

Transgender Multiplicities in Jos Charles's *Feeld*

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"Alarum is mye nayme." Direct yet double-sided, this six-syllable line embodies the multidimensional nature of Jos Charles's *Feeld*. Indeed, this collection of poems on gender and speech feels as open-ended as an abstract art piece with its abundance of white space, profusion of backslashes, and exercise of Chaucerian language. It is through this very structural disarray, however, that Charles illustrates the overwhelming multiplicities of thoughts and emotions that occupy a transgender person's body at any given moment. The speaker knows she raises alarm in others, but she also senses alarm when called upon by name; she is both the threat and the threatened. In the opening poem of *Feelds*, "i.," Charles employs a dissonant dynamic between language and structure, in which each subverts the other, to capture a transgender woman's simultaneous feelings of self-acceptance and social ostracization.

The poem's opening image conveys the speaker's recognition of herself as different in regards to gender identity:

thees wite skirtes / & orang  
sweters     / i wont / inn the feedynge marte / (1-2).

Charles immediately directs attention toward the physical body. The speaker eyes "skirtes" and "sweters," and since these clothes are in a food market, not a retail store, one can assume they are being worn by women. As skirts and sweaters connote femininity, these clothes become synonymous with the female body. Assuredly, the speaker's "wont," or "want," for this clothing triggers an awareness of her own body: of the "i." Already the syntax conveys the speaker's preeminent focus on her external self. Charles does not write, "I want these white skirts." No, the objects — skirts and sweaters — come before the subject and verb because the speaker understands that one observes visible aspects of a person before they observe beliefs or

personality. The colors “wite” and “orang” highlight how visual details stand out upon an initial glance at someone. Furthermore, although “wont” reads clearly as “want,” the negative denotation of “won’t” complicates the speaker’s feelings: it suggests an intrinsic impossibility in her desire for femininity.

The subsequent lines elaborate on how the speaker’s transness makes her a societal outlier, yet the language celebrates her differences. Charles writes:

wile mye vegetable partes bloome /  
 inn the commen waye / a grackel  
 inn the garden rooste / the tall  
 wymon wasching handes / (3-6).

“Wile,” or “while,” marks dissimilarity as well as mere simultaneity. The common usage of “while” to indicate a contrast builds the pessimistic reading that the speaker is upset that “wile” other women in the “feedynge marte” can wear feminine clothing, her “vegetable partes” prevent her from doing so. Charles alludes to the cisgender male body to insinuate that the speaker’s genitalia may be visible when she wears skirts, which either fully inhibits her from skirts or makes her stand out in them. Regardless, the speaker “wonts” skirts and sweaters, so this reading of “wile” conveys that her “vegetable partes” are *undesirable*. However, Charles also writes that her partes “bloome.” The word “bloom” possesses positive connotations of beauty, flowers, maturity, etc. As such, one can read “wile” as a neutral recognition of current bodily difference. The diction continues to normalize the speaker’s body parts; Charles deems the speaker’s blooming parts to be as “commen” as a bird in a garden roost. The inclusion of the natural world in this metaphor affirms the speaker’s understanding that being gender-queer is organic.

Still, Charles compares the speaker to specifically a grackle, a bird whom many loathe for its looks and artificial-sounding cries. Again, one image presents two understandings: while the grackle is natural and thus rightful in a biological context, people dislike it for its features. The rhyme of “grackel” and “tall” accentuates the parallel in how people dislike the bird’s traits and how people dislike the speaker for being “tall” — a typically masculine trait — as a woman. In the same vein, Charles spells “garden” as “garden” to reiterate the speaker’s need to be on guard as a transgender person. The repetition of “inn” highlights the pressure to hide in private spaces for safety, such as in a bathroom. Likewise, although birds usually symbolize freedom, the grackle must remain “guarded” within its home. This warping of a garden from which life should “bloom” and birds should fly into a reminder to protect oneself hammers the point that the speaker is not safe “inn” the world where she exists. The visual and metrical agreement of lines 4 and 5 compound the similarities between trans people and grackles; both lines begin with “inn the” and follow trochaic meter until the backslash, thereby connecting the two literally, visually, and audibly. Still, Charles indicates a difference between them through the space before “the” in line 5. She provides line 5 with one less syllable than line 4; this caesura places audial attention on “the tall,” which makes “the” tall woman stand out even more than “a” grackle. The definite article reflects the speaker’s feeling of absolute singularity in being “the” trans person in a room, not just “a”nother person.

To the same point, Charles implements literal and linguistic parallelisms between “mye vegetable partes bloom” and “a grackel / inn the garden rooste.” In a poem characterized by scattered images, it is significant that the metaphor follows through with parallel grammatical structure in comparing one subject to another. However, the comparison feels incomplete because the “partes bloome” in the way “a grackel / inn the garden rooste” ... blank. One

expects a verb to follow “rooste,” but there isn’t one. Instead, the assonance of “bloome” and “rooste” suggests that the grackle in the roost itself *is* the verb; the bird does not need to perform an action to stand out, similar to how a transgender person’s mere existence causes them to stand out. In each of these cases, the images themselves — whether a blooming vegetable or a grackle in a garden — *are* common, but Charles highlights their peculiarity through their location on the page and the words which surround them. This strategy mirrors how transgender individuals are denaturalized not by cause of their innate self but by the environments that alienate them.

The strange structure of “i.” then undermines the speaker’s words as the poem progresses. In expanding on the “tall wymon,” Charles continues:

or eyeing turnups

/ the sadened powres wee rub /            so economicalie / (7-8).

It becomes impossible to ignore the blaring white space and oddly-placed backslashes. Although the speaker declares an acceptance of her body parts, grackles, washing hands and eyeing turnips, the awkward pacing and visual spacing distract the reader from the actual narrative. In an auditory sense, the overwhelming pauses break up her dialogue. There is even a backlash at the beginning of a line, where backslashes serve no traditional purpose, to illustrate an evident fragmentation of thought. The medieval spelling further makes the text difficult to read, which illustrates how transgender experiences cannot be — and have historically never been — articulated in a standard, public language. Charles ensures that the poem’s structural qualities subvert the speaker’s message to reflect how systemic structures silence transgender people’s voices; although there are countless trans folks who work to proclaim their power, there are just as many forces that break down them down physically, mentally, and emotionally to disrupt their speech on every scale.

The fiscal and political diction in lines 7 and 8 further elucidates how a regular act for a cisgender person becomes dangerous for a gender-queer individual. “Rub” refers to the washing of hands, which returns attention to the physical body. The act of rubbing one’s hand together generates warmth and connotes power and confidence. It also portrays a sort of internal friction: perhaps the power of the speaker’s own self-acceptance rubs against homophobic powers as she tends for herself. Consequently, the speaker’s “powres” are “sadened” because she must only rub her hands “economicalie.” Indeed, anything that generates confidence for a transgender person likely “rub”s others the wrong way, so she must “rub” her hands no more than necessary so as to not provoke others.

Nevertheless, the following two lines inject an atmosphere of hope while recognizing the speaker’s current danger. Charles announces the speaker’s belief in an alternative future for transgender people:

inn 1 virsion off thynges /  
alarum is mye nayme (9-10).

In every essence the name is a person simplified into one phrase: it is a tool in society to describe, call, and classify a person. As mentioned, the speaker is aware that “alarum,” the archaic term for “alarm,” embodies her identity. She raises alarms in others, but just as one senses fear when they hear “fire,” the speaker’s name raises alarm in herself. Intriguingly, the reclamation of a name is generally a radical assertion of the self for transgender individuals. The speaker’s announcement that her name is “alarum” thus reveals an internalization of herself as dangerous to others. Another notable point is that her identity as the threat and the threatened only activates when in the presence of others; after all, the name serves no purpose when one is alone. This specification builds on the speaker’s combating belief that she *is* “commen” — that

there is nothing intrinsically wrong with her. Charles goes out of her way to declare that the speaker is associated with alarm in only “1 virsion” of life. There is a possibility for another version: for a world where transgender people are safe around others. The number “1” paired with the space after “nayme” produces the anticipation the speaker will elaborate on the second, third, or any alternative “virsion” of things. Charles leaves the space blank, though, a possible invitation for one to be active in imagining the future for transgender folks. The fact that the poem appears so strange and broken only in a visual context enhances this call to action; it indicates that silence constructs difference, so one must amplify and listen to the voices of transgender people.

Ultimately, the speaker’s intense self-awareness grounds her “inn” the current reality. The poem thus concludes with feelings of boundness. Despite this, Charles implements the motifs of persistence and survival:

/ unkempt & handeld

i am hors /

i am sadeld /    i am a brokn hors (11-13).

Charles compares the speaker to another animal: the horse. A later poem in *Feeld* elaborates that Charles’s estrogen is made from “the urin concentrat off pregnynt mares,” so there is a literal likeness between the horse and the speaker. The lack of a direct or indirect object before the first “hors” also allows one to read it as an adjective: the speaker may have a “hoarse” voice as a transgender woman. “Hors” also means “out” in French. This underscores the speaker’s feeling of vulnerability in being out as transgender as well as being observed by others in outside spaces. The diction further highlights the speaker’s awareness of her visible self, as “unkempt” refers to a disheveled appearance. The masculine rhyme of “handeld” and “sadeld” then draws focus

toward the feelings of being owned, of being bound by another's hand, and of being used.

Charles attributes the word "brokn" to these notions, so the speaker's vocabulary conveys that she has "brokn" down and digested the narrative that something is wrong with her. Even as she says this, however, Charles implements anaphora to upend that feeling. In spite of the breaks and immense pauses, the speaker does not stop. "i am," "i am," "i am." No structural division, temporal prolonging, or diction filled with brokenness can stop her from being. No, the poem does not end with a period. The speaker survives as a living being, whether broken or not.

Throughout "i.," the structure, narrative, and diction continually subvert one another to portray the competing narratives within transgender people. Trans individuals know that they are natural, as common as any other person, but they also know they are not viewed as such. They cannot be "a" nameless person in today's society; they are always "the" trans person. This constant awareness of multiple perceptions is captured through the poem's Chaucerian language and scattered images, which together create the opportunity for multiple meanings within one poem. These structures ultimately break apart the speaker's words, but Charles tells a story nevertheless — and that is the transgender fight. "i." is about survival while and in spite of holding so much within the body. It is a poem that contains various meanings, and it is also a poem that verbalizes one particular message: that transgender people exist, even if broken. Truly, whether blooming, broken, or both, what matters is that one persists. What matters is that *I am*.

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