Moral Shock and Trans "Worlds" of Sense[1]

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Abstract: There are two aims of this paper: (1) to explore the affective dimensions of moral shock and how it relates to normative marginalization of those furthest from dominant society, but also, more specifically; (2) to articulate the trans experience of constantly being under moral attack because the dominant "world" normatively defines you out of existence. Toward these ends, I build on Katie Stockdale's recent work on moral shock, arguing that moral shock needs to be contextualized to "worlds" of sense to understand how marginalized people affectively experience shocking events. My focus is the trans experience of moral shock due to the way trans people are positioned outside of dominant society, creating the conditions to experience cyclical, chronic shock. These affective conditions point to a collective responsibility to ease the affective stress that the most marginalized experience.

Keywords: Shock, Transgender, Oppression, Burnout, Anger

Introduction

Trans women regularly experience being asked *the* question; a question that demarcates the border between the world trans people live in and the world that the rest of society

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lives in. Sometimes the question goes unasked, due to delicacy or difficulty framing it, while at other times people shamelessly ask it directly. Without hesitation they say out loud, "Do you still have your penis?" Others may flutter about the question, instead asking, "have you had *the* surgery?"; or, "pre or post?"; or, "Are you 100% woman?" A number of reactions can be imagined in response to this question. We can imagine a shy smile, trying to redirect the conversation, answering without answering in hopes that our interlocutor will drop the matter. Or, a boiling rage that finds no outlet, wanting to explode but withholding, knowing that such an outburst can be deadly, turning down the heat to a simmer instead. There may be feelings of shame, finding the question to be more than mere inquiry but a reminder of one's fraught relationship to her body. But we can also imagine being struck by shock, a shock that comes despite knowing that trans women are regularly asked this question, despite having experienced this question and its variants before; one can be left motionless, frozen, like a statue.

In a recent article, Kate Stockdale draws our attention to this form of moral shock (Stockdale 2022). She argues that there is a kind of shock that responds to matters of moral evaluation, where morally abhorrent behavior, however expected it may be, still renders us shocked. This shock occurs because the behavior is intensely bewildering, making us realize that the moral norms that shape our individual life are not shared by others. This bewilderment is jarring; breaking our attention, leaving us at times paralyzed in response to it. While underexplored in the philosophical literature, Stockdale argues this kind of shock plays a significant role in moral life.

I am interested in the role shock plays in the lives of the extremely marginalized. Stockdale remarks that moral shock occurs most often among the privileged; that those who are forced to regularly recognize the immoral realities of our society are likely more emotionally prepared or numb to such shocking actions. While there is truth to this claim, it still seems like shock plays a significant, though perhaps differing, role in the most

marginalized of us—those furthest from the norms and ideologies present in most of our society. The role it plays, as I alluded to at the beginning, is in demarcating the border between the different worlds the marginalized and the privileged live in.

Theoretically, I want to connect moral shock to María Lugones' notion of "worlds" of sense, articulating how moral shock needs to be contextualized to a "world" of sense to understand the experience of marginalized people (Lugones 2003). The relationship between moral shock and "worlds" of sense reveals the affective contours of the emotion. Shock contributes to existent affective conditions, which may inhibit our ability to recognize its presence in our lives. Notably, the way shock is experienced in privileged and oppressed persons differs significantly, pointing to differing moral responsibilities. I conclude the paper suggesting that moral shock may point to a forward-looking responsibility for us to not only "world"-travel, as Lugones argues, but engage in "world"-building, constructing new "worlds" of sense that no longer marginalize.

Toward these aims, I will focus on how trans people experience moral shock, using this perspective to shed light on how those of us extremely far from the dominant "world" deal with and experience bewilderment at most people's beliefs, actions, and values. In saying trans people are "extremely far" from the dominant "world," I am alluding to the fact that one of the organizing features of the dominant "world" is something denied by trans existence. It is the belief that there are two, and only two, genders, immutably existing without change or possibility of change; rooted, or constituted by biological sex markers like genitals, chromosome pairs, or hormone levels. The existence of trans and non-binary people directly undermines this organizing belief, causing trans people to have a queer experience of the world, watching its inhabitants be caught up in an obvious fiction while they look at us as strange or deviant for not buying into the belief with everyone else.

The trans experience is shaped by two things that make it a stark example of how shock demarcates the borders between marginalized and dominant "worlds." The first is the aforementioned distance from the dominant "world"; the way our very existence undermines a central, organizing belief held in the dominant "world." The second is the trans experience of burnout. Hil Malatino articulates how burnout is central to surviving as trans, attempting to make a better life in the face of medical gatekeeping and transphobic institutions (Malatino 2022). Shock is yet another cause of affective burnout, depleting emotional energy every time a trans or otherwise marginalized person finds themselves shocked. Affective burnout, though, can also lead to shock. Stockdale argues that one's emotional preparedness determines whether one experiences moral shock (2022: 10-11). Those who find themselves ill-prepared will likely experience shock at immoral behavior. The experience of affective burnout inhibits emotional preparedness, not only making it more likely to be shocked, but also more likely to experience *cycles* of shock, creating a chronic affective condition that when paired with other sources of burnout can compound one's struggles.

There are two aims of this paper: (1) to explore the affective dimensions of moral shock and how it relates to normative marginalization of those furthest from dominant society, but also, more specifically; (2) to articulate the trans experience of constantly being under moral attack because the dominant "world" normatively defines you out of existence. I begin with an explanation and expansion of Stockdale on moral shock, before articulating how shock is contextualized to Lugones' "worlds" of sense. I then turn to the details of the trans experience of moral shock and how it contributes to trans burnout, concluding with brief thoughts on what our responsibilities may be. I gesture at a possible solution using Lugones' notion of "world"-traveling as a way of moving toward "world"-building, creating new governing norms that work for marginalized and privileged people alike.

The Very Concept of Moral Shock

One can be shocked by several things: a runaway bride, when you trip over yourself, fireworks in the middle of March, and so on. But none of these cases have a moral element to them (unless, perhaps, you're the bride left at the alter). They seem to be shocking because you are not expecting the shocking event. You're excited for your friend to get married, or freely walking around, or anticipating a quiet spring night. Your expectations were for things to go a certain way, and yet here you are, watching your cousin run away on her wedding day. Your expectations were defeated. However, these experiences may be better captured under the emotion of *surprise,* as Kate Stockdale argues (2022: 8). Stockdale argues that one is surprised when their expectations are defeated, but shocked when they find something *intensely bewildering*. It is the bewildering nature of shock that distinguishes it from mere surprise. Especially since bewilderment, and therefore shock, can sometimes *confirm* your expectations. Stockdale recounts her shock when one of her students, who regularly asks her inappropriate questions, raises his hand, and asks, "when do you plan to have children?" Her expectations were that this student was going to ask something inappropriate, but nevertheless, she was *shocked*—with expectations confirmed.

But there is another important element to Stockdale's case: it is moral in nature. The bewildering event is filled with a normative tension that renders you shocked; it "disrupts [your] sense of reality" (Stockdale 2022: 8). Moral shock has a distinctly moral element to it, where the shock rests on a moral evaluation of the event that occurs. The evaluation doesn't need to be negative, doing something morally good can be shocking as well. What is important is the moral evaluation embedded in the shock.

Building on Stockdale, moral shock reveals a normative tension. In some cases, the tension may be between the agent acting in a way that is inconsistent with the rest of

their moral life. One example Stockdale considers is of your racist aunt who says something anti-racist over dinner (2022: 4). If your racist aunt says that mandatory minimum sentences are racist and shouldn't be in place, then that can be shocking because that political position is in tension with her general racist outlook. But in many cases, the shock arises from the tension in the perceivers' normative outlook and others' actions. If I am shocked by a student saying something sexist or racist, it is because of the tension between my normative outlook and their behavior.

By normative outlook, I mean something like the moral lens one perceives the world through, or perhaps, the normative landscape they perceive when taking the point of view of morality (Bair 1954). When the bewildering tension between a perceiver's normative outlook and others' actions arises, it tracks the perceiver's sense of immoral actions. The affect, the shock indicates one's negative moral judgment of the attended actions.[2] Of course, our senses of right and wrong might be at least a little, if not wildly, off-base. It is easy to imagine scenarios where someone experiences moral shock, and therefore has a negative moral judgment, because of some perfectly permissible action. But that one is wrong about some moral judgment doesn't mean they don't have a particular (or peculiar) normative outlook that classifies the actions as wrong. They just happen to be mistaken. That one can be shocked in such cases, and yet have a false moral judgment, means that shock is not a reliable indicator of wrong actions. However, it is a reliable indicator of what the perceiver takes to be wrong actions. It is exactly this normative tension that the perceiver finds shocking. The moral evaluation *is embedded* in the shock.

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[2] Stockdale states the cognitive component of shock is perceptual instead of something like a judgment (2022: 4). I don't take myself to be saying anything significantly different—I am perhaps less convinced that moral judgments are always cognitive in nature and not often perceptual (Murdoch 1971), though I agree shock is not a sophisticated moral judgment (Stockdale 2022: 4).

Let's turn from the moral dimensions of moral shock to my focus, namely, the *affective* dimensions of moral shock. As discussed above, they are quite intricately enmeshed with the moral evaluations and normative outlooks of perceivers. But the affect itself is strong and significant, creating issues for moral responsibility.

Moral shock is an emotional reaction, cutting you off with a bewilderment that leaves you motionless and frozen. Stockdale argues that moral shock can render us unable to act in an appropriate or significant manner, leaving the wrongdoer without the criticism they deserve (2022: 12). Shock can emotionally strike us, puncturing our emotional tank, leaving us without the energy to respond with an emotion like anger, which would here be ethically and politically valuable (see, Lorde 1997; Frye 1983; Lugones 2003; Stryker 2013; Srinivasan 2018; Fakhoury 2021; Cherry 2021; Malatino 2021, 2022). Shock can create or intensify feelings of shame, helping us realize the vulnerable position we're in, having our normative world shaken in full view of another's gaze.

Of course, not all situations that *can* cause moral shock *will* cause moral shock. It is not hard to imagine a case where a professor isn't shocked by their obnoxiously sexist or racist student. Who, when asked when she's having kids, responds in a straightforward, critical, yet appropriate way without hesitation or emotional disorientation. In such cases, the person isn't shocked because they are emotionally prepared. Stockdale argues that preventing this experience requires either conscious preparatory work or learned experience that makes you emotionally resilient in the face of shock. A professor with a sexist student can consciously emotionally prepare before class, creating the emotional space necessary to not be bewildered by their student's latest invasive question. Similarly, those who have regularly experienced many such shocking instances may stop finding them bewildering, having built up an emotional immunity to the normative tension inherent in moral shock. While Stockdale (2022: 9) seems to take experienced based resilience and numbness to be of kind, my view is that it is distinct from numbness. One

may fail to be shocked because they have become numb to their emotions, or have numbed themselves to them. Here, their emotional reactions don't register and are avoided (or numbed) *instead of* being prepared for. Such numbness is often a result of an emotionally tumultuous life where one's regular experiences of emotionally difficult or uncomfortable situations makes them shut down from that source of information—a response to shock with which I will return later.

The paralyzing, draining, and diminishing nature of shock can leave us unable to act, much less do the right thing, in response to the shocking action. And yet, there are ways to avoid such shock through emotionally preparing for such interactions or, less ideally, numbing. The disruptive nature of shock may mitigate back-ward looking responsibility, i.e., blame, but as Stockdale argues, shock can also create a forward-looking responsibility to emotionally prepare for bewildering events (2022: 13). If we know we are likely to face morally bewildering events, we may have a responsibility to properly prepare ourselves so that we can face such events with a morally apt response. Stockdale believes this is especially true of those with privilege (2022: 14). If a white person, for example, is shocked by a racist remark, then they'll be unable to intervene, but this is exactly the kind of case where it seems *they should* be intervening. While it may seem unfitting to blame them for being shocked, Stockdale argues that their responsibility to challenge racism is so significant that they should have a responsibility to not be shocked the next time around (2022: 14).

So far, we have established that moral shock is responsive to normative tensions that agents find intensely bewildering. These tensions often turn on a clash between one's normative outlook and the behavior of others, revealing an agent's negative moral judgment. Furthermore, this experience of shock creates a significant emotional toll on agents, leaving them paralyzed, drained, and diminished. In this way shock may excuse one's failure to act in response to immoral behavior, but one's ability to emotionally

prepare for such bewildering events may create a forward-looking responsibility to do so before the next instance of shock. This discussion of shock has focused on acute, singular instances of shock, as was Stockdale's focus. However, there are also cases of cyclical shock that are significant if we want to understand the deeply marginalized person's experience of shock.

Given that emotional preparedness is what often prevents shock, and that shock is an emotionally draining experience, this opens a person up to cycles of shock if they experience enough of it. While this detail escapes Stockdale, it follows directly from her account. Moral shock's intensity can vary significantly, but when it shows the intensity that Stockdale at times describes, it would certainly require emotional recharging to fully move past it, leaving one depleted and open to more instances of shock. Even less intense, but more frequent cases of shock could similarly deplete someone, making it far more draining to navigate the world.

It is these cycles of shock that I think are more likely to occur among those who are deeply marginalized. Stockdale's view is that those who are marginalized and oppressed are more likely to have the experiences that make them emotionally prepared for shocking events and situations. That it is typically those with more privilege who are not prepared for the morally bewildering things people often do. But in many of these cases there's a shared normative outlook. Consider the January 6th attempted coup on the U.S. Capital and how for many it was incredibly shocking but for others it was not. Both the shocked and unshocked alike find the actions morally indefensible, but one may be so used to the exaggerated actions of the U.S. right wing that they no longer find it bewildering, whereas those who are more privileged and insulated from the right's attacks may find this normative tension bewildering. When comparing reactions to an event where people have a near-universal, shared normative outlook, the privileged will

certainly experience shock more while the oppressed are better prepared for the bewildering event.

But we don't always share the same outlook on events and the oppressed may be shocked more because they have a more detailed outlook on what constitutes oppressive barriers and the actions that reinforce those barriers. The oppressed, especially those deeply marginalized, inhabit a completely different moral perspective, where the sense making features vary wildly from the rest of society. One's experience of shock will subsequently be different. It's not that privileged people can't find such cases shocking, it's that they won't be aware of the normative tension at all. So, while experience can inhibit shock in the marginalized, the marginalized are also epistemically positioned to find more things shocking than those who are privileged (Toole 2021). This chronic, cyclical moral shock is part of the trans experience, but to understand how and why it occurs, we need to talk about inhabiting different "worlds."

"Worlds"

In presenting Stockdale's account of moral shock, I used the notion of a *normative outlook* to roughly stand in for an agent's sense of morality (what things are good or bad), drawing out that shock arises in the tension between that outlook and someone else's actions— no doubt someone who has a *differing* outlook on the morality of the actions in question. That people disagree over matters of morality is obvious. Recognizing this is a helpful building block for understanding what María Lugones called "worlds" of sense. Of course, a truly *normative* outlook packs more into one's view of the world than just their sense of morality. There are multiple sets of norms that govern how we go about our lives and shape the way we perceive, judge, and interact with others around us. Typically, we do not recognize all these norms; all the things we "buy into" when going about our daily routines. They simply constitute our "world."

In a series of now foundational papers, María Lugones develops this idea of "worlds" of sense to describe the way we differently inhabit and understand the world around us (Lugones 2003). While at times obscure, this idea holds a lot of intuitive appeal. In my experience teaching Lugones' papers to undergraduates, my Latine (and other culturally marginalized) students feel its explanatory pull. What they relate to is in part the normatively disorienting experience of coming to or being in the United States, which lingers through multiple generations of racialized immigrants. Similarly, the first-generation experience often detailed in college admissions essays about straddling the two "worlds" of one's impoverished home life and one's successful academic life also gets at the experiential aspect of moving between different "worlds".

For Lugones, this notion of "worlds" is more than just an experience. It constitutes part of the political issue at hand. Most people who are privileged enough exist in an entirely different world from those of us whose lives are shot through with oppression. They inhabit a dominant "world" of sense, a "world" whose norms and organizing structure are not only familiar but are undeniable givens. Givens that help insulate them from the realities of life under oppression, realities that would haunt (or shock!) them if they fully realized those conditions. But mostly, these "worlds" normatively organize people's lives, making sense of what exists, why, and who gets access to those things. In the dominant world men are Men, women are Women, love between them culminates in monogamous marriage, loving their innocent children, and finding ways to enjoy their economic comforts, which you can achieve if you simply work hard enough.

This dominant "world", however, is a world that is inhospitable if you are born outside of it, if you're brown, poor, queer, trans, disabled, and so on. You can try and force yourself into it, assimilate like The Borg, but it will likely reject you. Alternatively, you can choose to resistantly inhabit your world of difference, cultivating a "world" that challenges the dominant "world's" logic and norms. These resistant "worlds" of sense are hospitable

to those of us on society's margins. Here we can construct our own norms and logics that don't suppress our differences but value and integrate them. Many of us inhabit multiple different "worlds" at a time, where our intersectional experience of oppression leads to moving between these different "worlds" depending on where we are at or who we are with.

In Lugones' discussion of "worlds" there are two noteworthy ideas that shape this concept: second-order anger and "world"-travelling. Building on Marilyn Frye's insights on anger, Lugones notes that not only are we often righteously angry when we are wronged, but sometimes the ways we are wronged constitute a pattern that makes it obvious that we are living in a "world" that is not meant for us (Frye 1983; Lugones 2003). This realization that one does not belong can lead to an even deeper anger, an anger at these mysterious borders, that one's life, character, or actions cannot be made sense of in that dominant world (Lugones 2003: 110-112).

Building on a different insight of Frye's, Lugones articulates the experience of travelling between "worlds" (Frye 1983; Lugones 2003).[3] There are two ideas here. First, oppression often involves being forced to travel from a "world" where one is safe and intelligible to the dominant "world" where one is not, often leading to the aforementioned second-order anger. Second, willfully traveling between different "worlds" is an activity with revolutionary potential. We have a lot to learn if we travel to others' "worlds" and doing so helps build understanding and coalition among those differently oppressed (an idea I will return to when thinking about how to deal with trans experiences of shock).

Despite the focus on features of oppression to demarcate the different "worlds" we inhabit, these "worlds" of sense contribute more to our understanding of how we relate to the world around us beyond those things that are just or unjust, good or bad. I

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[3] Marilyn Frye did, after all, have many insights even if she also got distracted by irrelevant features of masculinity in a transmisogynistic way, see Frye 1983: 41-51.

was recently talking with a white friend who explained that she has an *auntie* who wasn't really her aunt but a close friend of her mother's, elaborating that this was a "Hawaiian thing" since her auntie is Hawaiian. I remarked this isn't *just* a Hawaiian thing, many non-white cultures have practices of including close friends or community members as family and using family names (like *auntie*); what sociologists have come to call "fictive kin." Research shows, for example, non-Hispanic whites are less likely to have fictive kin than African Americans (Taylor et al 2013: 620). Similarly, we see many examples of fictive kin in Puerto Rican and non-white immigrant communities in the U.S (Chatters et al 1994; Ebaugh and Curry 2000). We similarly see fictive kin style relationships built in queer communities under the name of "voluntary" or "chosen" family (Nelson 2014). In terms of linguistics, we see multiple examples of kinship terms being respectfully and endearingly used for non-kin in languages like Mandarin Chinese, Uygur, Thai, and Vietnamese, whereas kinship terms being used for non-kin in languages like German are almost always pejorative (Hentschel 2012: 33-35).[4] This constitutes a difference between the dominant white/Anglo "world" in the U.S., and many other "worlds" of sense that are outside of that culture. There are a couple of things we can notice in this example.

First, "worlds" are heavily shaped around an individual's existence. The value of using the concept of "worlds" is in how it blurs the distinction between those things that are part of an individual's subjective outlook and those things that are a part of what we might call a social imaginary—a shared resource of information that everyone in a community or subcommunity pulls from to interpret and understand the world around

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[4] While this difference holds as a general rule, there is of course some nuance. While non-Hispanic whites are less likely to have fictive kin, when they do have it they report significantly more help form said relations than Blacks (Taylor et al 2013). Furthermore, Margaret Nelson argues that while non-white and immigrant communities often have more examples of fictive kin, whites sometimes do have functionally similar social networks that don't fit the typical understanding of "fictive kin," reflecting a different in terminology more than social function (Nelson 2014). However, part of my point here is that there is something about kinship terms like "auntie" that trace the way different "worlds" conceptualize the family.

them.[5] My white friend, despite being white, has the concept of *auntie* in her "world" even though it's clear (by her explaining it to me) that she knows it's not a common concept for people to have (particularly, white people). She, or anyone else, can have a concept, idea, or norm from another world even if the white/Anglo "world" they primarily exist in does not have that concept, idea, or norm.

Second, there is a reason why many white people don't have the concept of *auntie.* Though the existence of someone getting a family title in some "worlds" and not in the dominant white/Anglo "world" is not a clear site of oppression, this difference tracks norms that are meant to limit and control. One such norm is that the dominant white/Anglo "world" is largely organized around the nuclear family as the primary social unit, which in turn supports the gender division of labor, and hierarchies of parents to children (Lewis 2021, 2022). Indigenous nations often do not have this focus on the family, with the notion of family being forced on them as a form of imperialism (Lewis 2021: 61, 2022). Furthermore, linguistic data about fictive kin suggests that collectivist cultures put less focus on the nuclear family unit. Use of kinship terms for non-kin tracks cultures that are collectivist or individualist, with collectivist cultures using them as terms of endearment and individualist cultures using them as pejoratives (Hentschel 2012: 40). This intense focus on immediate, blood family and rejection of extended and chosen family plays a role in organizing society to function a particular way. The gendered division of labor, of course, requires that people be sorted into two specific genders, and that monogamous marriage is kept in place to promote the family unit. It isn't surprising that teaching indigenous children gender roles and the nuclear family played a central role in assimilating them into white/Anglo society (see, Lugones 2007; Marak and Tuenneman 2013; Lewis 2022).

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[5] For more on social imaginary, see Jose Medina (2012).

Let's take stock. An organizing belief of the dominant "world" is that there are two, and only two, genders, immutably existing without change or possibility of change; rooted, or constituted by biological sex markers like genitals, chromosome pairs, or hormone levels. This allows one to sort humans into two genders, which helps organize the existence of the nuclear family. Without that organizing belief, many of the features of the dominant "world" lose their sense. Note too, how this belief is rarely recognized as a discreet belief people hold onto but exists as a given—a norm that orients one's outlook on how to relate to others via their gender (Frye 1983). In effect, the dominant "world" can often be extremely hostile to trans people.

Trans philosopher Talia Mae Bettcher has made significant use of this notion of "worlds", and it underlies her work on trans subcommunities (See, Bettcher 2009, 2013). This of course makes perfect sense. Trans people, by their mere existence, contradict this central organizing belief. In effect, living on the margins leads to building our own "worlds" where we not only jettison that organizing belief, but many of the subsequent things that belief organizes. In this way, trans people often exist in "worlds" that are quite far away from the dominant "world." It is within these "worlds" of sense that shock must be contextualized to understand the trans experience of shock.

Trans Experience of Shock

There is a kind of moral shock that is a common part of the trans experience. There are two features of our social life that makes this kind of shock possible, and both have to do with "worlds." The first is the point I have been stressing: that trans people live far away from the dominant "world" due to their existence undermining an organizational belief of the dominant "world." But of course, one can't *not* live in the dominant "world." It is central to Lugones' analysis that the marginalized are forced to travel to the dominant "world." We need it because that's the "world" that provides paychecks, food, and healthcare; the

streets we walk, where our water comes from, the clothes we wear are all products of the dominant "world." Trans people often insulate ourselves from the dominant "world," living in community with other trans people, supporting one another, creating opportunities to live a good life despite one's marginalization. But this insulation only goes so far, we must travel to the dominant "world" to survive. This feature of our social life, in combination with our distance from the dominant "world," is a recipe for shock.

Trans life is filled with the bewilderment that comes from the tension in these two "worlds" and the way we navigate the commute between them. Overhearing a couple at a coffee shop planning a gender reveal party for their newborn can send a quick jolt through you, recognizing the vastness between the "worlds" you inhabit. Cases like this one may not be difficult to handle; it is an action far enough removed from our lives that doesn't drain us of our energy despite gender reveal parties being immoral due to the underlying conception of gender being conferred at birth.[6] But the sheer volume of shocking instances creates a problem. Consider some further more examples. (And then imagine experiencing them all in one morning.)

Hil Malatino recounts his experience of shock when reading the *New York Times* headline, "'Transgender' Could Be Defined Out of Existence Under Trump Administration" (Malatino 2020). Notably, he finds this headline shocking despite "knowing better." He writes,

> "I read in shock, even though I should know better, even though I *do* know better than to be this nonplussed... I've listened to conservative politicians repeat this idiocy over and over again in order to attempt to push through transphobic legislation... [I] think about what the redundant alarmism of the news cycle is doing to my adrenals. I think about how acculturated I've become to being discursively

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[6] Not to mention the regular environmental damage and multiple fatalities these parties have somehow managed to cause (Williamson 2021)

defined out of existence, and not just by conservative administrations." (Malatino 2020: 10-11)

There are two common things here: the alarmism of popular news and the continuous attacks on trans rights by conservative politicians and administrations. Both are extremely common, yet both maintain the power to shock, to do damage to our adrenals, to leave us exhausted. Moral shock can be an all-too-common part of our lives, and one that reminds us just how far we have been pushed to the margins. To see this demarcation that shock can bring, consider a different example in more detail.

Imagine a trans man (call him Archibald Thomas Walker IV), only a few months on testosterone, presenting in such a way that his androgyny is at its peak. Archibald is in a poor position to predict whether he will be gendered as a woman or as a man, turning such mundane activities like urinating in a public restroom into a cost-benefit analysis. If he chooses the men's then he may pass, safely surviving the experience with a little gender euphoria to boot. But if he doesn't, he's at a higher risk of violence than if he fails to pass in the women's restroom. In this situation, it is common to choose the women's restroom since there is less chance of a violent interaction. Many cis women, though, enforce gendered restrooms, for often understandable, though ultimately misguided, reasons. So, when washing his hands, a cis woman entering the restroom exclaims, "You can't be here! This is the women's restroom!!"

There is, of course, a non-arbitrary reason why public restrooms are organized across gendered lines. The first known instance of sex segregated restrooms occurred in 1739 France, largely as an eccentric novelty for a ball that a Parisian restaurant was throwing (Cavanagh 2010). Through an extended portion of western history there were simply no women's public restrooms until around the Victorian era, communicating that women ought to stay home (Ibid). The creation of women's public restrooms was a step toward equality, creating better access for women to live out in the world. But like most

things in the 1800s in the U.S., public restrooms were sex segregated, mirroring the sex segregated train station waiting rooms and public library reading rooms (Ibid). The existence of sex segregated restrooms are relics of a far more sex segregated culture. There are, though, *implied* moral reasons for the continued existence of gendered restrooms, one being to protect women from unwanted interference with men—though they can fail to serve this purpose. Talia Mae Bettcher argues that "the human body possesses a moral structure determined by interpersonal boundaries," which in Eurocentric cultures, such as the dominant white "world," is fundamentally gendered (Bettcher 2012: 325-326). It is a violation of moral intimacy to witness the genitals of the "opposite" pairs of one's own outside of heteronormative sex. Furthermore, this moral structuring is reflected in how we conceptualize things as rape as "male-to-female," making the importance of sex segregation a matter of safety (Bettcher 2012: 326). Such reasons are firmly rooted in the dominant "world," a world that believes in keeping the sexes separate, reinforcing the ideological difference between the two.

This arrangement is harmful to trans people (and other people marginalized along lines of non-normative gender). When taking the view from trans "worlds," gender divided restrooms appear much more arbitrary, if not entirely unnecessary. What makes this arrangement of public restrooms morally problematic is due to the norms sex segregation protects, and the way cis people often police this division to uphold it. This policing of gender is part of what Talia Mae Bettcher calls *reality enforcement* (Bettcher 2014). While Bettcher has since developed a more detailed account of trans oppression beyond solely reality enforcement, reality enforcement *as an act*, I believe, still illustrates a way trans people are often harmed (Bettcher 2022). For Bettcher, reality enforcement upholds the view that trans people are either deceivers or pretenders: passing as different genders to deceive others or pretending to be a gender they're not (Bettcher 2014). To "reveal" a trans person, one engages in genital verification, trying to determine whether a person

has or had a penis or a vagina, which determines the true, moral gender of the person in question (2014: 392). When someone exclaims "You can't be here! This is the women's restroom!!", the goal is to enforce the reality of one's genital status and the appropriate behavior of someone with that status – i.e., which restroom to use. (There is, of course, an irony here in our case because Archibald *is* using the correct restroom based on what the dominant "world" determines to be his "real" gender—just because cis people often want to be a gender sheriff doesn't mean they are actually good at it.) Policing gendered restrooms, then, is a way of enforcing this aspect of trans oppression, making good on the punitive dimension of gender norms (Butler 1988: 522). The norm is there to establish and protect moral gender; cis people are simply showing up for their shifts to be the cops at the door.

Trans people of course expect this, we know it in our bodies as is evidenced by the cost-benefit analysis that emerges from merely having to pee while out on the town. The mere process of doing the cost-benefit analysis is emotionally taxing, and likely to leave one less emotionally prepared for the interaction. Trans people also often insulate in their own "worlds" in part to reduce the number of occasions they must face this decision. This leaves us open to shock despite knowing the likelihood of the interaction, bringing us back to Archibald. There he is, washing his hands, when a cis woman enters the restroom and exclaims, "You can't be here! This is the women's restroom!!" He was so close to finishing his "business" but at the last minute the dreaded interaction occurred, and he is immediately immobilized. He is shocked. It *is* bewildering, isn't it? That this woman is so concerned with someone as harmless as him merely washing his hands at the sink. That this mundane action, washing one's own hands, requires exclamations of what room they are currently in. How is this an okay way to treat a stranger? What harm is he causing? (None.) He ekes out an impulsive "sorry," quickly exiting the room without drying his hands.

This case of moral shock is predicated on the vastness between the two worlds. We have two conflicting worldviews at play. The view from the dominant "world" where there are important moral reasons why restrooms are separated along lines of gender, so important that it requires civilian enforcement to keep this division protected. Whereas from trans "worlds," this division is arbitrary, largely unnecessary, and needlessly creates opportunities to be harassed. In the dominant "world," the act of enforcing the division is a morally good one, upholding the morally important arrangement, showing courage in the face of danger. But from trans "worlds" this behavior is morally objectionable, it is an instance of reality enforcement where trans people are harassed to incentivize conformity to the dominant gender ideology that men are Men and women are Women and they urinate in different rooms. Furthermore, reality enforcement requires a presumption of one's gender, also an act that is often considered immoral (or at least rude) in trans "worlds." This is where the tension that creates bewilderment lies, it is in how the act in question makes no sense from the point of view of trans people except to harm us—"the cis are truly not okay!" Being faced with actions like this one can cause bewilderment that leaves trans people shocked.

This kind of bewilderment is not only shocking but alienating. It makes one aware of how different they are, their lack of belonging in the dominant "world," and how far they must travel back to a place of comfort. Lacking a felt sense of belonging can weigh heavily on trans people, and it is an affectual response to our social position that doesn't require shock to be felt. Moral shock, however, can hit you with this feeling of alienation when you least expect it. Imagine this encounter happens to Archibald while he is out with other trans friends, or on a coffee date with a person who affirms his gender in subtle and fulfilling ways. One can find moments of belonging, living among others who appreciate and attend to you in ways that affirm your place in others' lives. That is, until some woman enters the bathroom and yells at you. It is no wonder that many trans people would prefer

to simply stay home, carefully planning any outings so that they don't have to use a public restroom. A circumstance that is eerily similar to Victorian era women—perhaps taking a page out of their book and peeing through long skirts into sewer grates is an appropriate solution (Cavanagh 2010).

This sudden awareness/remembrance that one does not belong is also present in what Lugones calls hard-to-handle anger, an anger that takes as its object the distance between worlds (Lugones 2003). When one realizes that their first-order anger never receives uptake, they also realize their separation from the dominant "world" of sense (Lugones 2003: 110-111). Anger, though, has revolutionary potential. It can root a cutting response or admonishment that holds one accountable for their action. We can imagine an emotionally prepared Archibald with a precise and controlled rage. When the woman exclaims, "You can't be here! This is the women's restroom!!" Archibald lashes back, "I know but there was no room marked 'other', so I'm stuck in here." In his anger, Archibald can disarm the woman, drawing attention to how her exclamation is othering and leaves him without consideration (and without a place to pee). So, while anger makes one aware of their separateness, it also creates an opportunity to respond in a way that challenges the immoral act. Moral shock, on the other hand, is immobilizing, interfering with the kinds of actions or responses one would prefer to have in the face of morally unjust actions. One would love to have a clever retort, forcing the woman to reconsider her actions. But the shock leaves one without a word, without a thought, without a way forward in the situation.

Trans people are also more likely to experience cycles of shock. As I stated before, given that emotional preparedness can help prevent shock, and that shock is an emotionally draining experience, this opens a person up to cycles of shock if they experience enough of it and well, trans people often experience enough of it. I've gone into detail about how public restroom encounters can lead to shock, but the underlying

elements of these encounters, i.e., misgendering, genital verification, unwanted attention, and so on, manifest in several ways that can lead to shocking experiences. (Again, imagine experiencing these examples all in one morning.) Trans people then are well placed to experience a lot of shock, chronically having their emotional energy drained merely trying to survive their exhibitions through the dominant "world."

These cycles of shock contribute to trans burnout. Burnout is often talked about as working past exhaustion, and therefore something anyone can experience regardless of what work they're doing. However, as Hil Malatino argues this understanding ignores important dimensions of the phenomenon that end up leading toward individual instead of structural solutions (Malatino 2022). Instead, Malatino understands trans burnout as being generated by "economies of scarcity" that influence both the medical gatekeeping trans people face when accessing medical transition and the recruitment of trans people to provide care for others without addressing the underlining transantagonism of these medical institutions (Malatino 2022: 134). This brings trans burnout closer to Herbert Freudenberger's original intention of coining burnout to describe the experience of free clinic workers in the 1960s and 70s. Furthermore, in centering the way medical institutions treat trans people in his account of burnout, Malatino shows why the problem is a structural one, implying that the solution to the problem is similarly structural. Cycles of shock contribute to exactly the kind of burnout that Malatino describes.

Moral shock, especially chronic, cyclical shock, illuminates one way specific instances of trans antagonism affect us emotionally, leading to burnout. Moral shock is an appropriate response to the many ways medical providers limit our access to life-saving medicine and use us to care for each other in lieu of providing professional care within medical institutions. But it goes beyond that. Although Malatino focuses on the specific ways in which the medical industry causes us burnout, our affective lives are more holistic than that. It's not solely that we must be our own case workers and emotional

support through medical transition, but that we're doing this in the context of a transphobic dominant "world" where we face regular harassment when engaging with other institutions with the same transantagonism and barriers. (Cis people keep showing up for their shifts.) As Malatino acknowledges, trans burnout is "the cumulative negative impact experienced by folks working for the realization of better life chances …while deeply and negatively affected by inequities and maldistributions of resources for survival" (2022: 165).

Understanding the trans experience of moral shock this way emphasizes the structural nature of this form of affective injustice (Shiloh Whitney 2018). It is a moral shock that occurs due to the way marginalized people engage with the dominant "world" which is ultimately held up by oppressive institutions – social, political, and medical. What responsibilities does this affective injustice create? Katie Stockdale argues that since emotional preparedness can weaken or remove one's moral shock, one's regular experience of shock might point to a forward-looking moral responsibility to emotionally prepare for those events, especially if the person is privileged (2022: 14). But despite the repetition, Stockdale's cases of shock are still largely acute forms of shock for the perceiver; they do not point to a way in which the privileged perceiver is separated from the dominant "world." Unlike more acute forms of moral shock, cyclical, chronic cases of shock cannot be solved by an individual working on their own emotional preparation, but require larger, more significant changes and forms of resistance. The difference between privilege and oppression alone may show that trans people don't have a responsibility to remove their shock.

But the case can be made much stronger when you consider the non-ideal ways trans people deal with our affective marginalization. Hil Malatino articulates a number of these ways (Malatino 2022). Trans people often flatten our affect, socially withdraw, and selectively numb (Malatino 2022). I've already discussed the way trans people try to avoid

the dominant world, insulating themselves in trans "worlds" that are affectively stable, though in effect sacrificing a broader social life out in the world at large. Similarly, informed by Malatino's discussion of selective numbing, I've already drawn a distinction between emotional preparedness and numbness. While Stockdale (2022) holds them to be the same response, my view is that they are two distinct approaches to one's experiencing shock. Unfortunately, each requires a sacrifice of its own.

Emotional preparedness helps preserve and direct emotional energy. It is not hard to imagine that the Archibald who directs his rage into a cutting remark emotionally prepared for such an encounter. That when doing his cost benefit analysis of which restroom to use, he took a few deep breaths before entering the women's knowing that if someone yelled at him, he could diffuse the situation with the appropriate level of snark. Being emotionally prepared opens up possible responses for a person faced with morally objectionable situations. Numbness on the other hand is the lack of emotional engagement. Many are often numb because of burnout, but one can also selectively use numbness to protect themselves, cultivating one's numbness through drug use (Malatino 2022: 57-69). As Malatino puts it, the effectiveness of numbing should close it off to criticism, and saying "fuck feelings" can be a useful form of affective modulation that helps us survive our conditions (Malatino 2022: 76-77). Saying "fuck feelings" though comes at a cost, given the significant value and pleasure that can be found in connecting emotionally to the world.

Being numb seems like the worse option, but emotional preparation may be just as sacrificial for trans people. In the pursuit of emotional preparation, trans people often instead cultivate an anxiety that makes one more fragile. In this vein, Malatino notes how a common kind of fragility and brittleness is born out of our skepticism of cis people in power over us (e.g., doctors, professors, administrators, politicians, etc.). Malatino writes, "we're always waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the microaggression to hit; it's a state

of hyperalertness that's exhausting and exacerbated by the fact that we're consistently told we're too sensitive, that our frustrations are outsize in relation to the slights we perceive" (Malatino 2020: 13). This hyperalertness can be understood as emotional preparedness gone wrong, or the impossibility of such preparedness when living deeply marginalized lives. It is what happens when preparation is too difficult to maintain under continuous antagonism; you spend more emotional energy than you get by trying not to get caught off guard, not shocked into immobility. In attempting to become emotionally prepared, we can find ourselves burnt out all the more regularly, sacrificing our mental health for physical safety.

The point I wish to draw out here is how there are no clear, ideal options for individual trans people given the burnout we face. Although I agree with Malatino that one should not be criticized for numbing, numbing is not how we should be forced to move about the world either. That the only effective coping mechanisms available to trans people are in some way sacrificial is telling of the affective conditions in which we live. At the end of the day, there is little trans people can do about the shock we experience, without also giving up something else of value. If we are to follow Stockdale's suggestion that moral shock can create a forward-looking responsibility, it is clear in the case of trans shock that the responsibility is not on trans people, but someone else.

Where do we go from here?

If individual solutions to shock are either unavailable or non-ideal, then where do we turn? As Malatino gestures, we need to look toward changing the overall structure of society and political institutions by engaging in structural transformation, solidarity work, coalition-building, pre-figurative politics, and resistance (Malatino 2022). But as should be clear, this is not work for marginalized people to do alone and the moral responsibility

certainly does not rest on them alone. One way to undermine such experiences of shock is to engage with one another across "worlds" to create newer, safer "worlds" together.

This is where we return to Lugones on "world"-traveling. We have a lot to learn if we travel to other's "worlds" and doing so helps build understanding and coalition among those differently oppressed, as well as those with privilege. This is because "world"-traveling is not a purely empathetic exercise in exploring what another's life is like, but in understanding how those experiences are created through the conflict between "worlds," as well as finding the ways others resist oppression through defining new norms, scripts, and structures. There are practices that trans people engage in that are not solely ways to "get by" given our oppression. Building complex care networks, valuing self-determination, creating better access to healthcare, and so on are things that everyone could benefit from, providing solutions to many of the kinds of isolation and poor material conditions that most of us experience due to the way the dominant "world" is structured while also preventing the normative tensions that produce moral shock.

The catch is that you cannot simply import norms or ideas from resistant "worlds" into the dominant "world" as, say, my white friend gained the concept of an auntie who serves a familial role without a blood relation. Consider how the practice of pronoun sharing has become implemented into the dominant "world" from trans and queer "worlds." While this addition has had a positive effect in some trans people's lives, it has been taken over by the organizing logic of the dominant "world." Subsequently, pronouns have become the central, and often only, way to support trans people in the dominant "world," without recognizing that this is an incredibly minimal ask that safely doesn't challenge any of the more harmful ideological motifs of gender essentialism. In fact, pronoun transparency has been assimilated in an essentialist way, with pronouns often being seen *as* one's gender, creating expectations of conformity between what pronouns someone uses, their gender, and gender presentation. There are many useful practices,

norms, and ideas in resistant "worlds," but these things in isolation cannot be simply added to the shared resources in the dominant "world" since doing so leaves the oppressive structure of that "world" the same.

Instead, we should see the aim of "world"-traveling as a means toward "world"-building. In travelling between each other's "worlds" we should begin to create new "worlds" where we can live and resist together. This is often the social and cultural effect of engaging in solidarity work, coalition-building, and pre-figurative politics. One creates community across difference, finding new ways to relate to one another, creating norms and practices that work for everyone, establishing the kind of social relationships that will be the foundation for a new "world" free from the tyranny of oppression.

Here we may return to fictive kin and what that linguistic flexibility might tell us about our emotional flexibility. The flexibility in recognizing someone as kin in non-dominant "worlds" of sense hints at a potential ease of access to "world"-traveling for marginalized people. Speaking for myself and my experience in multicultural, multiracial queer and trans communities, there is something easy and practiced about "world"-traveling. The flexibility of emotionally adopting someone unrelated to you as part of your own blood, as it were, is built into the way we talk about one another. Built into the way we label each other. We access this point of view because we know that true emotional safety can be found, not in the people we happened to be with as a child, but with people who can love us for us, being attentive to and supportive of us. For some, that is one's biological family, but for many others it is not. Knowing that *family* may require active searching, there is a certain practice in traveling to other's "worlds" when getting to know them, to understand if our worlds overlap or if there is room for us to build new "worlds" together. An emotional flexibility is enabled by this practice, which is helpful when traveling to other people's "worlds," as this must be done lovingly, as Lugones argues (Lugones 2003: 78-83; see also, Hernandez 2021).

Of course, this is not solely the solution for creating a better world for trans people, and trans people are not the only ones who experience the kind of cyclical, chronic shock that I have detailed in this paper. The kind of distance from the "dominant" world and the subsequent tensions that lead to shock are also experienced by racialized immigrants, people of color more broadly, those who are disabled, and compounded when one person lives in a number of these "worlds" at once. We as trans people, in building community, are often also building community with people of color, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized and oppressed populations. Trans people may not be responsible for easing our own shock, but we do have a responsibility to travel to other resistant worlds that our trans siblings are also often a part of, making this kind of responsibility collectivist in nature (Iris Marion Young 2010). While moral shock is a specific phenomenon that is seen in our individual, social lives, it—like many forms of social and affective oppression—is caused or exacerbated by structural injustices that work for next to no one and require everyone to undo.

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