

Beyond the Color Blindness in Gender

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Multiple interpellations operate on any subject any time, a richness that is opportunity and dilemma. Saketopoulou's account of her work with DeShawn in a hospital setting skillfully traces race and gender, sanity and madness, clinical and social hierarchy as they tangle in the mind and body of a psychotic, African American, trans boy. Struggling to maintain her own balance as she takes on a case the hospital staff initially kept from her in the name of encouraging DeShawn's masculinity, Saketopoulou recounts how her work with him changed. She comes to see how her support for his trans identity and longings mixes unpredictably with a potent mix of race, gender, and the complications of racism that she had previously known nothing about.

I have barely stepped onto the inpatient unit to pick up DeShawn for our first session when I see him running towards me. His body slams into mine, and he violently pulls my hair with all the strength his 9-year-old body can muster. "I swear, I'll pull it all out," he screams. I tear up from the pain and crouch down to his height. Now our noses nearly touch and I feel like I can almost taste the smell of his breath; droplets of his sweat land on my skin as he thrashes about. "I know you want to have long hair, that you're angry and scared," I say; my interpretation releases neither my hair from his grip nor DeShawn from his rage. As the staff intervenes to whisk him away, a thick bunch of my hair is clasped in his small black fists.

This incident occurred 3 years into my relationship with DeShawn, which began when he was first admitted to our inpatient unit following multiple prior short-term hospitalizations. At the time of admission he was 7, already diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder: When manic, he was sexually inappropriate and physically injurious to others and himself; when psychotic, he was thought-disordered and would hallucinate.

Spattering his weighty clinical record were also clinicians' derisive references to his cross-gender identifications and "sissy-like" behaviors. DeShawn had wanted to be a girl from as early as his family recalled, and he'd always gestured and walked in ways hailed as effeminate. On the unit, staff was transphobically disturbed by his gender presentation but also genuinely protective of his being bullied or shamed by peers (see Brill & Pepper, 2008; Lev, 2004; Walton, 2005). Adopting a "viral" approach to his gender (Stoller, 1966, 1968, 1975), they informally decided to encourage masculine identifications by keeping him from socializing with female patients. Staff's admonitions that he "act like a man" emerged early on and fed DeShawn's shame, layering onto his preexisting low self-esteem born of illness and hospitalizations; their reluctance to touch him intensified his self-representation as disgusting and abject.

Most of this struggle remaining unmentalized (Fonagy & Target, 1996), DeShawn's hair emerged as the site where his gender transgressions became negotiated with others. He began making wigs: He would staple a piece of paper into a circle and then attach strands of string to its periphery. The wig draped over his head; the strings mimicked hair brushing his shoulders that, girlishly, he would then tuck behind his ears. Staff's upset equaled his elation; either they would take the wig away, or, mysteriously, between bedtime and morning, it would vanish. To restore some semblance of control, DeShawn began compulsively destroying his wigs, biting staff, and becoming self-abusive. His nonnormativity put the unit in disarray, which no amount of psychoeducation* could contain.

* I am thinking here of contemporary psychoanalytic theory, which has deconstructed essentialist conceptions of gender challenging the idea that female-male are neatly separated categories (Corbett, 1996, 1997, 2009; Dimen, 1991, 2007; Goldner, 1991, 2006; Harris, 2005, 2008).

It was then that DeShawn came up with an ingenious solution that heralded the emergence of an unanticipated dyadic interrelation between gender and race: He resignified his stringed strands as “dreadlocks.” This discursive drag freed the wig from feminine inscriptions, rendering it acceptable, and he was now allowed to wear it. A previously rejected request that he grow his hair was granted on the condition that he braid it. His rage subsided, the unit calmed down, and, while his psychosis did not resolve, he became less thought-disordered and more organized, and his assaultiveness diminished in both frequency and intensity.

Overall, however, and following on the long, sad tradition of conceptualizing trans experience as delusional and pathognomonic of schizophrenia (Caldwell & Keshavan, 1991; Laufer, 1991; Siomopoulos, 1974), clinicians managed their countertransference anxieties about his gender by attributing it to his psychosis. DeShawn was seen as a boy who wanted to be a girl because he was a *disturbed* boy, despite the fact that his gender remained stable even as psychotropic interventions alleviated some of the psychosis. Psychiatric diagnosis made his subjectivity dismissible, discounting his right to a serious consideration of his gendered experience (McRuer, 2006).

The experiential gap between internal gender fluidity and the rigid regulation of gender prescribed by culture can be profoundly disorienting even for a robustly constituted ego (DiCeglie, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). For a child’s ego, however, it may prove impossible to withstand the pressures of gender-normative expectations. Given that a nascent ego is called upon to tackle multiple developmental challenges, especially when it is, as in DeShawn’s case, constitutionally porous to psychopathology, a break with reality may become the only psychic mechanism through which the misalignment between psyche and culture can be tolerated. In other words, deeming DeShawn’s gender a manifestation of his illness did more than just marginalize him: *It fenced him into his psychosis.* Consequently, when, long before I became his therapist, he’d seek me out, I would gladly engage his interest in dolls and makeup, even though staff feared “it would encourage his belief and make him more hypersexual.”

Our bond became strong and intimate. When bullied, he’d run to me, press his head against my belly, and cry inconsolably. My hair,

representing his fantasy of uncomplicated femininity, was central. He'd gently tug on it as he sobbed, and sometimes, before I could stop him, stuff it into his mouth like a famished infant gobbling the nipple. This regressively desirous relationship to my hair contrasted with his barbaric yanking of it before our first play therapy session, an act that had confused and wounded me. Not surprisingly, given his passion, once we started play therapy, I found DeShawn's play to be anything but stilted, a finding that contrasts with reports of gender-variant boys' play as joyless and compulsive (Coates & Moore, 1998). Rummaging through bags of toys, he discarded Black dolls before choosing a White one with long, luscious, silky hair. Placing her on top of a fan, he giggled joyfully as her tresses playfully tangled in the wind.

Such moments were not only gendered but also saturated in *racial* meanings. I wondered whether gender was being appropriated by racialized self-hatred. Was he any different from those Black school-children who, Kenneth Clark taught us, preferred White to Black dolls (Klueger, 2004)? Or had DeShawn folded race *into* gender? As a Black boy growing up in a culture where ideals of femininity are hued in White, was femininity for him *at odds with* his Blackness?

These thoughts circulated in my mind for several months into our work before DeShawn took from my toy shelf a big, stuffed teddy bear wearing a pink wig, which he had previously ignored. He tried it on, looking at himself in the mirror; "I'm beautiful," he said proudly. In that moment he no longer was the insecurely effeminate child I'd known; his girliness became something to delight over. I imagined him as a vibrant, radiant, girly performer singing, "I will survive," the audience cheering him on: drag queen extraordinaire! My reverie saw his creativity and resilience: its significance did not hinge on how his atypical gender would carry him into adulthood but in that the hope for his happiness, for a life outside institutional walls had been possible to imagine. "Yes, you are *so* beautiful," I said, moved by his joy.

"I'm sorry I pulled your hair that day," he said. "That was the day that Paul [a staff member who had made it his personal project to make a man out of DeShawn] said I gotta keep it real and get a haircut." "You didn't want to disappoint him," I said, recalling how hard he'd worked to be allowed to grow it out. "No!" DeShawn corrected me, "I [he emphasized the *I*], I gotta keep it real."

DeShawn's crisp response spoke something new; condensed in it was not just a gender imperative, but a *gender imperative spoken in Ebonyics*. What was really at stake here was not masculinity but racial identification. The kind of "man" that Paul implored my patient to be wasn't merely rigidly gendered—it was raced. My patient had on some level been keenly aware of, perhaps even shared, the racial anxieties underlying the staff's fears. My previous attention to transphobia had blinded me to the racial demands on DeShawn's gender. Caught up in a White discourse that treats masculinity as a prized possession, I missed that *for Black boys racial identification trumps gender anytime* (Perry, 2002). Where White teenage boys taunt one another for being "a faggot," Black adolescents' offense is "acting White" (Pascoe, 2007).

The non-White staff had responded to my nonpathologizing of DeShawn's atypical gender as a form of racist emasculation. This response is embedded in the historical discourse of attacks on Black masculinity, from actual castrations to the symbolic emasculation of Black men denied paternity rights and male entitlements by their White slave owners (hooks, 2004; Neal, 2006), which sedimented nonnormativity in a racial matrix. "Homosexuality," says Julien in his famous *Looking for Langston*, "is a sin against the race," an idea birthing the notion that those who are gay cannot possibly be authentically black (West, 1993). The economics of reproduction in the colonial period favored "breeder women" who were afforded the protections of not being sold (Collins, 2005), thus consolidating the survival value of heterosexuality (Cole & Guy-Sheftal, 2003). When the 1863 American Freedman's Inquiry Commission situated newly emancipated slaves in the state, it made American citizenship contingent on (heterosexual) marriage by deeming extramarital unions as emblematic of the "uncivilized, degraded ... ways of the slaves" (Ferguson, 2004, p. 86). The idea that homosexuality compromises masculinity cuts across racial lines, but for Black Americans it carries the additional burden of imperiling racial membership.

There was nothing spectacular in how these thoughts influenced my work as they slowly worked their way into my time with DeShawn. Having a way to linguistically represent the continuities between race and gender and therefore to be able to think them, I found myself

entertaining questions that pertained less to his gendered and racial experience as based on static, distinct systems and more to how they are and might be braided together. Of this, though, I said very little if anything at all. Mostly, I was able to nod encouragingly as my patient anxiously turned to me when his play would venture into racio-gendered territory. Where I'd have previously commented on it as distinctively raced or gendered, I now stopped disrupting him from playing, playing out, and dwelling on their tangled meanings.