

Legible Yet Erased: Black Transfeminine Embodiment in the Poetry of Justice Ameer and Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi

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Abstract

This paper examines the poetics of Black transfeminine embodiment in the works of Justice Ameer and Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi, arguing that their poetry exposes and resists the intertwined forces of racialized gender regulation, historical erasure, and the precarious legibility imposed upon Black trans feminine bodies. Through close readings of "body without the 'd'," "My Beauty," "Life Turns," "t for t," "Amnesia," and "History Lesson," this study illuminates how these poets articulate the fraught experiences of dysphoria, hypervisibility, and sexual violence as enduring legacies of anti-Black and cisnormative structures. Rather than merely documenting suffering, their works foreground acts of self-authorship, intimate negotiation, and radical reclamation of beauty and desire. By centering Black transfeminine voices, this paper argues that Ameer and Edidi redefine the body as a generative site of becoming, crafting a poetics that refuses assimilation and reimagines possibilities for survival, intimacy, and self-definition beyond the bounds of state-sanctioned legibility and systemic violence.

Keywords: Black transfeminine poetics, gender legibility, erasure and visibility, trans self-authorship, racialized embodiment

Introduction

In the ever-persistent theatre of American cultural discourse, gender and visibility remain battlegrounds of ideological contention. The latest conspiracy rhetoric surrounding Michelle Obama, reiterating the baseless claim that she is a trans woman, reveals the nation's enduring fixation on gendered legibility and the deep anxieties that arise when bodies do not conform to rigid expectations. The recent comments made by Elon Musk's father, Errol Musk, in which he claimed that Barack Obama is "queer" and Michelle Obama is "a man," are not simply the ramblings of a reactionary voice on the fringes of public discourse ("Elon Musk's Father Unleashes"). Rather, they are symptomatic of a broader sociopolitical pathology in America, one in which Black femininity, transness, and gender nonconformity are persistently framed as threats to the normative order.

The mechanisms of legibility, erasure, and resistance are central to understanding the lived experiences of Black transfeminine people in America, a reality powerfully articulated in the

poetry of Justice Ameer and Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi. Their works expose how racialized gender regulation, surveillance, and violence shape Black transfeminine embodiment, rendering the body a contested site where visibility is both demanded and denied, and survival requires constant self-renegotiation. This deliberate selection allows the application of transfeminist and Black feminist lenses to trace the specificities of Black transfeminine experience without collapsing it into broader trans discourses that risk erasing racial particularity. By centering these poets, the paper engages directly with texts that challenge cultural and political structures of legibility and erasure, illuminating how Black transfeminine bodies emerge as sites of resilience, self-authorship, and radical becoming.

The Body as a Site of Erasure and Resilience

To understand how Black transfeminine subjects negotiate the contradictory demands of hypervisibility and systemic erasure, one must begin with the body itself, the primary canvas upon which structures of gendered legibility, racialized surveillance, and social regulation are inscribed. SJ Langer, in “Our Body Project: From Mourning to Creating the Transgender Body”, argues that while trans individuals experience a form of bodily mourning, this process is fundamentally linked to the broader human experience of self-acceptance (67). However, for gender-nonconforming (GNC) individuals, this mourning is intensified by societal misrecognition, which often begins in childhood when the incongruence between internal identity and external perception creates a profound existential dissonance. As research suggests, this dissonance is not just a private struggle but also a site of cultural policing, where bodies that do not conform to binary gender norms are met with scrutiny and censure (Brooks-Gunn and Matthews; Kleeman).

Ameer’s “body without the ‘d’” situates transfeminine embodiment within this broader discourse, foregrounding the tension between forced visibility and systemic erasure. The “bo’y”, Ameer’s linguistic subversion of “boy”, exists within a recursive process of becoming, simultaneously inscribed upon the flesh and continuously deferred. Through the repeated motif of “bo’y,” Ameer dismantles binary gender categories, exposing the fundamental instability of gendered embodiment. The paradox articulated in the refrain, that the body is simultaneously “too much” and “not enough” (line 4), encapsulates the experience of gender dysphoria and the racialized dimensions of trans legibility.

The poem further interrogates the “bo’y’s” corporeal presence through the lens of hair, a deeply contested marker of gender and monstrosity. “what a hairy bo’y / some makes it look more like a bo’y / some makes it look more like a monster” (lines 6–8) speaks to how racialized gender expression is weaponized against Black transfeminine individuals. Historically, Blackness and femininity have been framed as incongruous within white, cisnormative frameworks. As a result, the bodies of Black trans women are rendered sites of hypervisibility and gendered deviance as represented in these poems. Ameer highlights how particular physical features, such as hair, bone structure, and stature, become focal points for discipline and exclusion, reinforcing the precariousness of Black transfeminine embodiment.

The act of shaving, an otherwise mundane practice, emerges in “body without the ‘d’” as both an intimate ritual and a violent means of self-fashioning. The bo’y “taught itself how to graze its skin and cut things off” (line 10), a line that underscores the absence of paternal guidance in negotiating masculinity. Cutting, in this context, serves multiple functions: an attempt to conform to gendered expectations, an act of self-harm, and a symbolic excision akin to the

linguistic erasure embedded in the missing “d.” Blood, typically associated with femininity in cishnormative discourses, becomes paradoxically affirming in Ameer's poem: “the blood reminds the bo’y it is a bo’y / reminds the bo’y how a bo’y bleeds / reminds the bo’y that not every bo’y bleeds” (lines 12–14). By disrupting the conventional association of blood with menstruation, Ameer destabilizes biological essentialism, reframing transfeminine embodiment as a process of resistant signification rather than a failure of gendered legibility.

As the poem progresses, Ameer shifts focus to the aesthetics of gender expression, where the “bo’y” engages in acts of self-styling, painting its face, altering its appearance, and claiming labels (lines 31–34). These transformations, however, remain fraught with contradiction. The declaration, “what a beautiful bo’y / still a bo’y” (lines 34–35), underscores the limits of gender performance under cishnormative structures: visibility does not guarantee legitimacy. Instead, the “bo’y’s” existence is framed as a continual negotiation of recognition, where even moments of affirmation are undermined by external misidentification. The climactic assertion that the bo’y is “a bo’y worthy of being called queen” (line 38) encapsulates the radical potential of transfeminine self-authorship, one that embraces ambiguity and defies reduction.

The Body as a Site of Beauty and Becoming

The body, for transfeminine individuals, is more than a biological entity, it is a contested site where self-perception, external validation, and cultural expectations intersect. As Marzia Mauriello argues in “What the Body Tells Us: Transgender Strategies, Beauty, and Self-Consciousness”, gender is inextricably linked to the body, making corporeality central to the formation of identity (57). Yet, for transgender individuals, the body is not merely a vessel of self-expression but also a terrain of struggle, shaped by the often-competing forces of dysphoria and self-affirmation. Beauty, within this framework, becomes both a marker of authenticity and a site of tension. This tension intensifies when aesthetic alignment with one’s gendered self is perceived as essential to social legibility and self-recognition.

Justice Ameer’s “My Beauty” explores this fraught relationship between the speaker and their body, foregrounding the ways in which beauty is both an externalized ideal and an internal battleground. The poem’s opening lines, “I found my beauty wearing a suit jacket / And I slapped her” (lines 1-2), introduce a moment of visceral conflict, where femininity is simultaneously resilient and constrained by the structures of hegemonic masculinity. The act of “slapping” beauty signifies the psychic toll of internalized aggression, shaped by a cishnormative world that negates trans femininity. This moment exemplifies what Mauriello identifies as the modernist fixation on material embodiment, where the body becomes the primary medium upon which gender is inscribed (57).

Ameer’s poem charts the complexities of dysphoria, illustrating the speaker’s attempts to reconcile their body with masculinity: “To make my body a man / imagining it more muscular / calling broad shoulders masculine” (lines 28-30). These lines encapsulate the pressures of cishnormativity, wherein dysphoria compels an effort to conform, yet this conformity remains unattainable. The speaker’s realization, “I never saw my beauty / We kept looking past each other / in search of some boy” (lines 31-33), signals an ontological rupture, where the search for masculinity becomes a site of estrangement rather than affirmation. Mauriello posits that for many transfeminine individuals, the pre-transition body is often experienced as an unfamiliar or alien entity, reinforcing the disconnect between internal identity and external perception as

conveyed in the poem (68).

Ameer's "My Beauty" ultimately moves toward a moment of self-recognition. The shift from dysphoric fragmentation to embodied affirmation is articulated in the lines, "Me and my beauty stopped looking for him one day / And suddenly / I saw my body / My beauty saw a woman" (lines 37-40). The mirroring of body and beauty underscores the transformative power of self-perception, where trans femininity is reclaimed as an act of self-definition rather than external validation as constructed within the poem. This moment is further reinforced by the climactic affirmation, "Looked in the mirror and said, / 'Hey girl' / And yeah, we cute. / We beautiful" (lines 45-48), which functions as a performative declaration of existence. In this assertion, beauty ceases to be an externalized struggle and becomes a site of reclamation.

The Body as a Site of Desire and Fluidity

If the transfeminine body is marked by erasure and regulation, it is also the locus of aesthetic agency, where beauty becomes not merely a personal aspiration but a political gesture toward self-definition, relational visibility, and ontological becoming. Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi's "Life Turns" and Justice Ameer's "t for t" explore this complexity, foregrounding how transgender individuals navigate bodily changes, intimacy, and the socially constructed borders that define gendered experience. Both poems resist fixed categories of gendered being, illustrating how transfeminine bodies are sites of both longing and resistance. Drawing on the frameworks of Sofía Pereira García et al. in "It is Not Even My Body: Trans Persons Experiencing Body Borders" and Ariella Tabaac et al. in "Discrimination, Mental Health, and Body Image Among Transgender and Gender-Non-Binary Individuals: Constructing A Multiple Mediation Path Model," this section examines the tensions between self-perception, social recognition, and the desire for bodily congruence.

García et al. conceptualize the body as a geographic space where gendered relations are inscribed and contested. Transgender individuals, in particular, disrupt the assumed fixity of gendered embodiment, revealing the inherent instability of identification and disidentification (3). This tension is central to "Life Turns", where the speaker reflects on their body's transformation across different temporal moments, shaped by transition. The line "Not one hormone had yet to touch this tongue" (line 13) signals a threshold between pre-transition and post-transition embodiment, marking the significance of medical intervention in gendered selfhood. The speaker's observation, "I have become too accustomed to marking time that way" (line 17), underscores how hormonal transition structures personal narratives. It reflects the cultural emphasis placed on bodily change as a means of affirming trans identity. This aligns with García et al.'s argument that gender identity is often fragmented into corporeal markers such as hormone therapy, breasts, and genitals, shaping cultural understandings of gender authenticity (8).

Ameer's "t for t" extends this discourse by positioning the trans body as a site of intimate negotiation. In a moment of physical closeness, the speaker is asked, "he asks me how it feels / and I don't know how to respond" (lines 15-16), revealing the difficulty of articulating trans embodiment within a world that demands gendered fixity. The hesitation in this exchange reflects García et al.'s argument that trans bodies exist in a perpetual state of negotiation. This negotiation is constantly mediated by the constraints of cultural legibility (3). The poem explores mutual curiosity between the speaker and their partner, as seen in the line, "he wants to know what he wants to have" (line 28), underscoring how desire within trans intimacy is shaped by

an exploration of embodiment rather than the rigid binaries of cisnormative attraction. The speaker, too, expresses a longing to understand their partner's experience: "i too wish i knew / how his space moves and bends and gasps" (lines 29-30). This exchange resists conventional understandings of desire as merely sexual, positioning it instead as an existential yearning to comprehend and inhabit the other's embodied reality as articulated in the poem.

García et al. argue that gendered embodiment is policed through micro-borders, corporeal sites where the male/female binary is reinforced (8). Both "Life Turns" and "t for t" highlight these constraints, illuminating how external perception often dictates gendered belonging. In "Life Turns", the speaker's past relationships are framed through the lens of dysphoria and external control: "features began to foreshadow / faceless men / fatherless / phantoms" (lines 32-36). Here, gendered embodiment is constructed through relationality, where past encounters shape how the speaker perceives their own body. The line "My choices bedding my trauma / Birthing cycles" (lines 37-38) suggests a history of dissociation, where sexual encounters function as performances of gender rather than affirmations of selfhood. This echoes broader research indicating that transgender individuals often navigate normative gender ideals to gain social legitimacy, even at the expense of their own embodied experience as thematized in the text (10). Despite the weight of dysphoria and alienation, both "Life Turns" and "t for t" resist narratives that frame trans embodiment solely through suffering. In "Life Turns", the final lines celebrate trans love as an act of renewal: "The Spring shall know our laughter forever more / Our love an eternal blossom renewed with each moment" (lines 85-86). The imagery of blooming flowers challenges the dominant discourse that trans bodies are sites of trauma, instead positioning them as capable of joy, growth, and deep relational connection. Similarly, "t for t" concludes with a moment of shared longing, not rooted in dysphoria but in love: "just to know how it feels" (line 37). This moment resists cisnormative frameworks of embodiment, affirming instead a trans-centered understanding of intimacy, one that embraces fluidity, exploration, and self-defined legibility as articulated in the poem.

The Body as a Site of Violence and Resistance

Even as the body becomes a locus of aesthetic reclamation, it is equally imperative to confront the ways in which Black transfeminine bodies are marked as targets of systemic violence, rendered hypervisible through racialized spectacle and simultaneously erased from the moral, legal, and historical imagination. Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi's "Amnesia" and "History Lesson" interrogate this enduring legacy. They trace how systemic violence shapes Black transfeminine existence, inscribing trauma onto their bodies while simultaneously attempting to erase their presence from historical and cultural memory. These poems illuminate the dehumanization and commodification of Black transfeminine life, exposing the ways in which their subjectivity is framed through erasure and objectification. Drawing on Emma Hutson's "Lived Experience and Literature: Trans Authors, Trans Fiction and Trans Theory", as well as Judith Butler's theorization of grievability and the legal implications of the trans panic defense outlined by Lee and Kwan in their work *Trans Panic and the Legal System: The Justification of Violence Against Transgender People*, this section examines how Edidi's poetry articulates the precariousness of Black transfeminine life and the structures that perpetuate its erasure.

Hutson underscores the disproportionate levels of violence directed at transfeminine individuals of color, particularly Black trans women, in Western societies (208). This systemic violence

is central to “Amnesia”, which opens with the chilling image of Black suffering turned into spectacle: “Turned on the news today / Found street dripping with black tears” (lines 1-2). The poem’s critique of white supremacy as a structure sustained by Black death is reinforced through its historical framing of commodification: “Black People / Sold by their brothers / Sold by their fathers / Sold by their sons” (lines 11-15). By linking the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary racial capitalism, Edidi reveals how Black lives, particularly those of Black trans women, continue to be reduced to economic and social commodities within oppressive systems. This framing aligns with Butler’s assertion that certain lives are rendered ungrivable because they do not fit into dominant frameworks of the human (Butler, 2004, p. 25). In “Amnesia”, this erasure is explicit: “Threatens to kill us all / And spill our limbs into an erased history” (lines 9-10). Black transfeminine bodies are not only subjected to physical violence but are systematically excluded from dominant historical narratives as the poem renders. This notion of erasure is further entwined with gendered violence, as seen in the lines, “Then the white man came / And trauma became our love letter / Replaced blood for wine” (lines 41-43). Here, colonial violence is framed as a force that reconfigures Black transfeminine history, positioning suffering as an enduring inheritance.

Sexual violence, as a mechanism of racial and gendered control, is another central theme in “Amnesia.” The speaker recalls a shared history of assault: “Like your ex-boyfriend did that night he had a little bit too / much to drink / And raped your body / After he had finished raping mine” (lines 45-48). This stark confrontation with sexual violence underscores the specific vulnerabilities of Black transfeminine individuals, whose bodies are frequently viewed as both desirable and disposable as evoked in the poem. The legal and cultural failure to acknowledge these experiences mirrors the logic of the trans panic defense. As Lee and Kwan argue, operates on the presumption that transfeminine people are inherently deceptive and thus deserving of violence (Lee and Kwan 113).

The systemic invalidation of Black transfeminine identity is further underscored in the lines, “And tried to rob me of my right to at least call myself a / woman / Oh wait / He did that to you too” (lines 60-63). Here, Edidi critiques the ways in which sexual violence functions not only as a physical violation but also as an ideological tool to delegitimize transfeminine existence. This aligns with Butler’s argument that the refusal to recognize transfeminine individuals as “real” women is a form of cultural and legal erasure. Such erasure denies their subjectivity and renders them unprotected within both feminist and Black liberationist discourses. “Amnesia” thus foregrounds how Black transfeminine life remains unprotected by the state, the law, and even social justice movements that fail to center their struggles.

However, despite the pervasive violence that both “Amnesia” and “History Lesson” expose, Edidi’s work also asserts Black transfeminine agency and survival. In “Amnesia”, the reclamation of pre-colonial Black spiritual practices serves as a source of empowerment: “We danced bare breasted to Black Gods / And sung with open throat / Black psalms / And Hymns to a She of Many Names” (lines 24-27). This invocation of divine femininity resists historical erasure, positioning Black transfeminine identity within a lineage of sacred knowledge and spiritual power. Similarly, “History Lesson” rejects the mythologized legacy of America’s founding fathers, marking a refusal to accept histories that justify or excuse oppression. Through this radical counter-history, Edidi affirms the necessity of reclaiming Black trans narratives on their own terms.

Conclusion

The poetry of Justice Ameer, and Lady Dane Figueroa Edidi reveals the transfeminine body as both a contested and generative site, one shaped by histories of violence yet continually redefined through acts of self-authorship. Across their works, these poets challenge the rigid constraints of gendered legibility, exposing the limitations of cisnormative recognition while asserting trans embodiment as fluid, relational, and self-determined. Their verses resist the erasure imposed by systemic structures, instead crafting spaces where Black transfeminine existence is not only named but reimagined on its own terms. Whether through the interrogation of dysphoria and self-perception, the exploration of desire and intimacy, or the excavation of historical violences inscribed onto Black trans bodies, these poets reject narratives that demand coherence or assimilation, foregrounding instead the complexities of trans survival and self-definition. Rather than positioning the transfeminine body as an object of scrutiny or a spectacle of otherness, their poetry insists on its multiplicity, an existence that defies reduction to binary frameworks or state-sanctioned legibility. By reclaiming language, memory, and desire, these poets transform the very conditions under which trans life is imagined, refusing the hegemonic dictates that seek to constrain them. Their works not only document transfeminine experience but actively reshape its possibilities, envisioning a future where embodiment is defined not by external recognition but by the radical insistence on one's own becoming.

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