo all of these processes, or even any of them. Julian Carter (2014) writes that "[t]ransition is thousands of little gestures of protest and presence, adding up and getting some momentum behind them so that you finally achieve escape velocity from the category you were stuck in all

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[1] I prefer the British spelling.

those years ago (p. 236)," a process that defies linearity and conclusion—even though it is often defined as the opposite, as conformist and linear.

Finally, the word "transing" or just "to trans" is also a form of critical categorical crossing through space and time—of leakages and slips, sometimes slipping or sliding backwards (Stryker et al., 2008). The ghost is an apt eccentric tool for helping to illustrate slips, backslides, and leakages.

3. TRANSGENDER SUBJECT

Subjectivation is an integral concept to the research this essay is based on. The spectral intervention of the ghost appears as a useful methodological intervention when considering the disjointed transgender subject I describe. I want to, therefore, start by exploring this concept, the transgender subject. Transitioning is a form of becoming, of being subjectivated. My basis for this interpretation is Judith Butler's Foucauldian notion of subject creation. Though both *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 2011) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) deal heavily with subject formation, it is in *Undoing Gender* (2004) where Butler asks, is there a gender that pre-exists its regulation? "Or is it the case that, in being subject to regulation, the gendered subject emerges, produced in and through that particular form of subjection?" (2004, p. 41). Butler's answer adheres to a Foucauldian sense of regulatory power, that to be regulated is to be subjectivated. Juridical power inevitably "produces" what it claims merely to represent—the dual function of power, the juridical and the productive (1990, p. 3). Butler follows Foucault's articulation of disciplinary power as a "grid of intelligibility of the social order" (Foucault [1976] 1990, p. 93). For Butler, gender norms govern intelligibility, they "[impose] a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social" (2004, p. 42).

Transitioning is governed by both medical and juridical forms of regulation that shape trans subjectivity. But these power dynamics are not static. Aren Aizura (2018) shows how the geography of such subjectivation is largely shaped by the institutions that govern access to trans health care and legal services. States which have centralized state-subsidized clinics tend to create transgender subjectivities that are more inherently in line with binary notions of gender—like the Netherlands. Whereas countries that have services available independent of the state, such as the United States and Brazil, allow other gender subjectivities, e.g. non-binary identities or *tranvestis*, to flourish (Aizura, 2018). Here, geography, with its attending deferential access to resources and cultural attitudes, directly affects transgender subjectivity. In this case, movement through space will affect transgender subjectivity.

In "Spiderwomen," Eva Hayward remarks that it is "impossible" to describe all the ways that trans people transition (2017, p. 256). Hayward notes

that to do so produces metrics for transitioning, and therefore a standard by which to measure all transitions. This creates a kind of violence. The danger emerges when considering how it occludes transitioning inherent heterogeneous/heteroglossic[2] nature (both its multiple subjectivities and narratives). The advent of transgender studies as a discipline, has been to acknowledge the diverse subjectivities and narratives attending transgender experience (Stone [1992] 2006). Nevertheless, transitioning is often defined as a progressive model, what Atalia Israeli-Nevo (2017) calls the "classic model of transitioning" that describes a medicolegal process which sees the trans subject travel from a fractured sense of sex/gender to a whole one (healed, *telos*).

This classic model of transitioning implies various medical and legal benchmarks. A primary goal of this model requires medical interventions such as psychotherapy, hormone replacement medications (HRT), which seeks to alter the body's biochemistry in order to bring it in line with a trans person's experienced sex/gender. Since the early-mid 20th century, there has been a steady invention of trans surgeries (vaginoplasty in the 1930s and phalloplasty in the late 40s [Susan Stryker 2006]). Additionally, a series of legislative changes to human rights laws in some countries has led to some protections for trans people and the ability for them to access amendments to their identification documents (these are usually accessed after medical interventions, but not always). These medical and legal technologies have led to what Julian Carter describes as "a process denoting a standardized trajectory of 'sex reassignment' in which people were shuttled from the psychiatrist, through the endocrinologist, to the surgeon, to the judge" (2014, p. 235). This railroading of trans people into a specific medicolegal trajectory, which accords with only certain highly medicalized senses of trans subjectivities (often transsexual), invalidates trans people with different aspirations and senses of subjectivity and corporeality—such as non-binary, non-operative trans, and gender non-conforming persons.

These non-normative positions are disregarded by the state as a consequence of not being normatively legible (Stryker, 2014). They are more often denied access to medical and legal interventions. Disregard and denigration result in a counter-validation of what a trans person is; it delimits and demarcates individual and collective trans subject positions, delineating the understanding of the self in relation to the world and, hence, articulating the process of subject formation. Additionally, these transition models help to reify the ideological and narrative frameworks which produce them, i.e. neoliberalism, Western techno-scientific progress, self-entrepreneurialism, the gender binary, and liberal human rights discourses, to name but a few.

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[2] Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term "heteroglossia" in 1934. It denotes a heterogeneity of meanings for a term within one language, but also a plurality of experiences and perspectives.

Nevertheless, my experience with these transitioning regimes runs counter to any "standardized trajectory of sex reassignment" (Carter, 2014, p. 235). Perhaps not in the sense that I have eschewed the medical and legal engagements implied by Israeli-Nevo's classic model of transitioning, but in my experience of being healed or made whole, or *completely* transiting gendered categories—which Beauchamp (2009) describes as the imperative of transgender institutional forces. As I am writing this, I have received *the surgery* but cannot change my name or gender/sex in Canada. I have, through a rather long, costly, emotionally fraught, and circuitous route changed my name and gender in the Netherlands—but only partially. As a resident, I am still beholden to my Canadian official documents. Thus, the institutional imperative has been transgressed in my situation; I contextually transpose, my subjectivity and experience of my gender are disjointed, they change as I move through space, and I am therefore faced with a break down in temporality, a forced movement backwards (which contradicts the futural directive of the institution to move forward).

Theoretically, "transposition," in a transgender context, comes from Eva Hayward (2017). My attraction to her formulation of this concept is its entanglement with space and geography. Hayward's theory of transposition is one where embodiment and subjectivity emerge through the locations the body moves through. Hayward's use of the term is engaged with movement; it is both a textual (discursive) and spatial movement: "I took the word 'transposition' for a series of walks through a number of readings alongside experiences and down city streets" (2017, p. 254). For Hayward, to transpose is the "everyday act of becoming otherwise," but not through a straightforward linear movement, from one state to another (2017, p. 254). Rather, like I have described above, to transpose is to translate, to alter, to shift contexts, sometimes transposition is decomposition; it is generative and destructive. However, in addition to Hayward's formulation of transposition, I propose the addition of a sense of partial transposition. That is to suggest that trans subjects do not fully transfer between contexts, but rather are haunted by inconsistencies and incongruences that impede a sense of whole becoming, as the classical model of transition suggests. And in turn, trans subjectivities haunt concepts of normative linear, progressive, temporality.

Trans subjects are rebellious, they defy direct translation from one category to the other, their gendered pasts leak into the present, they refuse to be concealed, regardless of a subject's intentions. This is because the records and processes they are subjectivated by are incomplete, incompatible, and contradictory. My case is extreme, my transition unfolds through three different states, and yet, as Currah (2014) and Spade (2008) show, even within a single state or geographic context, institutions haphazardly apply gender (re)registration. Here, transgender subjectivity rebels against being subsumed

into neoliberal narratives of self-entrepreneurialism (Azura, 2018), or products on modern techno-science (Stone, 2006). The trans subject is haunted but also haunts. And now we are ready for the ghost.

4. GHOST THEORY

The ghost as a conceptual tool for tracing transgender subjectivity and its inherent non-linearity, starts with Derridean hauntology (1994). For Derrida, hauntology, like the trace or *différance* before it, deals with absence and presence, but hauntology deals more with the temporal dimension, making it a useful lens for analysing transgender subjectivity, which is itself imbricated in temporality. Spectres are never fully present, and they engage both past and futural absences (Fisher 2014). Blanco and Peeren (2013) note that hauntings are not a science or method because the ghost is that which escapes full comprehension (p. 9). For Blanco and Peern, the ghost is unstable. Contrastingly, Gordon (2004), interprets the ghost inversely. "The ghost…is not the invisible or some ineffable excess…a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention" (p. xvi). And while I turn to the spectre, ghost, or haunting, in the sense that Blanco and Peern (2013), as a signal of disjointed ontology, Gordon's interpretation is also present as a kind of haunted methodology. "Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way… [to notify] that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us" (Gordon 2004, xvi). In this sense, ghosts appear, throughout my dissertation, even before the analysis fully turns to them—like the figure of Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* (1999). They highlight a tangible sense of concealment or absence and presence of being. They are in a sense, the extended metaphor that (de)solidifies temporality and space for transgender subjectivities. It is important to note that the trans subject is not only haunted but also haunts. As Butler points out, the illegible body is haunted by that which exceeds intelligibility (1993, p. x). The transgender subject is not only being acted upon, but also is an actor, like a mirror reflecting other normative subjectivities and states (in the vein of Stryker's monster, see [Stryker, 1994]).

Ghosts, in my research, are connected to movement, to the moment when movement becomes non-linear and anti-futural. This is why I link the spectre to transposition. When referring to transpositions Hayward (2017) writes that this kind of movement can be decomposition or deviation. To "decompose" is to decompile, to degrade, to fall apart into pieces; it is also something that is associated with death, it is anti-teleological, in that it creates a new beginning; Detritus creates nutrients and regeneration. To "deviate" is to depart from a course—or to be deviant, as in deviant subjectivity. With transgender

subjectivation there is a specific sense of these things. We can see this in Simpkins (2017) definition of transitioning as a paradoxical space where past, present, and future commingle; transitioning is a haunted process, hence the ghost. The ghost appears at the moment of breakdown, decomposition, or deviation—at the moment concealment becomes visible. Ghosts often invoke records of past histories—both literally and in social memory (a passport or a familial misgendering). They are in effect traces of incomplete transgender histories of becoming. And conversely, some spaces anticipate futural subject positions, like the clinic. These fragments negatively affect the biopolitical calculus of inclusion—they submit trans persons to death by demarcating their non-normativity.

For me, the movement between states is not clean cut with the past, my previous gendered history haunts my current subjectivity. For example, *Nether Worlds* (2020) explores my three legal genders: I have an "X" for unspecified on my Canadian Passport; an "F" for female on my Dutch registry of foreign birth; and an "M" on my Canadian birth certificate. But, because Canada will not recognize my Dutch "F," and the Dutch won't recognize my Canadian "X," it gets very confusing. In addition to this chaos, I have two legal names (I have changed my legal name in the Netherlands, but Canada will not accept this). These multiplying markers are not merely poor translations in a process of transposing between international institutional settings. Each gender/sex marker and name are traces of different subjectivities. As I have failed to translate and be interpolated through each movement, I am always entangled and haunted by the fragments of previous gendered states left behind in various institutional records.

5. GHOSTS AT THE AIRPORT

This paper can only address a small portion of the issues covered in my dissertation *Nether Worlds* (2020). Nevertheless, I want to use this last section to see the ghost in action. The airport is a site where transgender subjectivity is haunted; a spatial coordinate where time breaks down. Paranormal phantasms have certain temporal and geographic patterns to their appearances. Cemeteries and certain pagan holidays, like Samhain, represent liminal spaces and moments where the veil between worlds is violable. Appropriately then, transgender ghosts also have spatial coordinates associated with their appearances. The international non-place of the airport (see Augé 1995), a concept that denotes a place of transience and liminality between nations, is one such place of ghostly apparition.

Ghosts are about appearances and invisibilities. According to Toby Beauchamp (2009), transgender bodies are traditionally involved in multiple

forms of surveillance. First to ensure they meet the criteria for being transgender (classic transgender temporalities), and then to ensure that their transness is invisible (spectral), that the trans body can be made to appear cis-normative, to pass. Passing is a form of invisibility, to occlude the body's gender and sex non-conformity; but, total invisibility is impossible because the institutional processes which trans people are subjected require registrations and record-keeping (Beauchamp, 2009). International borders, in the form of airports, are locations where gender tends to break down—where the invisible is made visible. In my situation, my transness is necessarily exposed. To start with, there is the issue of booking a flight; there are no X marker options for most airlines (though this is changing). My ticket is, therefore, the first thing that betrays my gender identity. The check-in counter or bag drop is the next place that this incongruency is exposed. Prior to surgery, even if I avoided this situation through self-check-in and only flying with carry-ons, there are other hazards. Europe, more widely than anywhere else I have travelled, uses body scanners. In these instances, my body betrays me, and a female security guard is forced to pat me down because of *anomalous* heat signatures. If you turn around and look at the scanning chambers on the operator's side, there are two large button options, a blue male icon, and a pink female icon. As I read as female, my scan would be initiated by the pink button. However, my pre-surgery physicality was often revealed by the monitoring screen and subsequent pat-down. I have never established who is more embarrassed, me, or the chamber operator.

Even if one has had surgery, there is still another moment of crisis at the facial recognition gate. This comes in the form of one's face failing to match the achieved photo—the ghost appears. Again, I have since remedied this by updating my passport photo, but prior to the completion of this lengthy and complex process, I would be questioned and occasionally even misgendered or harassed. After this, I would then have to anticipate repeating this process at gate security checks and at my destination airport. This type of border crossings exemplifies the disjunctive nature of transgender subjectivity, how the past leaks into the present, or how the haunting ghost becomes present (the invisible becomes visible). Border crossings like these are sites of gender securitization, sites of control, and policing, where the absent or hauntological gendered states become present.

Avery Gordon's (2004) *Ghostly Matters* is an attempt to create a method of knowledge production that conjures and describe absences and the costs of absences and loss to "modern systems of abusive power" (p. xvii). I indicated at the opening of this section that geographies help us expose ghosts and hauntings. The airport is one such location, and when combined with the biometrics represented by my passport, it creates an opportunity for ghostly matters, for what I have described as the hauntological dimension of

transposition. In this way, movement between states, in a context of hyper security, forces trans subjects to encounter their history of gender fragmentation.

As I move through the airport, or any highly securitized location such as banks, educational and medical institutes, government facilities, online identification verification checks, my subjectivity becomes the site of fragmentation. I can no longer be concealed, my gender(s), and the various Kafkaesque bureaucracies that they entangled with, are exposed—and here the state is also exposed as anything but a Leviathan (Brown, 1995; Currah, 2014). Beauchamp (2009) writes that a trans person's requirement to register their transness upsets the imperative of concealment. The ghostly appearances I necessarily evoke at the airport upset the notion of stability and progress.

During my trans-liminal airport crossings, I traverse the complicated network of biometric security checks and surveillance systems and I am confronted by my history of fragmentary documentation, repetitively. I am greeted as "miss," if I am lucky, probably "ma'am," by the check-in counter agent, only to have that gender performance become transformed, collapsed *back* into a previous gendered history represented by my passport, dead name, or X marker. Contrary to the aim of biometrics and the state, the body is rebellious, as I am interpolated as female—pass—as I enter the body scanner, and then I am revealed as something deviant, other, by the nonconformity of my body. These few examples encapsulate multiple ghosts and systems: my failure to appear normatively through legal registration practices, and my variegated experience with medical systems which have also failed to produce a stable gendered and sexed body. My border crossings not only deconstruct biometric surveillance by revealing the failure of the system to conceal my subjective instability, but they also entangle progress with regress and linearity with divergence. The border is revealed to be full of cracks which these concepts leak through. Borders, be they medical, juridical, or emotional, are not stable barriers; trans bodies haunt their peripheries—eroding the previously imagined solidity of boundaries.

6. CONCLUSION

The ghost appears as a loose method of tracing the moments when/where transgender subjectivity exceeds the effects of institutional bounding. When the future and past leak into the present. Ghosts, like the ones that visit Scrooge in this paper's epigraph, can help describe different temporal relationships inherent in transgender subjectivity—that it is non-linear. These discontinuities and ruptures are entangled with space and subtended by the fractious discursive forces. By paying attention to the ghost, to the moments and spaces the spectre

haunts, the trans subject becomes a site to see the cracks in the meta narratives of power structures.

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