

## Audio Script/Performance Text for Exhuming Transgenre Ties

by Ames Hawkins

### Part 1

*Text:*

Daisy: Embodied rhetoric travels through the bones, into the ground and through all other organic things, which also harness physical energy. This underscores for me the single most important thing I have learned: that bodies are always in relation to the world around them, to other bodies, and that, truly, there is not good or bad body.

—A Member of The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab, “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics”

Bodies hence acquire orientation through the repetition of some actions over others, as actions that have certain “objects” in view, whether they are physical objects required to do the work (the writing table, the pen, the keyboard) or the ideal objects that one identifies with. The nearness of such objects, their availability within my bodily horizon, is not casual *it is not just that I find them there like that.*

Rather the nearness of such objects is a sign of an orientation toward the world as an orientation that shapes what we call, inadequately, “character.” Bodies tend toward some objects more than others given their tendencies. These tendencies are not originary, but instead are effects of the repetition of the “tending toward.”

—Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

*Voiceover:*

My experience as a drag king in the early 00s was limited and short lived short-lived; yet even though I left Cougar Pete and sideburns behind quite a few years ago, I am eternally grateful for the lasting gifts that experience continues to provide: comfort with my masculinity and permission to embrace my love of ties. Of the more than one hundred ties I own, a wide range of mostly silk, sometimes cotton fabric strips, my favorite ones are the thin, 1960sish, generally polyester, smaller to no patterned, brocade bands; those with some texture, subtle design I appreciate most through touch. The majority of my collection was effectively curated by a dear friend of mine who loves to scavenge in alleys, shop in resale establishments, excavate in garage and yard sales. A visual/material anthropologist, he loves objects and things and thinking about others.

I don't wear a tie every single day, but putting one on is definitely a part of what you might call my “everyday practice.” I almost always wear one to work, to teach, to present, out to dinner, to a play, a reading, a party, a film. I wear them as any man might—to signify a kind of attention to dress and demeanor, a connection to choice, reverence for style and decorum. The act for me is similar as it would be for Everyman, but this doesn't mean my tie-wearing will be read as such. The minute I walk out the door, I know that this tie marks me, writes me in ways it both would and would not mark a cis-gendered man from my same background.

Symbolically connected to my contemporary cultural position as a PhD educated, White Anglo Saxon Protestant, the tie stands as a clear link with and to a decidedly American tradition of liberal arts intellectualism, fiscal conservatism, elitist desires. It's a connection I came by honestly, having grown up in Grosse Pointe, MI, a community of privilege, positioned on the banks of Lake St. Clair, a tiny freshwater pool between Lakes Huron and Erie. Now, I reside in what any self-respecting Michigander would refer to as “the other side of Lake Michigan” in Chicago, where I work and live as a professor: a different, and yet equally identifiable, existence of privileged.

On my transgender/genderqueer body, the tie is not simply a text; wearing it not only performance. An always-conscious decision to mark myself with and in relationship to male dress, to professional attire, knotting a tie is a regularly repeated act of submission/domination, rejection/acceptance, exaltation, elation, revision.

This connection to a masculine sensibility engendered by privilege; my body knows it, regards it, delights in it. Each new day provides me opportunity to choose colors and designs to reflect the season, my mood. Sartorial sensation found in fingertips on fabric, manipulated by my hands dexterously deciding between Windsors half, four-in-hands full. The tie is always a projection of the me-not-me, knotted knowingly here fast, repeatedly to see: Over, around, under and through—practice for me, presented to you.

## **Part 2**

*Text:*

Metaphorically, feminist practices have brought specific attention to various combinations of these sites (e.g. examinations of rhetorical contexts, performances, impacts and consequences), for our disciplinary and interdisciplinary “gold” and other “precious metals.” In other words, the “digging” process of feminist rhetorical inquiries have helped to make clearer the expectation, not only that there may be gold but also the distinct possibility that gold or the gold standards of traditional rhetorical expectations may not always be the only precious metals to be sought, found, desired, or valued.”

--Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*

*Voiceover:*

It was an unusually warm and sunny February day in Seattle, Washington, my harness boots ca-clicking with pop-step pride, as I walked over to the JewelBox Theater, to its Red Velvet Lounge and a poetry reading, to meet my date, a used-to-be colleague, now long-distance friend, a polyamorous poet of national regard who had Facebooked me months before wondering whether I would connect with her during this writer’s conference. She wanted me to help make visible her queer, to butch her femme, to come out and play and have fun with her, and gender, through dress and desire.

Fashionably late, I reached the top of the stairs leading to the event, and noticed my date sitting on the floor, legs together and knees bent, leaning over to the left on one hip, that way, you know, women in dresses and skirts often do, lounging but not, legs for you to see, crotch tented under fabric smooth, left to the imagination. She caught my eye and

motioned for me to come over and sit next to her. I planted myself, politically-correct-pretzel-style, leaned my face near her ear and whispered “hello.”

I can no longer remember whether she read before or after TC Tolbert, a self-described, “genderqueer, feminist poet and teacher committed to social justice.”

What I do clearly remember is that before TC began reading he invited us all to stand. Then, as he read, with the help of an assistant he removed his sweater, and then shirt, revealing over time, testosterone deflated breasts, a bare genderqueer chest. When TC finished reading, he compassionately, and systematically, met the gaze of each and every person in the room.

My skin screamed in cellular solidarity when his eyes locked with mine.

That night, I lay in bed re-playing the reading over and over wishing that I had stripped and joined TC in the front of the room, I was then unaware that in donning a tie, that in fantasizing about placing it around TC's neck, those who wear it are ever connected to the historical power of a nearly 400-year-old fashion accessory, borne on the fields of battle, connected to the cravat borrowed by the French from the Croatian soldiers, mercenaries hired during the Thirty Years War. Neither had I considered that it also always knots us to a nineteenth-century poetic ancestry to Beau Brummell and dandy dress to Oscar Wilde and lyric desire.

I did not yet know what my body seemed to instinctively comprehend: I wear a tie as both pen and sword as both page and shield. This sheath of fabric always covers my sternum, protecting me from the penetrative glares that might be seeking a glimpse of my female form. But it also sits there at the ready, a weapon for me to brandish, to wield when necessary. Perhaps not mightier, but it is like my pen, connected to my hands, to writing: to my strength of syntax, adroit manipulation of language, and tactical positioning of words.

My ties let me know I have enlisted in service to a war. One in which I have been called to protect each story through the telling of my own, to defend content by challenging dominant form. To do so both bodily and textually for belief in art, love of language, and pride in prose.

### **Part 3**

*Text:*

Paradise is down below. According to my people, writing isn't given. Giving oneself to writing means being in a position to do this work of digging, of unburying, and this entails a long period of apprenticeship, since it obviously means going to school; writing is the right school. Which I have learned cannot be generalized but it can be shared. There are important moments of apprenticeship. The first moment of writing is the School of the Dead, and the second moment of writing is the School of Dreams. The third moment, most advanced, the highest, the deepest, is the School of Roots.

—Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*

*Voiceover:*

Rules for Writing Like Ames Hawkins OR Ames Hawkins' 10 Rules of Engagement:

- 1) Use an absurd amount of alliteration as an application of the object—a tactic for inciting simultaneous disgust and desire. In other words, craft a space where the abhorrent can be recognized as divine.
- 2) Confess.
- 3) Position aphorisms as apertures, sentences that open.
- 4) Imagine you're sitting and listening as Jack Halberstam, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Audre Lorde, and Roland Barthes deliver presentations on description, and Wayne Koestnbaum, who's sitting next to you, leans over and asks you where you got your tie and then write from wherever in your body you feel the thrill in whispering him the answer.
- 5) Juxtapose long, complicated, complex-compound sentences with simple, short ones.
- 6) Never leave the center where you left it.
- 7) Use humor to highlight tragedy (i.e. pretend you're writing your piece for Pee Wee Herman *and* Paul Reubens, and that both of them will like it.)
- 8) Enter your own writing space by first literally writing a love letter—or perhaps just a lovely letter—to another person, and loll and linger in liminal language long enough to elicit personal literary libidinality: See #1
- 9) Read: often, widely, voraciously.
- 10) Pull back the curtains just a little so the reader-voyeur can get a better look, hold there for a moment, and then turn out the light.

#### **Part 4**

*Text:*

Watch how I tell you a story and then tell you the same story so many years later. Drop the face the search for comfort the fog of too much sun. Drop caution and the ease of eye drops. Clear the fascism of anxiety that begets identity begets narrative begets a story. How do you see me when I read? How do you know me?  
—Same Ace, “The Language of the Seeing The Language of the Blind,” in *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*.

*Voiceover:*

In the broth of my first Pho, I lapped at language, asking Sam Ace to retell the story of me approaching him at a poetry reading to ask where I might find Linda Smuckler.

Illuminated by soup steam, Sam's memory was not located in what happened, but in what I bodied: “The look on your face,” he said. “It was priceless.”

It was the year before, Tucson 2013, at Casa Libre. I approached Sam all excited and jittery as he was climbing down a ladder following a rooftop sound check.

“The person at the desk said you know Linda Smuckler. I saw her books for sale. Is she here?” I asked.

I wanted to see her again. See how she had aged. See what she had become.

Sam cocked his head and smiled, and opened his arms wide. “She’s all around you,” he said.

I thought he was fucking with me. So I tried again, “The person at the desk says you know her. I met her in 1996 at a conference in Atlanta. Hers are two of the only books of poetry I’ve really ever liked. Is she here?”

Now Sam thought I was fucking with him. “Are you serious?” he wanted to know.

“Yes,” I said. “Do you know her?”

I watched as Sam placed his right hand squarely, flatly on his chest, “I’m Linda,” he said.

Knowing became. Becoming: written in body, a story on skin. Her books as my bones, his bones entering my mind, my mind tongued there. Fleshing the past, handing us the page.

And then, There. My disconnection became his understanding. Her resurrection our unearthing of ties. Sam and Ames. Story. Both/and. Both and not. Not. To be. Not not. And yet. So very. S-Ames.

## **Part 5**

*Text:*

When I speak of knowledge, as you know, I am speaking of that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others. It is this depth within each of use that nurtures vision.

—Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly”

*Voiceover:*

Dearest Page,

I have always loved you. From the moment I could handle you all by myself, alone in my room, running my tiny hands across your vast surface. Learning first, at age two, how to be gentle and kind, how to read you. At five, I was taught to take great care and not press too hard, or pull too fast; how to use my index finger to first gingerly flick and then slowly slide in between. Then, pause there to consider and stare, before, one at a time, inserting the rest of my fingers to move my hand toward the spine. Over time, with a great deal of practice I was able to move my hands faster and faster, ultimately coming to forget about you; only in it for my pleasure.

At first, I just didn't understand that you giving me story wasn't the same as me taking your space. And at seven, I sat on the linoleum floor in our kitchen, forcing you in between the rollers of my mom's blue Smith-Corona Super Sterling Series electric typewriter, hammering you there again and again, designing desire for myself without ever considering you. Now that I'm all grown up, I want to apologize for this prepubescent prosaic pummeling almost as much as I do the premature pull-start snatching and crumpling, or worse yet, ripping and tearing of what I felt to be mine, never as yours, definitely not ours. I ask your forgiveness of my immature posturing of writerly affectation.

I am deeply sorry for the ways you have been confined, by context and time. Believe me, I understand that cultural prejudice limits narrative possibility: by line, by size, by genre, by design. You and I, we understand this space of social restriction, this tradition of restraint. And I now understand that I want to write not on you, but with you; into and beyond spaces and boundaries we together create, intending to let you live in whatever form works best for you. I want to attempt—to try—and assay how to titillate you so that you will gladly go somewhere with me so that I might craft as I come. I want to transubstantiate page-ness and author-ability, bringing my flesh to your skin, your surface to my instruments—pen, pencil, finger—and worry the tiniest of cracks until they rupture wide.

I know that together we have the power to transmorgify possibility and amplify epistemic opportunities, to generate raptures. And even though we may not always be successful—there will be moments of insecurity, times when you or I retreat into the recesses of habit, become apprehensive about our attempts to transcend the boundaries before us—I am just as certain that with time and tension, consciousness and care, we have the potential to transfigure literary knowing.

Another way: I promise to never forget our past, and so hear this proposal: Let's here-now unearth we-thou and treasure-tie ourselves to a great writing.

As I am, for, with, by you of, in, on, near you—and sometimes even nearly—you,  
Ames

*Text:*

I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything. The sun came up like gold through the trees, and I felt like I was in heaven.  
--Harriet Tubman

#### Credits

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