

Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad

by Hil Malatino

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I was sitting in my living room attending a virtual biweekly event for transgender people to discuss our mental health. For the first time, I thought about how all of us—trans folks of various gender modalities, ages, and points of transition—just felt kind of *bad*. At first, we discussed how difficult it is to find trans-competent therapists—a task troubled by the exorbitant costs of care in the United States. We suggested books, shared providers' emails, and nodded along when folks stopped short of expressing the full weight of simply *being* as a trans person. Our conversations were sporadic, filled at times with stories marked by long silences coupled with flickering camera screens. At some point, we agreed that no one told us transitioning would make us *feel bad*.

Every so often, you must grapple with a book that you thought you knew how you would feel as you read it. As a trans person, I am used to feeling bad. As a trans person, I am *not* used to hearing (or reading) other people articulate those bad feelings. Hil Malatino's new book, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad* somehow captures the knowing glance cast toward the only other trans person in the room, the shudder of the wrong honorific, and the vexation of needing to perpetually defend your existence.

Side Affects describes itself as a reckoning with feeling bad and the bad feelings specific to trans ontology. Moving beyond individualized feelings, Malatino locates fatigue, numbness, envy, rage, and burnout as structurally produced phenomena that

shape trans ways of being. Organized into six chapters, *Side Affects* can be read in any order and each chapter can stand alone. When read together, though, Malatino's explorations of fatigue, numbness, envy, rage, and burnout weave together affective attunements so often understood, but often unspoken by trans folks.

Each chapter opens with theoretical musings, Malatino's own experiences with the respective bad feeling, and an application of the theoretical implications of said bad feelings to trans media about transition. Drawing heavily on Lauren Berlant's (2011) theorization of cruel optimism, the first chapter on fatigue analyzes how transition vlogs affirm a particular vision and timeline of transition that becomes the measurement for transness and transition progress. For many, access to transition-related medical care is hindered by a variety of oppressive structures and the aspirational marker of "post-transition" is always just out of reach. An inability to reach a desired future places trans people in "lag time," where they are subjected to continual wearing away, making life exhausting.

The second chapter articulates how repeated misrecognition disorients our understood embodiment. Thinking through Sara Ahmed's (2006) work in *Queer Phenomenology* and Gayle Salamon's (2010) work in *Assuming a Body*, Malatino approaches cultivated tolerance for moments of confusion and refusal by others to argue that numbness, flat affect, and emotional disengagement are a response to persistent disorientations. Malatino directly states that numbness should not be "stigmatized, dismissed, or easily glossed" or be suggested to dissipate "post-transition" (76). Numbness is a vital affect that makes room for uncertainty in the aftermath of misrecognition so that we may survive our own hypervigilance generated by instability.

Carefully navigating through envy, the third chapter reads envy as a response to structural inequities, rather than failings of the moral self, through Sianne Ngai's (2007) work in *Ugly Feelings*. Envy alerts us to what might be possible and indicates where deprivation occurs. Moving beyond the self, envy hints at a political consciousness that tells us we deserve more than just survival. Envy invites us to think about what is possible when we deem our desires acceptable rather than acquiescing to transnormative narratives of "dysphoria" that link transness to hardship.

Rage appears in the fourth chapter as a key resource for trans survival that orients us towards transformation. Drawing on the works of Ahmed, Judith Butler, María Lugones, and Baruch Spinoza, Malatino argues that rage moves us from disorientation by breaking our understanding of the present, providing a renewed and transformative orientation towards an alternate space-time. Trans people are frequently dependent on relationships and institutions that sustain our survival while simultaneously threatening it. For example, doctors often pathologize transness while supplying us with hormones, and we must often cohabitate with people who refuse to gender us correctly in our shared homes. Malatino contends that, in order to live, trans people must break with what enables their survival, thus compromising their livelihoods. Rage becomes a "sense-making tool" of these series of breaks, becoming both a breaking point and a break from the present. Trans rage alerts us to injustice while providing a sense of what could be possible with an infra-political ethics of care that bears witness to rage and encourages trans world-building.

The landscape past tired, or burnout, is the central affect of chapter five. Trans burnout comes specifically from economies of scarcity that influence access to medical

care and recruit trans subjects to perform voluntary “gender work” without addressing structural transantagonism. “Voluntary gender workers” help shepherd newer trans people into discourses that maximize their chances of receiving the services they need from the health system. This labor is exhausting, but unlike conventional paradigms of burnout, it revolves around consumption rather than production. Trans people are forced to shape themselves into the ideal consumer of biomedical services to access needed resources, creating a hierarchy of “good” and “bad” trans patients who do or do not fit a pathological model of transness. No matter where one sits on the hierarchy—as an enforcer attempting to help others navigate the system effectively or as a dropout who rejects these models altogether—they cannot perpetually maintain a perfect trans consumerist affect. No matter what approach one takes to the medical system, they eventually find themselves at an impasse. This unique, consumption-focused model of burnout breeds exhaustion and annoyance with oneself and others.

Side Affects concludes with a chapter that traces how trans discourses of healing are entangled with psychedelics, New Age spirituality based in cultural appropriation, and racial exclusion. Working through a series of archival correspondences between Harry Benjamin—a key proponent of mid-century transition care—and Robert Masters—an LSD researcher and sexologist—Malatino finds explicit remarks of racial eugenics. Malatino questions how the racist and colonial legacies of Benjamin and Masters’ work shape transition access and discourses of spirituality that emerge in modern-day practices of self-care for trans folks. Drawing on Arun Saldanha’s (2007) theorization of “white viscosity,” Malatino argues that utopian visions that rely on a collection of disparate cultural practices that romanticize wholeness or self-actualization by fetishizing non-Western practices make white bodies stick to each other. Even trans practices of healing are not exempt from the structural disparities that impact the negative affects described in the first five chapters of this book. Malatino concludes this chapter with an anecdote about the banality of happiness, shedding light on why and how they came to their decidedly unhappy subject matter in *Side Affects*.

Malatino’s thoughtful navigation of the negative affects experienced by trans folks makes this text necessary reading scholars in trans studies; women’s, gender, and sexuality studies; philosophy; and beyond. I am particularly excited to see how scholars take up Malatino’s concluding chapter on white viscosity and New Age movements to think about how capitalism influences trans folks’ practices and packaging of healing. *Side Affects* offers robust applications of theories from Ahmed, Berlant, Butler, Salamon, and Spinoza, as well as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, that are often considered opaque, rendering them clear in their relatability to trans experience. As I parse through my trans peers’ reflections on mental health, Malatino’s theorizations of fatigue, numbness, envy, rage, and burnout help me interpret how structural powers impact our emotional lives. At a time of increased attacks on trans people’s sense of being, *Side Affects* provides a guide to explore intense experiences that offers a partial balm.

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