



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Now Don’t Say We Didn’t Warn You”:

A Poetic Meditation on the (Im)Possibilities of Mad Trans Time

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Abstract

This poetic meditation explores the (im)possibilities - including imaginaries and dreams, longings and desires, wonders and exhilarations, fissures and fractures, heartbreaks and heartaches - of Mad trans time via the conduit of Mad trans poesis. By placing the complexities of Mad trans subjectivities, meaning making, and knowledge production in relationship to the archive and its residual traces and hauntings, Mad trans time unfolds as a deeply embodied theorizing, challenging and actively disrupting normative temporalities, blurring the artificial boundaries between past, present, and future; knowing and (un)knowing; being and becoming.

Keywords

Mad, Mad Studies, trans, Trans Studies, time, poetry, archive

History

Received 8 June 2022

Accepted 2 July 2022

Acknowledgments

This poetic piece was able to manifest on the pages that follow as a result of the support, care, and compassion of my remarkable mentors and colleagues at Syracuse University, individuals that include Dr. Mike Gill, Dr. Mario Perez, Dr. Eunjung Kim, Dr. Dalia Rodriguez, Dr. Gretchen Lopez, Dr. Katie Roquemoire, Easton Davis, Shiilā Seok Wun AU YONG, Meaghan Krazinski, and Teukie Martin. It is because of you all that I am able to explore the intricacies of Mad trans time and center subjectivities that have been historically erased from the archives of academe. My gratitude to you all is boundless. You make me and this work possible in more ways than you will ever know.

**“Now Don’t Say We Didn’t Warn You”:
A Poetic Meditation on the (Im)Possibilities of Mad Trans Time¹**

Recently, I saw a post on social media from the University of Victoria’s renowned Transgender Archives that included a clip from the September 1987 Issue Number 1 of FTM² Newsletter, published by FTM International, “the longest continuously running organization for the transmasculine community” (University of Victoria Libraries, 2021) - a publication that ran from 1987, the year I was born, to 2008, my junior year of college when I learned that genderqueer was synonymous with me. This excerpt from the very first edition of this groundbreaking newsletter that “became a lifeline by connecting transmasculine people worldwide” (University of Victoria Libraries, 2021) was posted without context, merely containing the caption/warning/caution:

We do not recommend this (sarcastic) advice
from FTM Newsletter, 1987. (TransChair&Archives, 2022)

Above this caveat,
written in black typewriter font

¹ **Content warning:** This poetic piece discusses suicidal ideation. As a reader, if this is not a topic that you feel is in your capacity to read, navigate, and hold right now, I recommend that you take space from this piece and return to it only when and if you feel as if these topics are within your capacity to explore. While reading, if at any point you feel overwhelmed or triggered, I encourage you to please take time to engage with any and all activities and practices that help ground and nourish you, centering your care and the needs that your bodymind communicates to you.

² FTM is an outdated acronym that stands for “female to male”, a label that many transmasculine folks, trans men, and other members of the trans and gender non-conforming community within the U.S., although by no means all, have moved away from because this term relies on a binary construct of the trans experience wherein an individual moves linearly from one point to another on a trajectory that is defined by biological sex as opposed to the complex, multifaceted spectrum of gender identity and expression. Furthermore, this acronym can also imply various forms of social and medical transitioning which not all individuals seek in their trans journeys; the decision to not explore medical transitioning does not make someone any less trans. Although this term is currently considered less inclusive, I also hold space for the countless AFAB (assigned female at birth) trans folk today, including trans elders, and also our transcestors who came before us who find/found this term to be affirming and fully encompassing of their trans identities and experiences.

with irregularly elongated spacing between words
etched against a pale pink background,
read the following:

Now, don't say we didn't warn
you--but maybe you can save
thousands of dollars on hormone
injections and surgery by stand-
ing on the roof with a coat
hanger during the next thunder-
storm! (TransChair&Archives, 2022)

These words -
taken directly
from the newly digitized
FTM Newsletter archive, hauntingly on display
in the liminal space between past, present, and future,
(re)archived here in the virtual realm of social media
(that already teeters precariously on the edges of the real and the unreal),
an archive demanding these transmasculine experiences be deemed
legitimate enough to warrant their recording (M. Perez, personal
communication, April 12, 2022),
transforming moments of the here and now, the then and there
into an archival time that plays on repeat indefinitely,
for how does one mark an ending
when so many of us have been denied
a beginning? (Guobadia, 2020) -
were cut off from the remainder of the newsletter³
which is needed to substantiate this fragmented proposition,
a disconnection from a journalistic context that,
only when presented in its entirety,
makes it/them/us/me
whole;
a literary and narrative lifeline that,
for over two decades, crafted
worlds of embodiment,
lands of desire,
elsewheres (Sharpe, 2016) of transmasculine imagination,
paving the way for me

³ Interestingly enough, this excerpt was the closing paragraph of a short segment of the newsletter entitled "Lightning Turns Woman Into Man!", a retelling of a tabloid news story from July, 1987 wherein a West German woman was purportedly struck by lightning and began to undergo some of the effects of what many folks would experience while medically transitioning (University of Victoria Libraries, 2021). To read the piece in full, you can access the newsletter here: <https://vault.library.uvic.ca/collections/d13ed5ae-6ea3-4cb8-b72a-4a5c794982b6>.

to
be:

When we create space for ourselves and others to dream, we embody recurring hope, active love, critical resistance, and radical change. We are reminded that those who came before us dreamed of that which no one thought could exist - that their dreams are the reasons that we now are living the 'impossible'. (Lewis, 2018 as cited in Kafai, 2021, p. 17)

As a masculine-presenting trans person
with a non-binary, gender-less (*or -more*)
gender identity,
who also identifies proudly as Mad,
I could not help but read the words
in this post through both a trans
and Mad lens.

Picturing this scenario of standing
on a rooftop, longing to be electrocuted
as a means to save money
(*and time*)
on gender affirming hormones
and surgery made perfect sense
to my Mad trans mind
that equally and contrastingly
seeks to challenge
normative expectations for
rationally-defined sense-making (Price, 2014).

Not only do my experiences
with bipolar and OCD lead to
intrusive thoughts and chronic
suicidal ideation that

(especially when in the midst
of the complexities of a mixed state)

involve repeated visualizations
and deeply embodied yearnings
to soar off my roof into the ether
and/or plummet to the ground below

("these are the things I love about crazy... /
the way you can lick the inside of your skull /
the manic flight and the deep grief sacred low when you feel the /
heartbreak of this world" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015, p. 45)),

but also as a trans person
who continues to navigate
the gatekeeping of the highly

anti-trans, ableist, sanist,
 racist, colonial, and white supremacist
 medical industrial complex⁴
 wherein I have to feign
 sanity (Cosantino, 2021) in order to receive
 gender-affirming care,
 care that is always,
 though,
 mediated through the
 unearned privileges
 that my whiteness affords;
 I interpreted the words of this post
 to be a reflection of what occurs
 when we allow Mad and trans
 worlds to collide.
 As Zena Sharman (2021) illustrates in
*The Care We Dream Of:
 Liberatory & Transformative
 Approaches to LGBTQ+ Health,*

[a]s queer and trans people living at the intersections of many identities, we remember all the times we've been called by the wrong name or pronoun by a care provider, were met with suspicion or disbelief when we tried explaining where we are hurting and why, or given inadequate pain relief because someone wrongly believes Indigenous, Black, or Brown bodies deserve less pain relief or feel less pain than white bodies do. We remember feeling like we can't talk openly about drug use, sex work, or suicidal ideation because we're criminalized, or incarcerated in a psych ward or a jail. We feel like we can't show our whole selves to the people whose job it is to care for us...When we do access health care, we strategize about which parts of ourselves to conceal or reveal to be considered credible and worthy of care...I am dreaming of a world where these kinds of compromises are unnecessary. (pp. 18-19)

To name my Mad and trans embodiment
 as co-occurring phenomena that shape
 the ways I inhabit the world
 and construct and reconstruct meaning
 in the spaces and places that affirm
 the complexities of my wholeness
 and/or violently deny me access

⁴ As disability justice scholar, Mia Mingus (2015), describes, "The Medical Industrial Complex is an enormous system with tentacles that reach beyond simply doctors, nurses, clinics, and hospitals. It is a system about profit, first and foremost, rather than 'health,' wellbeing and care. Its roots run deep and its history and present are connected to everything including eugenics, capitalism, colonization, slavery, immigration, war, prisons, and reproductive oppression. It is not just a major piece of the history of ableism, but all systems of oppression."

to the wisdom that I derive
 from a self that embraces
 all of my fractures, fissures,
 and fragmentations (Price, 2014),
 remains a terrifying
 point of self-(dis)location
 for, as long as gender dysphoria
 remains housed within the
*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
 of Mental Disorders (DSM)*,
 my Madness will always be weaponized
 as a tool to discredit my transness (Sharman, 2021)
 and my transness will always be
 deemed deficit, in need of cure
 and treatment (Clare, 2017; Wiggins, 2020),
 a mechanized pathology
 that relies on the construction
 of deviance
 as an appendage
 of mental “illness”⁵:

I live daily with the consequences of medicine’s definition of my identity as an emotional disorder. Through the filter of this official pathologization, the sounds that come out of my mouth can be summarily dismissed as the confused ranting of a diseased mind. (Stryker, 1994, p. 244)

It is within this tension
 that I return to the excerpt
 from FTM Newsletter
 that calls me to renegotiate

⁵ I place “illness” in quotation marks here because I, personally, do not consider my Madness to be an illness in the diagnostic and pathological sense. When defining mental health as a broader U.S. industry and framework (naming the U.S. specifically in order to locate myself geographically and geopolitically within the historical and present-day extraction and violence of U.S. imperialism), it is oftentimes diametrically opposed to mental “illness” with a focus on ensuring Mad bodyminds can operate within the realm of “productivity” and “individual achievement” which, as Kai Cheng Thom (2019b) powerfully notes, are nothing more than the “very values that make late-stage capitalism so very destructive to our well-being” (p. 4). From a social model of disability perspective, I recognize the ways in which U.S. society is disabling, inaccessible, ableist, and sanist (Puar, 2017). Thus, to navigate these systems as they are now, I require various supports and forms of care, some of which I access via the medical industrial complex as a result of various unearned privileges such as class, race, education, English language, and citizenship privileges. Other forms of care I intentionally receive and co-create outside of the realm of the medical industrial complex in alignment with the practices of disability and transformative justice (Dixon & Piepzn-Samarasinha, 2020). Although I do not personally identify with the term mental “illness”, I want to invite, welcome, and make space for the countless individuals who do claim and reclaim this term for themselves and their lived experiences.

and reconceptualize
what trans time can be
when the institutions
designed to offer us “care”
are the very same ones that
deny our wholeness,
forcing us to prove our
transness using timelines
that were never
“designed for us” (Sharman, 2021, p. 47),
training us in the art of
“concealment and elision”
as tools not of liberation
but rather survival (Sharman, 2021, p. 47).
What does trans time mean,
encompass,
comprise
when it is not forced into
constraining colonial chronologies (Smith, 2021),
when the desire and longing
to (re)imagine one’s past,
(re)tell one’s story as the being
that one truly was
as opposed to the corporeal form
that one was judged and
assumed to be (Jones, 2020)
becomes a deluge
within, impossible to contain,
demanding histories to be (re)written,
time that was lost
to *transform* serendipitously
into time that was found?
What does the magic,
beauty,
creativity,
and power (Jones, 2020)
of trans time,
of trans imaginaries
look like,
feel like,
smell like,
taste like -

“*That is just so sexy!*” (Jones, 2020, 2:47) -
when enshrouded by the

(im)possibilities of
 Mad time,
 Mad dreams,
 Mad worlds, and
 Mad subjectivities?

you're going to find the people you can sketch the secret inside of /
 the world with. if you can't find them you can sketch the secret /
 inside of your world inside yourself. breathe in the place where /
 all the words fall away into lemon yellow rose fractals and it's /
 fucking amazing. (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015, pp. 41-42)

I have immersed myself
 in the embodied theorizing
 of queer time (Freeman, 2019; Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2019),
 crip time (Kafer 2013; McRuer, 2006; Price, 2014; Samuels, 2017)
 trans time (Jones, 2020; Nash, 2020; Puar, 2017; Snorton, 2017),
 discovering aspects of self
 becoming self
 in these third spaces
 “of *real-and-imagined* places” (Soja, 1996, p. 6, italics in original)
 that act in direct opposition
 to colonial constructs
 of what linear, white supremacist,
 ableist, sanist,
 cisheteropatriarchal time
 should, could, and *must* be (Schalk, 2018).
 However, the more I “kno[w]
 the inside of crazyworld” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015, p. 43)
 and lean closer,
 embracing “this brain
 shattered into a million
 beautiful fractal raindrops /” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2015, p. 45),
 the more I long for a site of resonance
 within the realm of Mad time,
 where the possibilities and
 impossibilities of
 spatial, spiritual, physical,
 and metaphysical *transformation*
 perpetually coexist,
 rubbing against one another
 with just enough “friction”,
 producing just enough “leakage”
 that “other forms,

other worlds,
 other ways of being...
 might emerge" (Luciano & Chen, 2015, p. 186).
 From this situatedness
 within a Mad time
 that only becomes imaginable
 because of its symphonic blending
 with the vibrations
 of queer time,
 crip time,
 and trans time,
 reverberating throughout history,
 dislodging us from destinations
 that seek to deny us of our desire,
 our longing,
 our joy,
 and our hope (Jones, 2020; Muñoz, 2019; Thom, 2019a),
 I embody Mad time
 recognizing the ways in which
 this framework for seeing,
 being, knowing,
 and not knowing manifests
 in me the sustenance
 necessary to endure
 trans waiting (Muñoz, 2019),
 a process of becoming
 that bears equal parts
 ecstasy and euphoria (Muñoz, 2019)
 and equal parts
 heartbreak
 and heartache,
 some days not knowing
 if this Mad trans bodymind (Price, 2014)
 can truly survive it all
after all:

I used to have expectations for humans that I don't anymore. It's sobering to experience a pandemic and see how difficult change is for people. It's sobering to see how much pain the ocean can be in and how few fucks humans can give. It's painfully sobering. I've had to do some serious expectation management of our species. You can only get heart-broken so many times before you recognize the nature of the beast. (Berne, 2021)

When uncovering the complexities
 of my reality within the

expansive, ever evolving
framework of time
that is both Mad
and trans,
I find an odd
and eerie sense of peace
in imagining myself
and/or an archive
of traces of infinite
past selves hauntingly (Gordon, 2008)
transfixed at the edge
where roof
and sky meet,
awaiting the moment,
just the right moment,
when lightning strikes
and this Mad trans bodymind
is finally invited
“to slide at the edges,
inhabit the clouds” (McRuer & Johnson, 2014, p. 151)
of (im)possible worlds
that once were futures,
distant, far off futures,
that will one day become
archives, just like you and I,
of what *was*
as opposed to remaining
solely that which
could be.
How does balancing
precariously on the
precipice of becoming,
awaiting the anointment
of actualization that,
for so many trans bodyminds,
still requires medical, legal,
and state intervention (Wiggins, 2020),
benefit from a type of Madness
that allows worlds to be seen
in the midst of structures
that attempt to deny
our liberatory visioning (T. Martin, personal communication, April 23, 2022; Piepznasamarasinha, 2018)?

May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world. (Stryker, 1994, p. 251)

The trans body has oft been
compared with the monstrous,
as a form of powerful trans reclamation
and also as a site of anti-trans denouncement
and pathologization (Stryker, 1994, pp. 238-241).

In these moments of waiting
wherein, according to the image
evoked in the FTM Newsletter,
the trans bodymind
holds a metal coat hanger
up to the sky -

 a simplistic-seeming object
 that is by no means solely a conduit
 for electricity,
 for, within the tireless fight
 for reproductive rights in the U.S.,
 the coat hanger transforms into
 a symbolic representation
 of the horrific denial of access,
 choice, and bodily autonomy
 that has historically disproportionately
 impacted poor, disabled, undocumented,
 queer, trans, and non-binary Black, Brown,
 and Indigenous bodyminds,
 and People of Color with uteruses (Mangla, 2016; Jones & Johnson, 2022) -

the trans bodymind,
this “unnatural body” (Stryker, 1994, p. 238),
summons the mystical
forces of nature
as both conjurer
and conjured,
as both Frankenstein
and Frankenstein’s monster,
as both Frankenstein’s monster
and Frankenstein’s ghost.
“Yet to be born”
and, thus, “already dead” (Grace, 2014, 1:11),
spellbound in the moments
that precede
transfiguration,

a unit of time that exists
outside of the realm
of time itself,
hailing from a willfulness
and desire (Thom, 2022)
to inhabit a world,
a body,
a self
that is beautiful
and monstrous

("I cannot be, and yet - an excruciating impossibility - I am" (Stryker, 1994, p. 247)),

trans time meets
Mad time,
spinning,
swirling,
twirling,
encircling
all who may come
into its path
seeking to
cheat time,
beat time,
deceive time,
be time,
carrying with them
origin stories
of their becoming
that predate time itself,
baggage we
need not burden
ourselves with
any longer:

Now, don't say we didn't warn you... (TransChair&Archives, 2022)

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