

## Trans Bodies and Burgers: *Change* and a Theory-of-my-flesh

Before I turned nineteen, I couldn't feel. I was almost entirely numb to emotion, and when I could feel something it was likely a fleeting moment of shame heavily blanketed by overwhelming apathy. I thought, for much of that time, that depression had another victim in its senseless clutches—that there was nothing I could do, nothing I ever could have done, and that I would succumb at one point or another. Dopamine knew me only vaguely, but those primeval shortcuts to happiness—namely masturbation and eating food—still rang true to my brain. In turn, I engaged in both almost constantly. I gained weight, as happens when one eats without regard for one's body. I knew I should stop—I didn't feel good about it—but I couldn't make myself do anything. Doctors would label me obese, I didn't really care. The depression that manifested in me via dysphoria cancelled out any primal, self-preserving instinct I had. If I was supposed to care about the future, why could I not envision one with myself in it? I hated looking in the mirror, but solace came from knowing that it was all temporary. I didn't have to change myself or lose weight—I wouldn't last much longer anyway. That passive ideation characterized nearly my entire teenage years. Even after realizing the transgender nature of my depression, there wasn't anything I could do until I turned eighteen. And by then, of course, I wouldn't be around.

But after highschool, the dose of freedom that came with moving to university gave my angst-addled mind the opportunity to explore what *change*<sup>1</sup> could mean for my body. By the nature of having to walk everywhere, I lost weight, and by the nature of being in college, I ate less. Coupled with the brand-new environment I was in, I started conceptualizing a world with myself in it—a changed self, but myself nonetheless. At the end of the year, I started hormone replacement therapy in a last-ditch effort to find some semblance of happiness. *Change* or die, I believe, was the unspoken contract. In the year that followed, my experience was two-fold; estrogen granted me the ability to finally feel emotion, but my life turned upside-down when I had to move back home. I wasn't ready to come out yet, so I repressed myself even further—that old hopeless mindset merged with my newfound faith in *change* in an ugly way. At the end of yet another year, I once again shifted location, this time to university again (albeit, a different one). I had come out to my parents, friends, and to-be roommate by this point, but I still wasn't in a good place by any means. College, however, gave me the autonomy to choose what I ate to a greater extent. In choosing my foods and choosing to walk everywhere, I started once again to lose some of my weight. The more I walked, the better I felt, and the more I experienced life as an out trans person, the future that I envisioned in my mind began to stretch. My temporal imagination was beyond anything it had ever been; finding meaning through *change* had saved me.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the word “change” is italicized to identify its use in my main theory, whereas an unitalicized version indicates the colloquial usage of the term.

The bodily changes that come with taking estrogen have reshaped my priorities—I have an actual desire to exist in my body, I want to be alive now. Feminizing HRT works best when its user is actively gaining weight—the only fat that gets redistributed is fat gained after having started hormones<sup>2</sup>—and this scientific fact has spurred a rhetoric from trans women that is the subject of this essay. I am, of course, talking about the “burger mandate,” as I call it—the imperative for trans women to gain weight so as to maximize their HRT gains.<sup>3 4</sup> The “burger mandate” often takes the form of trans women on the internet posting pictures of food (nearly always fast food, and very often Wendy’s baconators or Raising Cane’s chicken) with the caption being some variation of “get fatter now,”<sup>5</sup> or “if you’re trans you have to eat a burger.”<sup>6</sup> These posts, upon first read, set a seemingly good precedent. The call for trans women to gain weight so as to maximize the effects of feminizing hormones can be a good thing—I fully admit that. The problem, I find, with the “burger mandate” lies in the underlying assumptions made about the average trans woman subtextually. Primarily, it assumes that the average trans woman wants to a) gain weight, and b) change their body in a way associated with feminizing hormones. Before diving in, I should emphasize that I’m, of course, not claiming that every trans woman who promotes the “burger mandate” is guilty of this. In my own research and personal experience asking for solutions via online spaces, however, there remain but a few answers provided for trans women who don’t wish to change their bodies in this way.

I spent so long laying out my history with food and my body for a few reasons. The first reason is a self-indulgent one, and it is that by writing my thoughts down I process them in a more comprehensible way. My mind is often a cluttered collection of constellations—concepts and half-formed theories connected as messy webs in incomprehensible ways. Writing down this history allows me to verbalize these thoughts, and better organize my own life in a way I prefer. The second reason is that this essay’s structure is informed by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s conception of a “theory in the flesh.” This kind of theory is built off the experiences of one’s body, and bridges the gaps between lived existence and theory. By conjoining theory alongside the practice (though not necessarily conscious practice) of said theory, we create a politic that suits our specific needs and experiences.<sup>7</sup> My theory in this paper is not meant to apply to everyone, and that is okay. I simply wish to detail some of my own experiences and place them within a framework that highlights my perspective on some contemporary trans issues. I chose to write this paper in such a way because it felt conducive to the subject at hand. This is a theory of my own body—a theory-of-my-flesh.

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<sup>2</sup> See Deutsch, “Information on Estrogen Hormone Therapy”; any number of chronically online tgirls

<sup>3</sup> Footnotes with social media posts are not meant to insinuate the true and actual opinions of the posters, just that such a sentiment exists in online transfem spaces.

<sup>4</sup> See @GRUGCEL, “i promise the burger thing isnt some feederism...”

<sup>5</sup> See @jakkie2220, “yes.. get fatter...”

<sup>6</sup> See @selfbegotten, “if ur trans u have to eat a burger”; @J4m\_s, “If you’re trans you have to eat burger”

<sup>7</sup> See Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*



The “burger mandate” highlights a contradiction in contemporary trans rhetoric that I wish to engage with. Upon promoting a goal that subverts the sexist expectations of thinness placed on all women, the “burger mandate” over-corrects to an ideology that erases the struggles of trans women such as my own: women whose disordered relationships to food involved (and continue to involve) eating too much, not too little. This problem runs far deeper than trans women making jokes on social media; it is an ingrained manifestation of anti-fatness, even within its subversion. Trans women are expected to be “blank slates” at the beginning of their transition,<sup>8</sup> and in a society where normative means thin, such an expectation turns into an anti-fat practice. A [Tik-Tok audio](#) by @ickee, a popular trans content creator, highlights this issue, stating “I love seeing baby trans women glow up. You follow some, like, twink guy who’s, like, experimenting with makeup... forget about them for a year... and then you see the hottest woman you have ever seen in your entire life” (2023). Via the (unnecessary, I may add) inclusion of the word “twink” in such a statement, @ickee (either knowingly or unknowingly) emphasizes a bodily transition timeline that doesn’t account for trans women who have fat before transitioning. Such a timeline is reinforced by the more contemporary “burger mandate,” which, in attempting to promote healthier eating habits for trans women, assumes the nature of the trans reader’s relationship to food. Deconstructing this assumed model of transfemininity—a model which assumes thinness and a specific facet of disordered eating behavior—is crucial to fostering a more inclusive dialogue on the topic of trans bodies.

This kind of rhetoric isn’t just harmful in theory, but harmful in practice, and it is for the purpose of demonstrating this point that I went so in-depth about my past and current-day struggles with my body and relationship to food. In searching for answers and healthy-eating practices that account for trans women like myself, I have been told some variation of “you should have lost weight before you transitioned” on multiple occasions, or been repeatedly lectured about the “basic facts” of feminizing hrt (of which I was already aware). Before I started hormones, I floundered for months because I thought I had to have a blank slate of a body.<sup>9</sup> My dysphoria-induced apathy stopped me from being able to even conceive of such an end, and my motivation to start medically transitioning plummeted for months. Even now, after having been on hormones for over a year-and-a-half, I still feel the weight and detriment of such expectations. When I look at my body in the mirror, I see my fat as scars—reminders of the unwelcome ways I changed my body when I was at my lowest specifically *because* I was at my lowest. For me, the desire to change comes not from a pull toward misogynistic beauty standards, but a push away from the traumatic associations of my fat. But I remain paralyzed—the hyper-efficient framework of contemporary trans rhetoric has me too afraid to lose what few changes I’ve made, but terrified to return to a heavier body: one that would return me whence I came. The

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<sup>8</sup> See @NightlingBug, “if you \*actually\* want to depict ‘realistic trans fem bodies’...”

<sup>9</sup> This experience is not unique; See @sarasargy, “feeling like I had to be skinny beforehand...”

discussions about trans bodies and burgers have made clear that there are inequities in the way we conceptualize bodily transition. I find my path outside such conceptions—through a lived experience with the intoxicating euphoria of *change*.

Recently I feel an internal compass, a draw to no specific goal, but toward *change* itself. The mirror is more enticing the less I recognize the reflection—the less I remember looking the way I do, the happier I am. I take pictures of myself, and the less recognizable I appear, the more I know I’m alive. I’m realizing that this pull—this guiding light toward *change*—has always been there. Before I even knew I was trans, I had the desire to be “unrecognizable.” I desired to look different, but didn’t want to build anything from my own body; rather, I wanted to start from somewhere else. After realizing my own transness around age sixteen, I deconstructed (or at least, reframed) that desire, deeming it a side effect of bodily dysphoria. There was no way to be “unrecognizable,” and it was better to accept that than yearn for the impossible. But now, years later, I’m starting to feel that pull again; the pull to redefine what it means to exist in my body. Hormones have shown me firsthand the malleability of my shape, and dismiss it as the addictive nature of gender euphoria, but I crave more. A light returns to my eyes everytime a muscle so much as shifts, everytime a new angle illuminates my evolving form in the shower. To change without regard for what people expect of me, without regard for how my body might make someone feel—that is the act I so covet. To test the limits of my newfound bodily freedom, to reject the microfascisms dictating what I can and cannot do—this is my desire. Watching my face change shape, feeling my hips widen, my waist thin—these are sacred acts in my religion of *change*.

I chose to lay my soul bare in the way I have here to provide insight for cis and non-transfeminine people, but also to emphasize that I come from a place of good faith. I have engaged with the “burger mandate” alongside other contemporary rhetoric about transfem bodies, and it has not worked for me. I’m not claiming that it doesn’t work for anyone, just that my past relationship with my body and food has necessarily led me down a different path. I want to emphasize that, for many people, it is *good* to eat more food with the express intention of gaining fat. Deconstructing the structures that would have us implicitly reject this notion is a necessary task on the way to bodily liberation. To some, necessary change may take the form of gaining weight, but that is not the case for people such as myself. It is not my intention to play into misogynistic beauty standards, nor do I wish to come across as fatphobic in any way. I simply wish to detail the way my past body trauma rejects contemporary rhetoric about transfem bodies, as well as the theory of *change* between the lived experience.