
The Liminal Femme for Nonbinary Thriving: A Narrative Reclamation of Femininities from A Transmasculine Perspective

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Abstract

This conference allowed me the chance to explore my liminal femme, transmasculine gender. I approached the work as an experimental reflection, inspired by feminist autoethnographies (Mackinlay 2021) and my background in social-developmental psychology—namely, the empowering Photovoice methodology (Budig et al. 2018). During my presentation, I shared my “gender story” using personal photographs to trace the development of my current understanding of gender. However, for the sake of privacy, in this written paper I have substituted the photographs with vignettes of a similar effect. Through this narrative, I expose the entanglements of life, death, and gender; challenging rigid notions of binary, linear, and isolated existence.

Keywords

liminal femininity, transgender experience, nonbinary, liminal identity, transmasculinity, gender narratives

Beginnings

Much has come before me, the person writing this. My family is from small, settler towns in the Treaty 4 and Treaty 6 territories of so-called Saskatchewan, and their roots stretch even further back to British, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh farmlands. I was born on the island of Taiwan as my parents taught abroad. When I was two years old, my parents moved to Mohkinstsis (Calgary)—the land adjacent to where the Bow River meets the Elbow river—which is located on Treaty 7 territory.

In the spirit of respect, reciprocity and truth, I honour and acknowledge Mohkinstsis, and the traditional Treaty 7 territory and oral practices of the Blackfoot confederacy: Siksika, Kainai, Piikani, as well as the Îyâxe Nakoda and Tsuut'ina nations. This territory is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3 within the historical Northwest Métis homeland.

I try to live in a way that both honours and returns the innumerable kindnesses I, my family, and all my relations have received from the Land as I work towards “[recognizing, refusing and rebelling] against what has not ended: sexism, racism, capitalism *and* colonialism” (Ahmed 2017, 31).

Open Eyes

My first vivid memory is from the age of three, practicing writing my name at the plastic picnic table my parents moved into the living room of their former apartment to spare it from the winter snow. I remember snippets from before then—of lost toys and scratchy clothes—but none with the emotional significance of independently writing my name for the first time.

At that table, there was also a spattering of scribbles and straight lines, explorations of colour and shape—more abstract compositions than genuine attempts at recreating reality. Of course, when asked, I'd lie and say they were trees, cats, or some relative of mine. The adults in my life could never tell the difference, and pretending the drawings were concrete was less of a hassle than explaining how a yellow squiggle can be enhanced by green and orange crosshatching to

create a pleasing aesthetic.

That eye for aesthetic composition extends beyond the page. There is a palatable satisfaction in witnessing the empirical orderliness of science books and the engineered exactness of Lego. Yet I was always aware those structured processes and clean combinations were temporary and illusory. Each Duplo brick was a slightly different size, and books claiming to describe the *entire* solar system only discussed the nine main planets. The same units were constantly recombining in nearly identical ways, but each deviation told a slightly different story.

I explored this notion most while playing dress-up. I was not casual about it, creating unique characters for each outfit. The world-famous diva was horribly shy despite her flashy feather boa, enormous wig, and amazing repertoire. That's why she always wore sunglasses. The pretentious *artiste* knew his cup-and-string creation was his worst work, but he was compelled to defend his art to the bitter end. The ballet teacher was struggling to hide faer fairy princess origins and the harsh movie critic secretly loved every film ze watched. The challenge of dress-up was to exemplify each person through their outfit; the reward was exploring the experience of that person.

There was no gender in this playing—just creativity and curiosity. Gender is not a solitary activity; it is, after all, a *social* construct. I begin at a time before “boy” or “girl” are meaningful terms. I was never a “girl”; I was a learner, a scientist, a teacher, an artist.

It was upon entering elementary school that I began noticing the strange concept of “gendered play.” Peers excluded me for not playing house, wearing pink, or watching “girls” shows. My divergences from femininity made me a target for bullying from a clique of popular girls, though more progressive teachers celebrated my “boyish” interest in STEM. And to maintain my “authenticity,” my mother refused to buy me pink clothes, accessories, and cheap trinkets—all of the status symbols which would allow me onto the playground with my classmates.

At the same time, my mother was also slowly replacing my toy cars with baby dolls and diapers,

and my Barbies all received new and modest clothes. The message was clear. From childhood, a strict, binarized gender was only going to grow in importance. I had to begin preparing for womanhood and practicing for motherhood.

These sudden changes confused me, but I was willing to play along. At school, it was easy to figure out what was expected from me by observing my peers. Mimicry was harder—at least at home—again, because of my mother. I explained the social situation as best I could to her, yet all of this yielded the same lecture: “You don’t need to be like those girls. If you were like them, you’d be a bully too. One day, when you’re older, you’ll see how dumb and unhappy all the cool, popular girly-girls really are. You don’t need to change. You’re good the way you are, you are safe the way you are, and you don’t ever need all those things. *Hide it under a bushel? No! I’m gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*”

Stolen Clothes

My mother knew who I was from the moment I was born. I was quirky, smart, and empathetic. I liked learning, stories, arts and crafts. I was too shy in public but too loud at home. It was inevitable that I would be bullied, but it didn’t bother me *that* much. Fickle things, like appearances, make-up, and socializing, were unimportant to me. My mother’s role was to ensure I remained authentically myself from birth until death.

It was impossible to persuade her that I had desires of my own free will that were *overlapping* with modern femininity, rather than conforming to it. I was trying to be myself, trying to learn my likes and dislikes, trying to forge my identity. I *could* enjoy “popular” things; I *wanted* to be social. I couldn’t understand why pursuing my desires was such a terrible thing, only that she disapproved of the more expressive aspects of who I was starting to become. In the same breath, she’d encourage me to pursue “my” individuality and “shine baby, shine.”

I was most persistent in my pursuit of femme presentation. Clothes shopping was an impasse; I

refused all my mother’s boxy t-shirts and plain jeans, and she refused anything more form fitting. Finally, my father intervened and became responsible for buying new clothes every few months. I noticed as that clothing disappeared from my closet. My mother frowned each morning as I left the house, suggesting I change into something I would actually be comfortable in. She taught me that gender expression, especially femme-ness, was more than patriarchal conformity—it was an unnecessary risk. Perhaps she was trying to prevent me from experiencing whatever had happened to her, or to simply spare me from the pains of womanhood in the age of “lipstick feminism.” I recognize that act of love, now, but I have never respected it. It was a limit on my growth, the creation of myself.

Soon, what little connection we had from my childhood had vanished. Our conversations became terse, business-like affairs. My performance as her daughter and a future mother was not meeting expectations. I would be required to take babysitting courses.

Puberty

In our first elementary school sexual education class, we were assigned a “puberty plan” worksheet to help us and our parents prepare when the changes began. I had already started my period, likely the earliest bloomer in my grade, and was desperate for pads, bras, and my mother’s support. I cornered my reluctant mother in her room, showed her the assignment, and proudly described my changing body.

After simply signing the worksheet, my mother sighed, “I’ll let you fill this out yourself. You know you best. Just tell me if there’s anything you need and I’ll add it to the grocery list.” Nervously wringing her hands, she continued, “It’s not easy for young girls who are becoming women. People might start to treat you different, or ask you to do strange things. You have to keep yourself safe. Don’t have sex until you’re much, much older.” She left. The conversation couldn’t have lasted more than ten minutes. It was the only time a talk with her was short. I heard her crying. Months later, she finally

took me to Walmart, urging me to choose the cheapest pads and the most unappealing sports bras.

Let it Shine

Growing up, my mother was a member of her small-town United Church, and she would remain one for the rest of her life. She was the smartest, fattest girl in town, so religion had an abundance of opportunity to enter her life as a coping mechanism in the face of the harassment she received. She was too familiar with the cruelty of children, especially popular blonde girls privileged with rich parents, but she believed in the Christian ways of turning cheeks and refusing to hide under bushels. Like many religious teachings, these are not inherently bad messages—*authenticity* is admirable.

Authenticity also had to be tough—an emotional callous forged through loud, unwavering commitments. My mother's identity was static, codified by society and tested by conformist temptations. She would persistently withstand any hardship and refuse to betray herself with flexibility or compromise because this persistence built character, and staggering from a blow was a personal weakness.

From my perspective, this belief was fuel for a cycle of victimization which was forced upon me. Ignoring my bullies' remarks did not make them stop, and the more genuine I was, the more deeply they could hurt me. I am not religious like my mother—I have no faith in a divine plan—and I could not suppress my emotions like she could. By the time I was 12, the harassment had driven me to suicidal ideation. I told my mom. She told me to stop pretending to be a teenager.

The Day She Left

My mother was born October 30, one month from her date of death. She was diagnosed on March 30—six months before the day she died. September 30, 2014—I opened my eyes, and she was gone.

I didn't go to her viewing. I hadn't said goodnight. A glance down the hallway. The warmly lit figure in her recliner chair was filled

with life for the first time in months. A false window into a time before chemo and death and potato leek soup reminded me that I was a failing woman of the house. I left her to that golden moment, unable to bear stealing that rare smile. She died hours later, ugly on the living room floor in the haunted black-blue predawn light. The paramedics took her before I opened my eyes.

I didn't go to her viewing. I hadn't said goodnight. A glance down the hallway. The lunar dust on her recliner chair reflected the black-blue light before dawn. I made my eyeliner bolder that morning and wore my deepest-cut V-neck. I filled my tea mug under the scrutiny of my father's enraged daily chore list on the fridge. My gut rumbled, angry about another 600-calorie day, but I reassured my organs that the sacrifice was necessary so my sister would have enough to eat. The suffering would make me thin and pretty and compensate for my failures as a woman. I pocketed twenty dollars from the counter for my lunches that week and ran for the bus without a jacket. The chair's ghost called me stupid, as it had every morning for the past three years.

Female Gradwand

The problem with my body was, and always had been, my chest. Those fatty lumps pulled my shirt strangely in the shoulders, stomach and back. They ached with every breath. I turned in my mirror, assessing my profile. I'd failed yet another fasting attempt, but my boyfriend would rat to my therapist if I had any new self-harm marks. The compression from both sports bras I wore was a perfect, just-bearable agony. I sipped my coffee, sweetened with my mother's ancient Stevia, contemplating my silhouette. The shred of fullness I felt as the coffee hit my stomach didn't evoke disgust. I sipped again. There was no emotion, not even a thought about calories or deservedness.

My friend had come out as a trans man earlier in the year. I flipped my hair up into my toque, copying him, but the mimicry wouldn't be complete without relaxing my stomach. I watched my vessel, expecting tears as I witnessed the horror of my body occupying space. As with my

coffee, there was a resounding nothing. I sat on my bed, still staring seriously at myself in the mirror, as I succumbed to selfhood for the first time.

It took a year before I could properly commit to transitioning and come out as nonbinary; I couldn't risk being a "trans-trender" since I feared that would be harmful to the LGBTQ+¹ community. I cut my hair short, overhauled my wardrobe, and legally changed my name. The feminine "a" at the end of my birth name was bad, but I didn't mind the "Emm." Everything else my mother had given me needed to be tailored, so it made sense my name would need to be as well. I settled on "Emmery" since it felt nice to spell, and there was a magic to writing the name I chose independently for the first time.

Trans

Two years after coming out, I threw out my makeup. Even the slightest hint of femininity would signal to the entire world I was a woman, no matter how many voice training courses and they/them pins I wore. I'd be forced to confront people about my gender, a conversation resulting in dismissive eye rolls or overly intense apologies. I preferred the sting of dismissal—at least it made the interaction quick. I didn't need to give the increasingly false explanation that I was, "somewhere between a boy and a girl, but more on the side of boy." It wasn't a false statement, but it felt hollow. A discrete point on a binarized plane, nicely quantifiable by my gendered behaviors. Personal euphoria has no place in politics or science, so I threw out my makeup. All of it.

I grieved at the view of my eyeliner, lipstick, foundation, powder, mascara, eyeshadow, and brushes all resting in their tissue-lined casket. I remembered how hard I had fought to wear it and wondered what that rebellious preteen would feel. I mourned for the way makeup held me together in my grief, the companionship and purpose it gave me when no one else would. I'd spent years developing my relationship with makeup,

learning how it wanted to sit on my skin as I showed it the world. In return, the cosmetics had brought out the contorted shreds of myself, my true self, that would have remained trapped inside me. Confidence, calm, attractiveness, wit, a reason to keep going. My makeup kept me alive, yet I could say nothing to it when we parted.

I tried to convince myself that my rebellious foray into the femme was over. I accepted my mother had always been right about me—I wasn't like the other girls; I didn't need "femininity" to be happy. Any enjoyment I had felt from femme presentation was because of the patriarchy or transphobia, and I could take comfort in finally finding the "right" labels. Friends and family encouraged me to spread my mother's ashes, to let her go and move on with life. It's what she would have wanted for me. My skin crawls. It's not what I need for me.

Betwixt and Between

My eyes burn, forcing me to blink. I simply cannot read fast enough. "Queer Death Studies: Death, Dying and Mourning from a Queerfeminist Perspective" (Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke 2020) sits buried under a rainbow of highlights and notes. I cackle, shooting a smile over at my mother's ashes; I'm a mad scientist communicating with my assistant. Five therapists, countless recommendations—rest, cognitive behavioral therapy, connecting with loved ones, antidepressants, writing her letters, hypnosis, joining a support group—and I finally find answers.

Finally, I find people who call "closure" what it really is—a futile attempt at forgetting grief. Finally, there are others like me who refuse to vilify grief and see it for what it is: a time-traveling necromancer who lets us revisit what we lost at the price of pain. The emotions and memories attached to our loved ones do not leave us when their body dies, nor do we stop thinking about the departed. Cognitively and emotionally, the dead continue to exist in the present through the living (Alasuutari 2021).

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus all other communities of sexual, romantic, and gender

Similarly, life and death exceed their rigid, mutually exclusive, categorical distinctions of “here” and “not.” Therefore, the state of existence itself is made nonbinary (Radomska, Mehrabi, and Lykke 2020). I construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the narrative of how I am entwined with my mother. She died and I lived, we live and we die, I will die and she will live. I resurrect her memory, which decays with each retelling. Grief neither embalms nor cremates. It composts, turning her into rich soil. She rots. I settle into a perpetual space held betwixt and between, *trans*-itioning.

I excitedly share these discoveries with my living peers, only to be met with considerable confusion. I reassure them, I know my mother is dead and that I am alive. The philosophically minded appreciate the mental exercise, the kind are glad I found something for my grief, and the rest worry for my sanity, no longer fully sane after confronting the “conditions of absolute reality” (Jackson and Miller 2006) for so long. I will admit, I get lost to the fog of queer, crip, feminist, (post/de)colonial, and posthuman theories. But they are the only way I can dream.

Femme

“There are he/him lesbians, but no she/her gay men. What’s the deal with that?” My partner questions, skillfully tracing their lids with black liner. Their hand remains steady despite the dynamism of their voice and quick glances towards me in the mirror.

“Nothing’s stopping you from being a she/her gay man, babe,” I reply, distracted by the spectacle of their dressing room. I’m honoured to be invited backstage to witness the rehearsal of their feminine performance.

“I wish I had a top hat,” they bemoan, blinking to check the evenness of their wings.

“We can look for one when we get my tie,” I suggest. “Maybe one with some florals.” Black, of course, balanced between ornate and extravagant. I think of an evergreen ribbon to match the tie I dreamt for myself, too.

“That’d be nice,” they muse, beginning to apply their black lipstick. I feel the tug of a frown,

knowing I’ll have to wait a few hours to kiss them properly. I’m always so lost in the experience of them that I forget to ask for one before they’ve carefully constructed the even more kissable outline. Perhaps it’s best I don’t kiss them first, the inertia of it might make it hard to get out the door. I press my hands further into my pockets, dragging my eyes from their waist to their voluminous curls. The all-black outfit relies on textures and shades, and that silky storm cloud perfectly complements the lace and tulle of their dress. Once again, I find I’m staring at their waist, and lower, and higher, and their waist again. They turn to retrieve their lacy shawl.

Their dress is a marvel, near tailored to their frame save for their shoulders. Often, they bemoan the masculinity of their frame; the limits it places on their fashion. I always reassure them women’s clothing is a practice of love and loss. I ask my mother how to tailor, willing her to show me the seams she would have known to rip. My instinct is to attach clasps to the shoulders as to retain the effect of the dress’s back silhouette. On a slightly lighter skin tone, the gentle inwards curve would contrast loudly with the skin, widening the shoulders while shrinking the rest of the body. I use the same technique to hide my bust, lifted from the contraband women’s fashion and grooming book smuggled to me by my dance teacher. But my partner’s warm honey complexion compliments black like none other. The symbiotic care between dress and skin transfers any excess thought of “broadness” from the shoulders down to the waist, the exchange of tones made visible by the lace bodice.

That bodice, my wingman, whispers of the bra underneath and confides the shapeliness of their hips as it introduces me to the tulle skirt. Forever my ally, the curve of the lace seam cuts the meeting of fabric short, urging my eyes upwards as my partner turns around. The shawl, tied in a simple knot beneath their silver deer skull necklace gives the illusion of a bust. They must know how inten(t/se)ly I’m staring. My usual attempts at subtly are forgotten when I watch their spectacle. It takes effort to not gape in awe, just as it takes effort to restrain myself from caressing them. They smile sweetly, somewhere between

coy and cocky, swaying in playful embarrassment. I return their smile, cheeks warm.

“You look *great*,” I compliment, hoping to erase any sliver of genuine shyness.

“It still needs something,” they announce, taking a quick glance in the mirror.

“Gloves?” I suggest, angling my chin towards the garments on their desk as the image of elbow-length, lace-trimmed evening gloves tickles my mind. One day, they’ll have an assortment of accessories from every goth subculture they want (and that I might borrow, on occasion). I think of wardrobes, how the mirrored door of my old wardrobe framed my face as I sobbed for my mother to leave me alone, how that old wardrobe was much heftier than the old rickety closet mirrors my partner slides aside to retrieve their coat.

The gentle pouffe fur and matte synthetic wool accentuate the delicate laces, tulle and curls I’d become deeply familiar with over the past few minutes. The already stunning outfit is enhanced by their gloves and boots; the silver metallics would match their necklace as the glossy leathers would mimic the shine of their hair, as to give the extremities, from head to toe, an outwards radiance grounded to their chest.

“I feel so underdressed next to you,” I confess, gesturing to my plain hoodie and jeans. “This is barely even an outfit.”

“Anything is an outfit when you feel confident in it,” my partner reassured me. “That’s why fashion matters so much to me—it’s all the things I personally like and want to be.”

Mother Fears Masculine Tits

I have a habit of getting consumed by my own reflection. I trip on the sidewalk watching my stride in shop windows. I’m too distracted by my warped face in the teaspoon to hear my grandma’s question. I watch myself watch myself in the bathroom mirror instead of brushing my teeth. My mother nicknamed me Narcissus when she discovered I’d snuck away from Christmas dinner to sit alone in front of my aunt’s mirror closet. It’s not narcissism or dysmorphia that draws me into the reflection. I’m just curious about the person

staring back at me. I know who they are, but I can never quite place *what* they are.

I know the physics of mirrors, how the light reflects off my face onto the surface and back into my eyes. I know the person I see is just a little bit more green than I am, since mirrors are just a little bit green. I know they’re me but opposite, and that they disappear when I walk away. They exist without the ability to live or die, trapped by physical laws and human whims. The poor human-like electron, ripped from the joy of its quantum form. When I blink, they’re freed from observation. I open my eyes and cruelly trap another. I don’t think they’re the same person staring back at me. Their eyes might be a little different, somehow. It’s impossible to know without looking twice, and I only get to have one look. The longer I stare at them, the less I see as they gradually disentangle from me. I blink again.

I see myself existing between many things, never resting entirely in a category or sitting neatly in a state of being. Awake and asleep, alive and dead, “boy” and “girl.” I’m comfortable in the intersectional quantum field. It’s a place equipped to handle my paradoxes and in-betweens, letting me breathe as an anti-categorical, liminal “I”dentity (Gunnarsson 2017). It’s not an easy space to maintain, since paradoxes have their way of falling apart. It’s not an easy space to be in either, since I will inevitably be observed in some way, somehow, by someone or something, which flings me into a discrete form. My body demands sleep, or I need to use the gendered public restrooms. I blink again.

It’s truthful. That’s what matters to me. It’s a brutally honest and truthful way of being. I will always be a little bit masculine and a little bit feminine. I can be both at once, and neither. My periods are brutal, my makeup and heels command respect. My femininity is as masculine, loud, and aggressive as my masculinity is femme, gentle, and subtle. I meticulously buff and file my nails; my stride is quiet and controlled. I am not androgynous—at least, not to those who can see beyond my trans biology. It is a rapid, joyful ping-ponging between extremes, averaging out to

centre-ish. “Bothness” doesn’t mean blended. I blink again.

Liminal femininity allows me to exist as a gendered entity. I will never be masculine “enough” just as I will never be feminine “enough” to fit rigid gender roles, whatever those are. I disagree with the notion of masculinity being the gender neutral and with the notion of patriarchy barring me from being “masculine enough.” The patriarchy can try all it wants, but it won’t win against Newton. A part of myself will always act in equal opposition to the hegemonic forces exerted on me. I blink again.

All things progress towards entropy—a state of disorder and randomness—and it takes energy to prevent that decay. I think that’s why my reflection fascinates me, but I feel uncanny seeing myself in photos. If mirrors are liminal catch-and-release, then photographs are trophy hunting. The person in those photos isn’t anymore, hasn’t been for years or for milliseconds, but everyone points and says, “look, it’s you!” I lie and say it is as I blink again to end that self’s discomfort.

I wonder, does my mother smile or frown when she sees me like this? I don’t own any pink clothing, but only because I found that greens, the colors of growth, suit my complexion better. Or maybe it’s just the complexion of the person in the mirror. The problem was never pink anyway. I try my best to conform and I’m not always “authentic,” but I’m always truthful to myself. No one else is obliged to know what that truth is. I am the happiest, the most myself, I have ever been. And for that, I think she smiles, at least a little bit.

I leave the bathroom, and I’m led back to where I started: (de)composing myself, free to scribble whatever combinations of colors and shapes will suit me best.

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- marginalized groups' histories and lived experiences. Between work shifts and poetry readings, Emmery can be found relaxing on the balcony with some coffee, their partner, and their cat, Javabeen.

Author Biography

Emmery Poppleton (they/he) is a gender non-conforming, transmasculine person residing in Mohkinstsis (Calgary) on Treaty 7 land. They are taking a gap year after completing an Honours degree in Psychology. However, that hasn't stopped them from exploring