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# The Story of a Changeling Femme: My Mutable Gender Journey

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## **Abstract**

In this essay, I will talk about my experience of gender variance, fluid femininities, and how they are encompassed and informed by my liminal life experiences and identities. I will use the “changeling” archetype to illustrate my many selves and encompass them all into one discursive space. Through the telling of my story, I endeavour to reclaim that term as an autistic and bipolar adult who feels otherworldly. This strange—or “queer”—experience of selfhood is in fact my gender. These liminal embodiments are, in fact, indicative of my changeling femmehood itself.

## **Keywords**

changeling, chronic illness, transgender, witchcraft, neurodivergence

## What is a Changeling?

In medieval Europe, the changeling was a mythical creature. It was supposed that a child who acted odd or different was actually a changeling: a faerie that had replaced a human child. Today, historians have interpreted the changeling myth as created to describe and explain autistic and/or chronically ill characteristics. I ask you all to keep the concept of a changeling in mind as I tell my life story.

## Fey Girlhood

I have always been multiplicitous. I was born a girl. I experienced the world as a fey fragile creature, out of place in, and yet enchanted by, the world. This is where I derive my femininity. I played by myself for the most part. I was incredibly sensitive to the language of the Eairth, a term to conceptualize an Earth that encompasses air and climate, coined by David Abram (2010), and responded intuitively. I loved tulips, and my backyard flower garden. I would create (imaginary?) portals in the trees, and crawl through, changed. I spoke to ghosts. My experience of girlhood was inherently magical, not unlike the way a faerie would play and be.



## Preteen and Teenage Years

During my preteen years, I became self-conscious of my appearance. I was no longer immersed in my present experience because I was

experiencing bullying for the first time by other girls in my class. When I acted effusive and excited about anything, I found that my peers treated me unkindly. I internalized the belief that too much self-expression was repulsive. So, I retreated into my mind; my body was now a separate entity that held all the trauma of the bullying. I was stuck in my head, and my outward presentation at this time was mediated by an expectation of smallness. Not only was my body itself scrawny and small, but my aesthetic presentation became very slight. My femininity was quiet, docile, agreeable. I was performing a very claustrophobic femininity, fearing that if I took my mind off my body and my present environment, I would be psychologically harmed, punished for my lack of compliance with that which was expected of me by the other girls. One of the only times I felt able to try on different, bolder, expressions of self was at Halloween—a liminal day in and of itself where, traditionally, it is said that one is between worlds. The veil between the Spirit world and human world is thinner; both worlds are accessible at once. I find it fitting that this is when I experienced the most freedom during my terribly repressed preteen and early teen years.



Later in my teenage years, I was able to transfer out of the high school where I continued to

experience bullying, and into the public school in my town. This was an important change for me. I was able to express myself more openly. I was bold, both outwardly and in my personality. I was outspoken and stood up for the beliefs and ideals that I held dear. I experimented with clashing patterns and had the chance to model for my photography class multiple times. I was able to connect with an adolescent whimsy, different from what I experienced as a kid, yet still authentic to my new age and life experience.



### College Experimentation

In college, I experienced my first depressive, and then manic, psychotic episode. I was terrified of other people, and of myself. I tried to dissociate from my presentation. I became thin through this disconnect, and I presented more boyishly. I was self-conscious. In pictures of myself from this time, you can see the mania and/or vacancy in my eyes. I didn't put much effort into my appearance, preferring to throw myself into intense situations without much self-awareness. For example, during my second year, I spent two weeks traveling through five different countries in Europe, staying in hostels, wandering around alone, only staying for three days in each city. I was bold, yes, but in a way that didn't allow for outward expression of my internal landscape because I did not have access to it.



One of these bold, impulsive decisions would end up being supportive and transformational for me. I took a semester off before my junior year to stay in a co-op in Berkeley. I had severe social anxiety, so this was like throwing myself off the deep end. In the end, it was a good experience to learn how to be around people, and to have fun—two things that were missing from my college experience so far. I had face-painting sessions with my housemates, wore funkier, patterned, campy, femme clothing, and went to Burning Man. The latter was formative for me, introducing me to the ecstasy of pure, uninhibited self-expression.

### Clowning Trip

After another year of university, I opted to go on a humanitarian clowning trip to Peru over the summer. I, once again, had a very challenging opportunity to self-express in an out-there, hyper-performative way. I wore tutus, rainbows, and frills along with a red clown nose. We visited a remote town and put on a festival for the children, leading drumming and musical sessions, dancing, singing, and playing. In a way, this was my first time since childhood of being able to connect to pure *play*. I later wrote an essay about this experience entitled “Performing Failure: Integrating Clowning and Play into the Neuroqueering Project” (Antillón 2021). In that

essay, I called the persona that I inhabited a “neuroclown,” and offered my pure, playful clown identity as a method to perform my neurodivergence without inviting unwanted judgment.

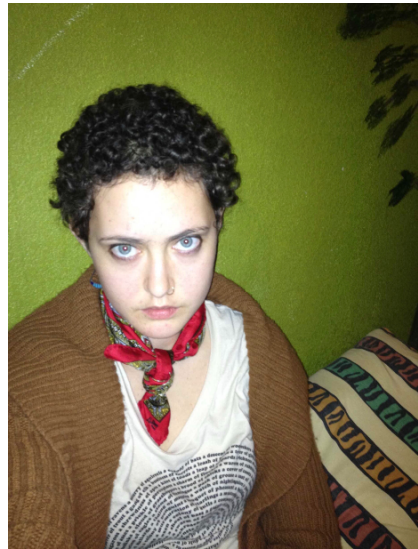


### Bipolar Diagnosis and Treatment

Unfortunately, the high that I experienced from such pure, contagious play, led to another manic episode once I re-entered the academy. My mental and physical health deteriorated, and I had to leave school to seek treatment.

When first entering the allopathic<sup>13</sup> world of medicine, in desperate need to resolve my mental storm, the doctors had a difficult time knowing where to place me. In this way, my initial diagnosis and treatment of bipolar was liminal. I wasn't responding typically to the usual medications. My symptoms resembled Bipolar I, but also didn't quite fit the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) description. So, at first, I was labeled with

“Bipolar Disorder NOS (Not Otherwise Specified).” It was a terrible and lonely experience. I eventually went through electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) in the hopes of reducing my unrelenting mania—two years in, by this time. It miraculously worked, and after that I was able to tolerate the usual medications (although I did and still do experience memory impairments due to the trauma). Today, I am able to understand myself through the lens of bipolar and understand that my wide shifts in identity and expression over time can be explained in part by this diagnosis. Bipolar has played a role in the continuous transformation of my gender expression, as it also promotes an unstable identity. I don't find fault in this. It is simply another way in which I inhabit the in-between, and hold within myself the extreme expressions of two different poles.



Today, I often try to feel like I did back when I was that femme girl. I try to get my medication dosages so that they don't make me feel so emotionally bludgeoned and flattened, so that I can experience that wonder I felt as a girl.

<sup>13</sup> Merriam-Webster defines “allopathy” is defined as “a system of medical practice that emphasizes diagnosing and treating disease and the use of conventional, evidence-based therapeutic measures (such as drugs or

surgery).” <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/allopathy>.



However, because of the way my bodymind works, I have to pass through stages of harshness. I'm a very aesthetically oriented person, and like to represent what I feel externally through fashion and makeup, so when I'm feeling harsh or frumpy, I may represent myself with less feminine wear, or I may represent myself more masculinely. Or maybe I feel like a blob of non-humanness, in which case I may dress to confuse the people around me as to who and what I am, to externalize that feeling of otherness.

### **Discovering My Queerness**

After being properly treated for my mental illness, I was able to enter back into the world. I felt as if I was a new person—the trauma I had gone through in the past few years had changed me. I felt like an adult, as opposed to an old adolescent. This had been an initiation of sorts, and I was finally able to feel my emotions and interact with people without the looming mania and dissociation that had plagued me previously. I changed my name from my birth name, Paris, to Simone, and began to inhabit this new name. One opportunity that I now had was to actually think about and explore my sexuality and gender identity. I connected with queer people online, and came out as nonbinary, using they/them pronouns as opposed to she/her which, before now, I had only used out of convenience, since they had been my pronouns from birth. This opportunity to reimagine my identity as something other than simply “girl,” was exciting. I began to queer myself through fashion as well, trying new, androgynous and tomboy outfits, new hairstyles, new makeup styles. Being queer, bisexual, and nonbinary while presenting mostly femme was a liminal space that I now inhabited. Often, despite my experimental expression, I was still simply viewed as a woman. Making that effort to be visibly nonbinary was only somewhat successful, and so, in another way, I was now toggling between visibility and invisibility—this time in my queerness.



### **Discovering My Spirituality**

Another new opportunity I had being in a more emotional stabilized place was to question and explore my spirituality. I connected with witchcraft and went to my first Witchcamp in the Mendocino woodlands. Witchcamps are a project by the International Reclaiming Witchcraft community, where we retreat and make magic and ritual together for a week. They happen all over the country and the world. I became part of the tradition after first attending. This concept of “reclaiming” has been and would be essential to my lived experience, so finding a tradition that included the word in its name was a beautiful synchronicity. In this context, we were reclaiming our birthright to practice Paganism in connection to and worship of the land. After Witchcamp, I began to dress differently. I wore more dresses, including silver and blue velvet dresses, sparkly shirts, and a pentacle necklace. I wanted to be seen as someone who was in touch with the more-than-human. The more-than-human included the faerie world, and this was the first time my identification with feyness was validated as legitimate, true, and not simply archetypal affinity.



### Connecting With My Mixed Ancestry

Soon after connecting with spirituality through this tradition, I was encouraged to look into my ancestry. I found out where in Latin America and Europe my ancestors were from, what some of their names were, what types of magic were traditionally practiced, and what their various traditional cosmologies looked like. It became important to me to acknowledge the mix of white and brown ancestries I contained within me, within one person. Holding these various manifestations of race and ethnicity is another liminality I embody.



### Gemini Mutability

Learning about astrology was interesting to me because it validated the mutability of my selfhood. Gemini is one of four “mutable” signs, and is also associated with the planet Mercury, and thus is a mercurial identity. Merriam-Webster defines “mutable” as “capable of change or of being changed,” and “mercurial” is defined as “characterized by rapid and unpredictable changeableness of mood.” I contain multitudes, and different facets of my personality and identity show up at different times. This may seem erratic to some, but experimenting with different genders and presentations has been a part of my embodiment of Gemini mutability.



### Autism Diagnosis

Once I was diagnosed with autism as an adult, I had a revelation. That fey femme embodiment that I had as a young child was actually my autism, not yet pushed and pulled by the stresses of survival. Moving between worlds is something autistic people do well. That aloof and whimsical nature that I embodied is a common trait of autism in children because we are experiencing so much at once. I interpret this experience of the All—all that exists on this Earth (Abram 2010) and beyond—as a gift, an ability to shift into perceiving aspects of things unseen by neurotypicals. I believe that autistic people are

naturally spiritually gifted because we have this other-awareness from birth.

How funny and accurate, then, that autism used to be understood as the replacement of a human child with a faerie one. How well this explains my feeling of otherness, of shifting between worlds, of whimsical, fragile femininity. This is how faeries are described, this whimsy and between-worlds-ness, and this is how I see myself deep down. I have always felt like I do not fit into the concept of gender at all, so I have used gender as a performance of what I am feeling at particular times in my life. No matter how I am presenting and identifying, I feel to an extent that I am “tricking” people into believing that I am who I say I am. Many autistic people with whom I have communicated feel this way. I see my otherworldiness in autism and gender as related. That uncanny ability to trick or fool people into believing I am something other than what I “am,” has been an important part of my changing gender identities and presentations.



### Chronic Illness Emergence

It is important that I touch on an aspect of my experience that involves liminality: my chronic illness. I have been experiencing chronic illness symptoms since 2012, but they were long overshadowed by the intense madness with which I had been dealing. After a few years of being stable on medication, I began to experience

extreme fatigue, brain fog, continuing digestive issues, and pain. I began walking with a cane. I often felt on the verge of death, or on the verge of something mysterious and sickly. I towed the line between trying to have a life well-lived, and battling the symptoms that made me feel like nothing, like no one. I danced on the edge of the void, trying my best to feel its cool air pulling me, without falling in. Flares were unpredictable, so sometimes I'd be able to participate in the world more actively than other times, often becoming debilitated again without warning. I would ask myself, “was my illness legitimate or was I ‘faking it?’” Besides my cane and my weight gain associated with my symptoms, my chronic illness was mostly invisible. In that sense, also, I inhabited the liminal space between being seen and being unseen in my struggles.



### Becoming a Trans Man

At a certain point in my queer journey, I felt called to present more masculine, to use he/him pronouns and call myself a trans man. For me personally, it was an experiment—I had been seen and interacted with as a femme nonbinary person, and often a woman, for my entire life. I needed to know for sure whether being a man was something that would make me feel like myself. It was an interesting and informative experience, and although I only lasted several months in this iteration of myself, it was still a significant and



relevant experience that I continue to hold with me in my expansive experience of genderfluidity.



### Returning to Femininity

Growing out of my transmasculine identity, I began to express myself more femininely again. As I have grown and transformed, I have experienced many states of gender and proximity to femininity, and yet I always return to this primal femmehood. I now identify as genderfluid, because all of my iterations of embodiment, even the ones which I have left behind, are crucial to my understanding of my changeable gender.



### Reclaiming Changeling Femmehood

I reclaim the changeling archetype and magical reality as a term to describe my varied embodiments. My neurodivergent experiences are inherently queer, as they situate my bodymindspirit in a position of “Other,” and as such, inform my experience of genderfluidity. For all these reasons I am a changeling. My changeling femmehood is at once liminal and expansive, encompassing all of my manifestations of self.





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## Author Biography

Paris Simone Mágdala Antillón is a subversive thinker, wounded healer, and genderfluid bisexual. Her experience of the world is mediated by her neurodivergence and chronic illness, as well as her spiritual orientation towards animism and magic. Simone is passionate about nutrition, herbalism, somatics, photography, occultism, astrology, glamour and fashion, and dance. She studied at Bard College and the California Institute of Integral Studies, the latter from which she got her B.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies. She has big dreams. Currently in school to become a nutritional therapist, she eventually intends to unite her studies of holistic healing modalities and cultural anthropology together in a graduate program.