

Pleasure through the Absence of (Mis)Perception

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Introduction

Because moving in society requires being perceived and being gendered, for transgender and non-binary people it regularly means being misperceived and misgendered. Research undertaken by Johnson, LeBlanc, Deardorff and Bockting (2020) and by Jones, Bouman, Haycraft and Arcelus (2020) explores the mental health of non-binary adolescents and adults. They reveal that many of the difficulties that non-binary people face can be related to transphobia, but non-binary people also experience specific invalidation based on their identity outside the gender binary. Daily, non-binary people have to navigate spaces that do not account for them. I, therefore, want to engage with potential ways for non-binary people to experience freedom and pleasure through the absence of misperception, outside of the gender binary.

In order to not be perceived, or at least to only be perceived rarely, I spent time on hiking trails and in urban green spaces. One group that inspired my project was Fat Girls Hiking. “Fat Girls Hiking is fat activism, body liberation & outdoor community” (*Fat Girls Hiking*, n.d.). What inspired me was not only the hiking but also the community they created. I ended up doing three hikes in the company of others as well as spending time alone in green spaces. I went on each hike with different people. The reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, I decided to not go on hikes alone due to safety concerns. Secondly, I wanted to examine the impact that different companies had on the nuances of being perceived. This is why I compare being alone to being with others and the different levels of disclosure involved. These

differences were based on whether and in how much detail I had discussed both my identity and the project.

I drew from my own experience, which is dominated by western gender norms. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the variety of possible relationships with Queerness and nature. Active learning and unlearning is necessary for queer people's joy and freedom. It is essential to include the variety of experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ people. This is important to note as I carried out my project on the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan Nation.

Reflection and Analysis

My activity as well as the subsequent reflection were guided by several concepts from Gender and Sexuality Studies, as well as Political Science. In what follows, I analyse the activity and its outcomes guided by these, such as the panopticon, social flesh, and being "unnatural."

The Panopticon

The concept of the panopticon played a crucial role in the motivation for the project as well as its execution and analysis. The constant surveillance and visibility represented by the panopticon influenced my goal to circumvent perception. The concept of the panopticon illustrates how the constant possibility of surveillance influences people to self-monitor (Duncan, 1994). The panopticon has particularly gendered characteristics by being impacted by the patriarchy and the male gaze. It is therefore described by Barkley (2016) as "patriarchal panopticism" (p. 12). "Women internalize the gaze and turn it against themselves" (Duncan, 1994, p. 50). Based on their gender expression and/or by being

assigned female at birth, many non-binary people face difficulties not only based on their non-binary identity but based on their perceived femininity as well. There are a variety of ways in which western society reinforces the gender binary through media, education and the design of public spaces. For example, Bender-Baird (2015) examines how public bathrooms can be understood as panoptic since they contribute to the production of docile bodies by enforcing the gender binary.

On the one hand I aimed to escape panoptic institutions, but on the other hand I anticipated my own internalized panoptic gaze to present a barrier in my attempt to circumvent the gender binary. This expectation was confirmed repeatedly. In an attempt to centre my own perception and experience, I reflected on the activities through sketching. The sketches, however, reinforced my inability to escape internalized effects of panoptic structures. I automatically sketched myself as I would be perceived by someone else. Only after reflecting on this, I drew sketches which reflected my own perception of my surroundings. This underlines how through the panopticon we additionally can focus on our “output,” opposed to “input.” Besides the external reinforcement of dominant norms, their internalization consequently presents another obstacle in the way of experiencing pleasure.

Social Flesh

Lorber and Moore (2011) argue that “individual bodies are constrained and conditioned by social circumstances and are produced through the ongoing negotiation of social power, historical trends, and cultural expectations” (p. 219). The social trends and expectations that are particularly influential in the production of non-binary bodies arise from the gender binary, and consequently lead to a construction of non-binary bodies as abject by falling outside these norms. Being perceived as non-binary then can lead to social punishments for non-conformity. At the same time, passing as cisgender comes with

privileges for example in terms of safety, but also entails psychological as well as social burdens, as Anderson (2020) explains. It demands a continuous assessment of one's surroundings in order to decide which identity aspects to disclose to whom. This in turn can lead to distance and isolation from others. This emotional discomfort is an aspect that I aimed to explore through the different levels of disclosure in my project. I reflected that I was most comfortable, in terms of my gender identity, in the presence of another non-binary person, as I felt that my identity was not only known or accepted but understood.

I first treated my company as standing in for social circumstances. Analysing this experience in the context of social flesh, I relied on the argument that “[c]ommunity norms and expectations determine the meanings of bodies and their relative value” (Lorber & Moore, 2011, p. 224). The only “community” where being non-binary can sincerely be said to fall within the community norms would be with my non-binary friend. Second, I treated the situation as an imaginary social vacuum. Lorber and Moore (2011) argue that “individual bodies are constrained and conditioned by social circumstances” (p. 219). By reframing the situation as a vacuum, I was able to observe a relative absence of constraint and conditioning. Through this absence of outside perception, I experienced an absence of misperception. Based on the understanding of gender as socially constructed, this construction of a hypothetical vacuum however means a change in the conceptualisation of gender identities. Non-binary identities, after all, are defined in relation to the gender binary. Imagining a space where the gender binary does not exist, I am not non-binary, I just am. This thought experiment was maybe the most freeing aspect of my reflection. It emphasized how labels reflect normative assumptions, as Braithwaite and Orr (2016) argue, and highlighted how the construction of gender in our society demands people to position themselves in relation to the dominant norm, even if they fall outside of it. Besides reinforcing the understanding of gender as a social construct, my activities highlighted the social construction of the relevance of gender. If

nothing else, I realised how I did not think about gender when I was too busy keeping a meaningless but very loud conversation going to avoid bears.

Being “Unnatural”

Because of the role that nature played in my activities, it is relevant to take into consideration that queer people in general are frequently regarded as unnatural in many societies. I had two main approaches in dealing with this in my project. The first was through my activity, during which I learned to alter my own perception through the positive experiences in nature. While I am sure that I was disturbing wildlife with my presence, the disturbance was not based on my gender identity. The second was active unlearning through information. I looked into different academic approaches such as queer ecology or projects such as the *Queerness in Nature* exhibition at Kew Gardens (Johnston, 2023). I learned that removing one’s body spatially is not sufficient in the pursuit of pleasure. Instead, continuous and active unlearning is necessary to counter internalized dominant ideologies.

Cautions

There were several elements of my activity which I reflected on more critically, such as mentioned limitations of my own perspective. Every non-binary person has a unique experience with gender and nature. Additionally, it is important to note my privilege in being able to spend time outdoors in terms of safety, resources, time and access. Finally, I think that it is critical to avoid an oversimplification or romanticisation of the idea of escaping into nature. Due to the mentioned unequal access and also because non-binary people, like everyone else, should not have to forego community.

Conclusions

The absence of perception highlights potentials as well as limitations for non-binary people's pleasure. It can be a valuable aspect in feeling joy as a non-binary person since it does allow one to experience the absence of misperception and misgendering. However, this "escape" needs to be combined with active unlearning and, as the concept of social flesh highlights, community inclusion, particularly the inclusion in communities in which we are accepted and understood.

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