

Mina Hunt

Grid Locked

abstract This essay explores how migrant transgender experience is structured through medico-legal and temporal grids. Following other trans scholars, such as Dean Spade, this paper uses autoethnography to break down the barrier between theory and its object, foregrounding my own subjective stakes within grids of transgender control. Specifically, this essay analyzes the consequences of being in-between or off the grid, and ultimately asks to what degree this is currently possible for trans people seeking medical and legal services

as migrants. Ultimately, despite my own privilege as a white transgender woman, at the time of writing this I have not been able to escape the controlling aspects of the grid(s) described here. This lack of agency has reinforced, and reiterated, a progressive linear temporal unfolding through the medico-legal system as I fail to become fully legible to the biopolitics of the grid.

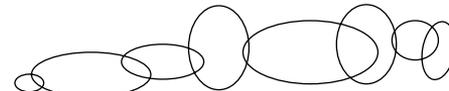
Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Dante Alighieri "Canto I," *The Divine Comedy*

In 2016, while recovering from a scuba diving accident that almost claimed my life, I began to medically transition from male to female.⁽¹⁾ At the time of my accident in the South China Sea, I was living in Asia. As a result, my transition has defied typical trajectories, taking place across three different countries, as compared to a process that normally unfolds in a single country. What makes my experience a potentially unique frame for analysis is its position outside

of the usual frameworks which determine the transition from one gendered category to another.⁽²⁾ I find myself unintentionally outside of the grid.⁽³⁾ As a white, Canadian, transgender woman, transitioning outside of her country of origin and citizenship, my experience helps to expose the rigid nature of the medico-legal and temporal grids which structure transgender experiences. From this perspective, I can test the normalizing tendencies of these grids and their potentially dire consequences for trans people trying to do their transition differently.

By using my own experience with organizational structures, which function to discipline and normalize subjects, I aim to shed light on the degree to which we can have agency as we move through grids of transgender control. Starting from my experience with the different medico-legal systems, this paper outlines two overlapping



- (1) "MtF" is a hackneyed term which does not account for my own sense of gender/sexed subjectivity, but it is a useful shorthand.
- (2) "Transition" is a complicated term. Though I dislike this definition for myself, and the normative temporal mechanics it casts my narrative in, I believe that it suits the use of the word in this paper, if problematically.
- (3) My prepositional relationship to the grid(s) is disorientating; whether outside or between grids, my position is heterotopic, which allows for an incongruent discursive space to materialize from which to analyze the grid.

grids implied by my transnational gender transition. The first grid is composed of two aggregate parts: medical and legal, referring to the medical transition process and how it is imbricated with the legal legitimation process to which only some trans people who are fortunate enough to live in certain states have access (for example Canada and the Netherlands). The second grid I outline is temporal, it enfolds and subtends both the medical and legal aspects of my transition. This paper explores my attempts to work outside and in-between these grids as structuring systems, questioning how they determine the biopolitical metrics of some trans people as worthy of life and others as worthy of death and abjection. My work also explores the specific consequences of being in-between or off the grid, and ultimately asks to what degree this is currently possible for trans people seeking medical and legal services.

Autoethnography

An autoethnographic method is central to the work of this paper. Drawing from my own experience to write the theoretical across the personal, I follow a methodological choice practiced by other trans scholars. In using my own experience as a transgender person who has transitioned transnationally, I aim to show how existing in a liminal position between various national and legal systems of administration reveal their biopolitical function, while remaining acutely conscious of my own position. Writing

from his own experience with the medical system in “Mutilating Gender”, Dean Spade comments on how medical services both enforce and potentially alter normalizing processes. “His refusal to feign a disinterested distance from the topic of his analysis, his explicit articulation of his embodied stake in the matter at hand, and the knowledge gained from his own embodied situation,” as editors of *The Transgender Studies Reader*, Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle argue of Spade’s work, “all exemplify important methodological hallmarks of transgender studies” (315). In a sense, autoethnography refuses categorization: it is interdisciplinary, a hybrid style of the personal and the ethnographic. It is a disruptive form, blending the personal and political and sitting at the limits of academic writing. Like Spade, I choose this mode of writing, thus refusing to ignore my own positionality within the grids that control me, as this methodology will inevitably reflect the position that I inhabit within the grids I analyse.

Elizabeth Ettorre writes that one of the primary roles of autoethnography as a feminist method is to demonstrate that the personal is political, while also highlighting the precarious position of the subject (4). To autoethnographically engage with the concept of the grid helps me uncover how medico-legal systems create precarious positions for trans subjects, drawing particular attention to the challenges faced by mobile trans bodies

like myself. Moreover, Ettore points to autoethnography as a performative method committed to the future, a future that does not merely maintain the status quo but holds a liberatory potential. For queer theorist Judith Butler, PRECARIETY and PERFORMATIVITY are intertwined. Butler argues:

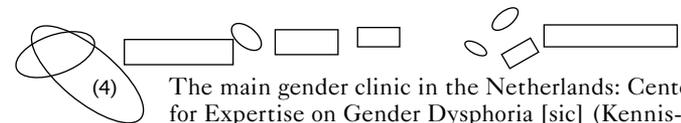
Performativity does take place when the uncounted prove to be reflexive and start to count themselves, not only enumerating who they are, but ‘appearing’ in some way, exercising in that way a ‘right’...to existence...The exercise of the right is something that happens within the context of precarity and takes form as a precarious exercise that seeks to overcome its own precarity. (Butler and Athanasiou 101)

By thinking through Butler and Ettore, and making the analytical focus of my work my own personal position — situated off and in-between national medico-legal grids — I attempt to create a space in which I can point to the precarity of this situation and its consequences. By doing so, I highlight a lack of services, an oversight of the system, and an intolerable positionality, which, ultimately, I seek to transform. Through my autoethnographic method, I count myself in the calculus of societies which surround me and demand to be counted, to demand a better future for myself and others in my situation.

Personal Context

In retrospect, I always assumed that starting the process of my transition in South Korea would be the most challenging aspect of the experience. In a sense, I was fortunate as I was able to pay out of my own pocket for my psychotherapy sessions, my diagnosis report — which was not covered by the insurance — and the thousands of euros’ worth of medication and laser treatments. However, I was looking forward to relocating to the Netherlands (and to Western Europe in general), where I hoped I would be able to express myself openly, and to pursue further medical treatment. In South Korea, surgery is not easily accessible and legal recognition of a sex change is difficult for natives and impossible for foreigners to attain. Although I was waitlisted at the VUmc⁽⁴⁾ and had contacted the Canadian government with regards to my legal status within a month of arriving in the Netherlands, I am still waiting for a response today, more than a year later.

Around the time I relocated, in the summer of 2017, there was a considerable amount of global media attention that focused on Canada as a leader in LGBTQ+ rights, particularly regarding the inclusion of



(4) The main gender clinic in the Netherlands: Center for Expertise on Gender Dysphoria [sic] (Kennis- en zorgcentrum genderdysforie)

gender identity in the Human Rights Act (Bill C-16, which was ratified in 2017). The Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Public Policy, based at UCLA School of Law, ranked Canada in the top five countries for both the protection of LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance by the wider population (Flores and Park). Bill C-16 uses a nebulous definition of anti-discriminatory language when outlining its protection of gender identity. EGALE, the largest Canadian trust for LGBTQ+ rights, defines this in the context of federal and provincial services (“What is Bill C-16”). An example of this anti-discrimination policy at federal and provincial levels is the recent extension of non-binary labels for passports at the federal level, and for birth certificates and drivers licenses at the provincial level (for some provinces).

However, contrary to this narrative, my gender identity was not protected, recognized, or made legitimate through the Ontario provincial government or through the Canadian federal government. This lack of recognition and the government’s refusal to take action on my account hinges on a technicality which exposes the nationalism implicit in these rights extensions. I am no longer a resident of Ontario, my home province. Therefore, I cannot change my name on the basis of the Ontario Change of Name Act. At first, I considered this a surmountable legal barrier. After all, I had the Canadian Human Rights Act on my side. However, through dealing

with the Ontario Office of the Registrar General, the Premier of Ontario (the highest level of the Ontario provincial government), the Minister of Consumer Products (also a provincial minister), the federal advisor to Justin Trudeau on LGBTQ2⁽⁵⁾ matters Randy Boissonnault (a member of Parliament for Edmonton Centre), and a minister of Citizenship and Immigration in Canada, I was repeatedly told ‘no’. My attempts to be recognized by the Dutch system were equally futile. My failure to conform to the grid has had severe material and affective side effects: access to job opportunities, travel, issues with finding a place to live, and the emotional and psychological effects that this ongoing precarity caused.

Grids as Regulatory Structures

In my experience, two regulatory structures, the medical and the legal, are decisive in transitioning across three national medical systems. Together, I read these systems as what Michel Foucault names “a grid of intelligibility of the social order;” a complex interaction of power structures and systems of social regulations (93). While I will analyze both of these structures as separate but

(5) “LGBTQ2” is primarily a Canadian variant of the LGBTQ+ acronym. The “2” refers to two-spirited.

overlapping, according to their particular functioning, and the power and control they wield in their national contexts, I will also consider the consequences of their interlocking into a multi-faceted system of control — a grid of intelligibility.

Gender, as a grid of intelligibility, finds its materializations in social regulations of gender norms. For Judith Butler, gender norms allow for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social. The question of what it is to be outside the norm poses a paradox for thinking, for if the norm renders the social field intelligible and normalizes that field for us, then being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it. (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 42)

Butler's performative take on subjectivation allows for movement within the grid of legibility. Within performativity, there is the occasion of slippage when we reiterate and perform norms. While we cannot escape the grid at once, we may be able to shift it through reiteration. I am here performing a form of resistance to the grid through autoethnography and writing this essay.

I am not simply reiterating what is, but attempting to rearticulate a new norm — a better future. Thus, grids become a matter of legibility and regulation of norms, but with a chance to reshape its rigid structures.

To contextualize my own experiences within regulatory state practices that govern gender, I draw on Susan Stryker's understanding of Foucault's concept of BIOPOWER and its role in normative subject creation: “[b]iopolitics, generally speaking, describe the calculus of costs and benefits through which the biological capacities of a population are optimally managed for state or state-like ends” (“Biopolitics” 38). Stryker notes that there is a “near-total absence of a gender analysis” in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. She emphasizes the importance of including gender in biopolitics, as “gender... is an apparatus within which all bodies are taken up, which creates material effects through the bureaucratic tracking that begins with birth, ends with death, and traverses all manner of state-issued or state-sanctioned documentation practices in between” (39). It is precisely this notion of ‘bureaucratic tracking’ and ‘state-sanctioned documentation practices’ from which my own issues with state recognition, and their material and affective consequences, stem.

Temporal Grid

In my case, the temporal grid implied by my transnational transition imposes a kind of recurring

retrograde temporality, as each system I move into forces me to start again: the Dutch system will not accept my medical transition from South Korea, Canada will not accept documents from the Netherlands, etc. This causes any sense of self-progression to be halted, forcing me to go back to the beginning. After almost two years in the Netherlands, I am still unable to get hormones through a gender clinic, despite having started treatment in 2016 in a different country. The legal implication of this interrupted linearity is also complicated, as I currently have two legal genders: one is not recognized in the Netherlands (X for unspecified). I am also in the process of attaining an F for female on my Dutch documentation, something that will force me to start the process over again in Canada. Thus, the unfolding of the legal recognition of my embodiment is systematically interrupted on multiple levels.

Sandy Stone's work helps me to explore trans temporality as a grid which imbricates with the medicolegal grid. Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto", is, at its core, an essay about narrative construction and chronology. Two temporal vectors are clearly present in Stone's manifesto and both have important roles to play in the formation of trans temporality. Analyzing Jan Morris' autobiographical mirror scene from *Conundrum: An Extraordinary Narrative of Transsexualism*, Stone recounts Morris' goodbye to herself in the mirror before surgery. She describes this scene as

"exit James Morris, enter Jan Morris, through the intervention of late twentieth-century medical practices in this wonderfully 'oriental,' almost religious narrative of transformation" (222). Stone frames her manifesto with this narrative and in it, Jan's transformation is depicted as inexorable, as if through "mysterious powers." Here he/she bridges a temporal gap and moves into the futural Jan and emphasizes this point by pointing to the "exit," or destruction of the former James.

Stone also points to the retrograde sense of trans temporality in her observation that transsexuals erase their past through "diagnostic criteria" (230). This erasure takes the form of the creation of "plausible histories" (231). In other words, a trans person's past must conform to the medical criteria of what is seen as a typical transsexual — a patriarchal, heterosexual interpretation of female gender conformity. There is a practical sense to the creation of "plausible histories," the imperative to fit in with cis women, "to fade into the 'normal' population as soon as possible" (23). Similarly, this medically-induced narrative device is used to make transsexuals conform to normalized narratives in order to access healthcare. Simon Fisher et al. point out that this negation forces trans women into a "chronological progression from a 'terrible-present-in-the-wrong-body' to a 'better-future-in-the-right-body,'" enforcing a future-focused trans temporality (2). Thus a temporal grid sequence replicates progression

and linearity at the expense of diverse and reflective trans experience and temporality.

I want to contest the necessity of a normative trans temporality that adheres to clinical diagnostic criteria and standardized unfolding of transgender experience through various medical and legal systems—one that takes me from wrong-bodied to whole-bodied.

Other trans theorists also seek to resist this temporal grid, such as Atalia Israeli-Nevo who refuses to erase her past, declaring “I wasn’t born a trans woman” (34), and Spade, who refused to adhere to conventional transition requirements. My experience with the medical and legal grids resonate with Fisher et al.’s statement that normative transgender temporal narratives negate the complex reality of trans embodiment. However, unlike Spade or Israeli-Nevo, my agency was influenced by the fact that crossing national borders has forced me to restart my transition multiple times.

Exemplifying this interrupted temporality is the process of my legal gender/sex marker ‘M’(ale) to ‘F’(emale) in Canada, where I cannot access the medical care system because I am not a resident anymore. While, I can, however, change my ‘M’ to an ‘X’ in Canada (which I have done to make travel easier), ‘X’ is not currently recognized in the Netherlands. Thus, my gender is currently registered as ‘M/X’ in Canada, and ‘M’ in the Netherlands. To complicate the matter, if my application for ‘M’ to ‘F’ in the Netherlands succeeds I will then have ‘M/X/F’.

This, of course, is undesirable and will create multiple instances of resubmitting myself to the grid, specifically the legal grid which cannot be disentangled from the medical grid. As such, my access to gender clinic services in the Netherlands turned out to be equally as convoluted, coming from different systems with different degrees of medical transition. Thus, I am ensnared in a complex temporal grid of (un)becoming both medically and legally; my temporal narrative is not linear, but nor is this a deliberate choice. The medical and legal are essentially interrelated and dependent on each other: one grid fits within the larger temporal grid which forces a chrononormative progression, a temporality that takes the trans subject from wrong-bodied to whole-bodied, anti-normative to normative, unrecognized to recognized.

Medico-Legal Grid(s)

My experience demonstrates how the medical and legal are difficult to disentangle. For example, in both the Dutch and the Canadian system, legal recognition of a trans person’s gender requires medical certification. As I have attempted to resist the linearity imposed by the grid, my various medical procedures and diagnosis from three different countries are incompatible with each other, which affects my ability to attain legal recognition. The medico-legal grid has the most profound effects on life chances, those which Spade defines are gained through access to “housing, education, healthcare,

identity documentation and records, employment, and public facilities, to name but a few” (*Normal Life* xii). I have failed to attain legal recognition of my gender in both Canada and the Netherlands. One effect of this has been on my employability. I am currently involved in the second round of application for a job in the education sector in Amsterdam, during which I will have no choice but to reveal myself as transgender. As an immigrant, I have to reveal my work permit, social registration number (BSN), etc., meaning that even a simple task like being paid by an employer through the bank outs me.⁽⁶⁾ This would not be an issue if I could change my identity documents. There is always a chance that once I reveal my legally documented gender, my prospective employer will close my application.

Bill C-16 functions within a biopolitical regime. In analysing the bill’s role, I turn to Spade’s work in *Normal Life*, which builds on Stryker’s short outline of the biopolitics which govern transgender lives. When shifting the focus to mechanisms of administration from a focus on anti-discrimination laws, Spade calls attention to the “lethal consequences” of the systemic distribution of life chance — or lack thereof — to certain administrative categorizations (74). Spade outlines a form of state administration that is concerned with the health

(6)

Outing is when your queer identity is disclosed against your will.

and production of the overall society: “One way to think about these population-level programs is that they are created as care-taking programs” (74). Categories, like male and female, replicated in innumerable government and official documentation as uncontested biometric data points, are in fact not naturally distinguished, but reified through the state’s creation and use of identity categories. The issue for me, and trans and gender nonconforming people in general, is that these categories are replicated as ahistorical and pre-existing, and proliferated across a seemingly endless array of bureaucratic policies, programs, and institutions. The grid in its medico-legal incarnation described here, functions as a categorization of bodies. Not fitting within these categories marks the subjects as non-normative and hinders their access to life chances. Life chances can be foreclosed by something as seemingly innocuous as not being able to access a driver’s license, or, as I have found out, almost being arrested for not having ID that matches your gender expression at Beijing airport. These experiences confirm Spade’s statement that conforming to “population norms regarding race, gender, sexuality, national origin, ability, and indigeneity always condition and determine who falls on either side of that line” (Spade 74). It is this line that distinguishes which bodies receive services and recognition and which do not. Thus, failing to be legible to the grid creates a context of multiple and chronic instances of precarity.

My experiences, ranging from applying for a job to moving through an airport, highlight how these policies of administrating gender have profound material effects on access to life chances for trans people. These categorization processes are a major mechanism for replicating transphobia, and unfortunately, inclusivity and protection legislation do not address these issues. The failure of Bill C-16 is in its almost complete ignorance of these systemic biopolitical factors which create untenable conditions for trans people. Essentially, Bill C-16 addresses societal symptoms of transphobia, not the cause. While Spade's work helps to show why Canadian human rights laws have not managed to protect trans people from systemic transphobia, there is still an issue that I have not addressed, namely, why I am not eligible for recognition by these laws in the first place — why I exist outside of the grid.

Stryker's definition of normative citizenship emphasises the way biopolitics replicate and sustain normative population categories. According to Stryker "biopower constitutes transgender as a category ... in order to move some trans bodies toward emergent possibilities for transgender normativity and citizenship" ("Biopolitics" 41). Some trans bodies have been extended normative citizenship and inclusion in state services (not marked for death), just as certain homosexual bodies have been extended the same status over the past few decades. As a white Canadian of European descent,

I would normally be included in the expansion of the normative to include certain transgender bodies as I fit within the racial metrics of normativity.

Race, however, my experience makes clear, is not the only category which precludes acceptance into normative categorization: migration status is also a factor. Human rights laws, like C-16, far from protecting gender identity, function as a form of transgender-nationalism. If one investigates the Ontario Change of Name Act, the issue for me is residency. Non-residents, like me, fall through the legal grid. By transitioning differently, outside of a single national context, I have ultimately been denied recognition and been left unintelligible, on the wrong side of the calculus of biopower.

If we consider LGBTQ+ rights more generally, as a mechanism of national power and maintaining the status quo, it is perhaps unsurprising that falling outside the national systems of citizenship inclusion would limit my access to rights and protection. Trans inclusion, i.e. transgender normalization, becomes an apparatus for enforcing national power. In this rather grim conceptualization of LGBTQ+ rights extension, the individual does not matter, what matters is their utility in upholding normative national narratives and regulatory processes. Lisa Duggan, for example, conceptualises the 'good queer' as one that buttresses and replicates consumptive neoliberal practices (50). Jasbir Puar adds that "domesticated homosexual [and now transgender] bodies

provide ammunition to reinforce nationalist projects” (39). My status as a migrant, outside of normative citizenship, helps to highlight how intransigent and indifferent mechanisms of bureaucratic gender regulation can be. The grid lines outlined by my personal case study cannot be bent to accommodate these differences and inconsistencies. In almost all correspondences with government officials I have been told to consult my embassy. This gesture is a form of casting off, as the embassy is a foreign arm of the federal government with less power to take action. I am therefore excluded from institutional help and sent to the border to languish in a liminal state. In effect, helping me to recognize my gender identity, has no utility to the state. C-16 is not designed to help me, but rather to signal a form of Canadian progressivism.

Conclusion

Regrettably this analysis does not bode well for a radical departure from the grid, instead, it enforces a sense of the inevitability of its control. Regarding both the temporal and medico-legal grids, though I have tried to upend the progress narrative of trans medico-legal transition, I have ultimately had to return to the beginning and submit to the regulatory structures these grids form. And yet, as a speaker, like Stryker before me, there is an intersubjective commentary which can be formed when I talk back to my makers, those structuring medicolegal

forces. Departing from Foucault and Butler, who have outlined the rigid grids of intelligibility, I hope to perform a better trans future by untangling my personal precarious position here. This is also the goal of Stone’s manifesto, which I hope I am upholding. It is worth noting that the clinic that I have been going to — an alternative to the VUmc — is not so beholden to binary notions of gender, like those suggested by Stone. So perhaps, through speaking, through reiterating this structure, we are slowly changing it and the nature of the grid, if ever so slightly.

I will finish by saying that the changes to Canadian trans human rights law, and those which affect biometric identification changes — I am thinking here of the new non-binary X markers — were achieved through actively challenging the government by means of human rights violations claims. I hope the last step in this process is doing the same with regards to the Ontario Name Change Act. Thus, perhaps though I will ultimately have to submit to the grid, in order to survive, perhaps it will help others find a way to escape in the future. In a world which is perpetually in motion, one which currently has a quarter of a billion migrants, we need to challenge the nationalism of the structures which dictate the trajectory of trans lives. It is perhaps not enough to merely change policy and law. Rather, the overarching grids which determine and direct gender transition need to be challenged.

biography Mina Hunt is a research masters student in the Gender Studies Department at Utrecht University. Hunt is currently researching issues of transgender migration and mobility.

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